

THE MAFIA'S OBSESSION

Ayla

I stand at the top of the basement steps, my ear pressed to the door. The screwdriver is in my hand, fingers squeezing the rubberized handle as I listen to what's going on in the house above me.

"Just got word from Gio's crew. They have Alessio. Gio is doing his thing with him now. Apparently, he wants to send you a hand or a foot or something as a trophy."

I almost lose my footing, immediately sick.

Sal's voice replies. "What a fucking weirdo. Tell him if he sends me one of that motherfucker's feet, I'll shove it up his ass."

"Really?"

"Of course not. Let's fuckin' celebrate. Goddamn, it feels good to have this thing over with. I feel like a kid who just got let out of school on summer break. You wanna smoke a Cuban with the new boss of the Razon family?"

The other man chuckles. "You know... I think I'd have more fun playing with Alessio's bitch than smoking a Cuban."

Sal laughs. "Oh, go on, don't let me stop you. You can fuck her, and I'll use her as an ashtray."

Footsteps start to come in the direction of the basement door. I creep down the steps as quickly as I can, heart pounding, and lie on the ground, pretending to be tied up.

Tears stream down my face, but I ignore them. No matter what happens next, I'm going to make it as difficult for them as I possibly can.

The basement door opens, and someone walks down the steps. I clutch the screwdriver, hand sweaty. The light flicks on.

When he crouches down next to me, I attack. I spin around, thrusting the screwdriver at him with all of my strength. It plunges into some part of his body and he screams, falling backward. I pull it out and just keep stabbing, stabbing, and stabbing, driving the screwdriver into his torso until his shirt is covered in blood and he's not moving.

I collapse next to him and drop the screwdriver, hands shaking, gasping for breath.

"What's going on down there?" calls Sal's voice from upstairs.

Alessio

My shoe grinds the gas pedal into the floor of Gio Lombardo's Cadillac. I screech around the turn leading to Sal Marco 's driveway, stop, go into reverse, then floor it again, ramming straight through the gate as the metal screams and crunches.

The impact is a big jolt to my already damaged system, but I don't have any spare focus to think about that. One of Sal's men is smoking a cigarette in the driveway. I gun it in his direction, run him over, then reverse back over him and jump out of the car holding the shotgun.

Gunshots ring out from the house, blowing the side mirror off the ruined Cadillac. I dive behind it for cover as more bullets slam into the side of the car. I want to return fire, but I don't dare. Until I know where Ayla is, I can't risk hitting her by accident.

“I have your wife!” Sal’s voice yells as the gunfire breaks. “You shoot at me, she dies.”

Panic grips me. “You hurt a hair on her head, you’re going to wish you died fast like Gio!”

Sal laughs. “I never liked Gio anyway. A marriage of convenience, as it were. You’d know something about that, right?”

“Let her go!” I shout. “You want to have any prayer of walking out of here, you let her go.”

More gunshots shatter the car window. I crouch as bits of glass fall all around me.

“All this for her?” Sal’s voice mocks me. “Did you know Ayla’s mother is the one who killed your parents?”

I freeze, barely comprehending. “What?”

He laughs again, and I get the impression he’s trying to enrage me, to force me into making a mistake. “She set the car bomb. She’s the reason your parents are dead.”

Deep breaths. Calm. “And what makes you think that?”

“I told her that your dad killed Jackie. So in a sense, I killed him. And your whore mother. How do you like that, kid? I did everybody a favor. No way I was going to let that useless fucker take over the family just because he was Nazio ‘s little brat.”

My hatred is making me stupid, and Sal knows it. This man arranged the killings of my parents, my grandfather, and he kidnapped my wife. All while pretending to be a friend, someone I could trust. I stay where I am behind the car, not trusting myself to make smart decisions.

Deep breaths. Calm. One dumb move and Ayla is dead.

Ayla

I creep out of the basement, clothes covered in blood that isn't mine. The screwdriver is still in my hand. I haven't let go of it since I killed Sal's henchman.

Sal is in the living room, ducking behind an open window holding a gun. He's yelling at someone outside, and another voice is yelling back.

