

## THE MAFIA'S OBSESSION

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Alessio

My pocket vibrates as I'm leaving one of my family's card rooms in North Bover. I answer it, glad to be away from the smell of stale cigarette smoke.

It's Sal. "Hey, boss, I've got some news on that thing with those Irish guys. Would be better discussed in person. You want to meet me at the club, or should I come to you?"

"I'll come to you. I'm in North Bover. Should be at the club in 15 minutes if I hit green lights."

"Okay, see you in a-"

The hair on the back of my neck prickles, and I'm instantly on alert. "Hang on, Sal, I might have a situation."

I don't know what it is, but something feels wrong. My instincts, honed over a lifetime of violence, are telling me that I'm in danger. I scan the street around me, searching for a threat.

There's nothing obvious, but there usually isn't. And I've learned to trust my gut. I pocket the phone, muffling Sal's voice asking if I'm okay. I'll need that hand free if I'm forced to pull my gun.

And then the car driving behind me, a beat-up Honda Civic, starts to slow down. I know what this means, and I'm ready for it. I dive behind a parked van, back slamming into it as gunfire splits the air.

The shots are rapid, hitting the wall behind me, the van. Bullets break glass, crunch into metal, kick up powder from the bricks. I stay hidden, knowing this cover is the best chance I have to stay alive.

After at least 20 gunshots, the attack breaks. I spring out from where I'm hiding and unload my pistol into the Honda Civic. More bullets hitting metal, more broken glass. I can't tell if I wounded or killed anyone, but the engine revs and the car peels out, squealing around the corner in a hurry.

I pant for breath, Sal's tinny voice still coming from my pocket. My thoughts are a total blur of fear and adrenaline.

I thought this was over.

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Ayla

On my mom's kitchen counter in front of me, my phone buzzes. I check the screen and see that it's Alessio.

"Sorry, mom, I should take this. Hey, babe, what's up?"

His voice is sharp. "We're in danger. I just got attacked. No time to explain. I'm sending someone to pick you up."

The panic in his voice makes my stomach drop. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"I'm fine. I'll tell you more later. Are you still at your mom's?"

"Yes, I'm still there. What are we going to-"

"No time, Ave. I love you. Be ready to go."

"What was that about?" asks my mom, squinting.

"It's nothing. I have to go. Alessio's sending a car."

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I have to pee, I’ll be right back.”

I take a moment to compose myself in the bathroom, splashing my face with water and taking deep breaths. It’s going to be okay. It’s going to be okay.

About 10 minutes later, Sal pulls up. I’m relieved my mom doesn’t walk me out to the car, considering the role he played in her brother Jackie’s death. I get in and he pulls out right away.

“What’s going on?” I ask before I’ve even buckled my seatbelt. “Is Alessio okay? Of course he told me he was fine, but...”

“Don’t worry yourself, he’s okay. He’s a tough kid, not a scratch on him. Well, except for the ear.”

I breathe out a sigh of relief. “Good. He got attacked? Who attacked him?”

“We don’t know for sure.”

“Do you think it could be my dad acting from custody?”

Sal pauses before he answers. “Anything’s possible. Alessio wants to get you to a safe house right away.”

I stare out the window, thinking. The thing my mind keeps sticking on is the fact that when my mom spoke about Jackie being murdered, she didn’t mention Sal at all. Only Alessio’s father. Pulling out my phone, I unblock her number and shoot her a text.

Hey mom, who was your friend in the Razone family?

Sal glances at me, then turns on the radio. A couple minutes later, I receive the reply:

Hey honey! Glad to get a text from u 😊

Salomon Marco

I stare at the message, brain whirring.

Sal told my mother that Andres killed her brother.

He sure left that part out of the story.

I look over at him, and he smiles easily. "Everything's going to be okay. I know Alessio will handle this. Might as well get comfortable, we've got a long drive."

My phone rings. Alessio's number. I go to pick it up, but Sal snatches the phone out of my hand. "Sorry, no communication. Alessio's orders."

"Alessio is the one calling me!" I try to take the phone back, but he wrestles it away from me.

"Give me the phone!"