Wait. That sounds familiar. Could it be? I crouch behind the doorframe leading to the living room, watching. There's someone hiding behind a smashed-up black car in the driveway.

"Release Ayla and you don't have to die today!" calls the voice, and my heart leaps.

I'd know that voice anywhere.

That's my husband.

I watch Sal from behind, trying to figure out my best move. Is there a back door I can use to escape? He doesn't know I'm out of the basement. If I can leave the house, maybe Alessio and I can get out of here in one piece.

And then, through one of the far windows on the other side of the living room, I see movement. Another of Sal's soldiers, armed, creeping across the driveway. He's trying to get behind Alessio, who hasn't noticed him.

And he's almost there.

"Alessio!" I scream at the top of my lungs, trying to project my voice so it carries outside. "Behind you!"

Alessio

I spin around at the sound of Ayla's voice. Behind me and to the right is one of Sal's men, creeping in my direction to get the perfect shot. I blast him with my shotgun and miss, but the second shot creates a spray of blood. He falls, his own shot popping the Cadillac's tire.

From the house, I hear Ayla yell out in pain or fear. She sounds desperate. I jump out from my cover behind the car and sprint to the front door, ducking as best I can in case any bullets come my way.

They don't. I slam through the door just in time to see Sal and Ayla struggling on the ground. He's on top of her, blood streaming from a wound in his chest, trying to wrestle a screwdriver out of her hand. A pistol is on the floor next to them, almost within his reach.

The screwdriver clatters to the ground. Sal reaches for the gun. I run over and kick him in the head, my shin connecting with his jaw. He falls off of Ayla, still scrambling for his weapon.

My "uncle" looks up just as I smash him in the face with the shotgun barrel, then point it down at him and fire from less than a foot away. The shot echoes through the room, reducing his head to chunks.

I rush back to my wife, who is picking herself off the floor, covered in blood.

"Ayla! Ayla, oh my god. Are you okay?"

"It's not my blood," she whispers, hugging me tightly. "I'm just bruised, that's all. Oh fuck..." She sobs against my chest.

"I thought I'd lost you," I rasp, choking up to feel her in my arms again. "Is there anyone else here? How many?"

"I don't think so," she gasps, body heaving. "Alessio..."

I wrap myself around her, cuddling her head like nothing else exists.

"Alessio... you're bleeding through your shirt."

I look down and see that my chest is soaked in red. "I'm okay," I tell her. "Just a scratch."

"You came back for me," she whispers, still crying freely. "I thought you were dead."

I wipe a tear from her cheek. "Of course I came back. I'll always come for you. You're my everything, Ayla. My life. There's nowhere you can go that I wouldn't follow."

"I'm sorry about your parents," she sniffles. "My mom..."

"Shhh," I say, kissing her forehead over and over again. "It doesn't matter. It's in the past. All that matters is that we're together again. Fuck everything that happened before. Fuck literally all of it. The only thing I care about is our future together. I love you so fucking much."

"I love you too," says my wife, putting her forehead against mine. "But I also really care about getting you some first aid before you bleed out. Let's find a medicine cabinet, huh?"

Ayla cleans and bandages my chest as I call Dominguez on Sal's phone. He sounds shocked when I explain what happened.

"Do you know how many of Sal's men were in on it?" he asks when I'm done giving him the basic summary. "I can't even believe this. We've known Sal since we were kids."

"No, but I'd like to find out. Get in touch with his lieutenants. Tell them I'm dead, Sal's the new boss, and you're taking over his crew. I'm going to guess most of them had no idea, but if anyone doesn't act surprised, you know what to do."

"Got it. Holy shit. I'm so glad you and Ayla are okay. How do you want to handle Gio's crew?"

“Definitely going to take some housecleaning. And hey, Dominguez? Maybe not the best circumstances, but consider this a promotion. You’re in charge of Sal’s crew now. You’re a captain.”

I can hear the excitement in his voice, even over the phone. “Wow, that’s... thank you, Alessio. I’m honored. Should I come to Sal’s place and pick you guys up?”

“Yeah, we’re going to need a ride. Appreciate it.”

I hang up the phone and turn back to my wife. She cracks a smile.