Sal shoves me away from him, then chuck's my phone out the window. I dive for the door handle, trying to unlock it, to get out. I can't be trapped in this car. We're going slowly enough that if I jump out, I don't think I'll be badly injured. It can't be worse than wherever he's taking me.

Pain flashes through me as Sal slams me violently against the window. I'm seeing double as my forehead bounces off the glass. The car stops, and I struggle as he grinds my head into the dashboard, drawing a syringe from his pocket.

"That's right, you fucking cunt," he rasps, piercing the needle into my neck and squeezing its contents into my bloodstream. "Go to sleep for me now."

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Alessio

My car screeches into the driveway of Ayla's mother's house, abject fear pulsing through my veins. I sprint past Dominguez's car and ram into the

locked front door in my attempt to open it. “Already got picked up?” What the fuck does that mean, she already got picked up?

After about five seconds of hammering on the wood, Dominguez opens it. “Fuck, man, I’m so sorry. Somebody got here first.”

I round on Maria Gonzalez. “She got picked up? Who picked her up?”

“I don’t know,” she says defensively. “She got a call, then said she had to leave.”

“That was me!” I roar, blood pounding in my ears. “Fuck!”

I turn around and pace, taking a beat to collect myself.

“Did you see the car?” Dominguez asks her. “Even the color?”

“I stayed in the house. We said goodbye in the kitchen.”

“So we don’t even know if she got into the car willingly, or through force,” I grit out, feeling defeated. I knew I should have gotten her another collar with a tracker. If I had done that, this situation would be very different.

“Have you tried her phone?” Dominguez asks.

“A million times. It just rings and then goes to voicemail.”

“Can you track its location?”

I whip out my phone. Of course.

“Is Ayla okay?” Maria asks, looking worried.

Nobody answers her.

“Got it,” I grunt. “At a park not that far away.”

Dominguez nods. We both know it’s more likely we’ll find the phone there than its owner. But it’s the only lead we have.

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Dominguez pulls up behind me and we walk to the park together. Following the map on my phone, we go to the north side of the park, where a group of three kids are shooting hoops on the basketball court. They look to be about 12 or 13.

“Hey!” says Dominguez, approaching them. “Any chance you guys have seen a cell phone?”

The kids exchange looks that tell us immediately that they have.

“I’ll give you \$100 each if you give me the phone and tell me where you found it,” I say, pulling out my wallet and showing them the money.

One of them takes Ayla’s cell phone out of his pocket immediately and hands it to me. “Someone threw it out of a car!” he tells me eagerly. “I thought it was okay to take it because they didn’t want it anymore.”

I take the phone from him, rubbing my thumb across the cracks that spiderweb across the screen. “What kind of car was it?”

“It looked like that one,” he says, pointing to a white sedan.

“It wasn’t white, it was silver!” says one of the other kids.

“That phone is worth more than \$300. We should sell it on eBay and split the money,” whispers the third.

The first kid gives me an accusatory look. “Yeah, hey, wait, give it back!”

I drop the \$300 on the ground and turn away from them. Dominguez and I walk away as they scramble for the money.

“Not very helpful,” says Dominguez. “A white or silver sedan? That’s half the cars in the city.”

My fists clench. I know he’s right. “Go talk to the soldiers, see what you can find out. I’m going to talk to the captains.”

“We’re going to find her,” my friend tells me, putting a hand on my shoulder.  
“Trust me, we’re going to find her.”

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“Jesus,” says Sal over the phone as I sit in the front seat of my car outside Gino’s bar. “I can hardly believe it. Fuckin’ awful, to mess with a man’s wife. What the fuck kind of honor is there in that?”

“There’s no honor in any of this,” I growl.

“Do you want to meet me in the club, talk it over?”

“No time, I’m about to meet with Gio Lombardo. He might have a read on whether any of Anthony’s old crews are still loyal to him. I want you to talk to the other captains. Have them put word out to their men that there’s \$100, 000 reward for any information, no questions asked.”

I hang up on him and head into the bar, buzzing like I just drank a gallon of espresso. I can barely focus, barely think. All that matters is getting Ayla back.