“Still got Dominguez working as your driver, I see. Should we... you know, wipe down fingerprints or anything? For when the cops get here?”

I shake my head. “Nah. Let’s find some fuel and burn this place to the ground.”

Epilogue I

Ayla

Four years later

Alessio leans across the restaurant table to kiss me, and his lips taste like champagne. “Congratulations, Ave,” he whispers, hovering his face inches from mine and stroking my cheek. “I know how hard you worked for this.”

I nuzzle him, brain pleasantly fuzzy from the wine. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“We both know that’s bullshit. You studied your ass off and earned this all on your own.”

“Well, sure, but I wouldn’t have been able to go to BCU in the first place if we didn’t do that thing with the admissions agent. Remember that? Jacob... something or other?”

Helaughs. "How could I forget? I still get a percentage of that guy's business."

"That's why you remember that night?"

My husband takes my hand. "No. That night was... very special to me. I think..." He trails off, like he's embarrassed to finish his sentence.

"Come on. What were you about to say?"

He looks down. "I think that was the night that I seriously realized I was falling for you. You remember sitting on that balcony, watching the city? I'd never..." He gulps. "I'd never felt that close to anyone before. And honestly, it scared the shit out of me. I didn't even know how to process it."

I giggle. "Should I be insulted that you didn't realize you were falling for me until I got you high?"

He laughs. "Oh my god, you got me so fucking high. I wasn't even ready. As for the insulted part... I almost feel like smoking help me cut through the bullshit. Like I couldn't lie to myself anymore."

I kiss him. "That's sweet. So like... Would you say that was the turning point for you? Where you decided you wanted to be with me?"

His expression turns dark, and he lowers his voice. "No, that didn't happen until I had a gun barrel in my mouth. I told you, feeling that way about you scared the shit out of me. I didn't want the pain of losing you. It wasn't until I almost got... you know..." Alessio puts a finger to his mouth, miming a gun, "that I realized I couldn't lose you if you were already gone. Then I felt like a fucking idiot. That's when I got on a plane to Boise."

We kiss again, and again. "You weren't an idiot," I whisper. "You found me in Alaska like, the next fucking day."

"Actually, it took two days. And I was going out of my skull."

We're both silent for a moment, looking into each other's eyes.

“Do you remember watching the northern lights together?” I ask. “That was so beautiful.”

“That’s one of my all-time favorite memories with you. We should go back there sometime. To that cabin. We’ll see the northern lights again.”

“Yeah. Definitely.”

I feel so happy, so in love. Tomorrow is my graduation ceremony, and after that, the party with all my friends. But tonight, it’s just the two of us. Just my husband and me.

“I think that’s for us,” says Alessio, peering over my shoulder at the kitchen. “I ordered us a special dessert.”

“You did?” I ask, immediately perking up. “I was just thinking I was full, but I could probably find some room...”

He grins. “Trust me. I picked this for a reason.”

The waiter sets two platters of Boston cream pie in front of us, and I laugh out loud. “Oh, gee, I wonder what the reason is.”

“It’s not what you think. Well, not entirely.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Do tell.”

“When we had just gotten married. I think it was like day two. We were making all these jokes about sexual dessert names.”

“I think you were the one making jokes,” I scoff.

“That’s... probably true,” he concedes. “Anyway, what I remember is that you said you wanted to try the Boston cream pie. I had just lost my grandfather, and I just... wasn’t ready to be close to you. I ditched you to go to the gym or something. But that was a new experience we could have bonded over, and

I've felt bad about turning you down ever since. I guess this is my way of saying I want to keep having new experiences with you."

Aw. I look down, my heart melting. "That's way sweeter than I was expecting. I thought it was going to be another dirty pun."

"Don't worry, I'm full of those, too."

I laugh. "Oh, I know you are. I love you, babe. I want to keep having new experiences with you, too."

Alessio kisses me. "I love you. So much."

"I do have to admit something, though. I've already tried Boston cream pie."

He looks shocked. "You did? When?"

"That same day, after you left. I mean, I wasn't going to just not have the cream pie."

"I like that about you. How was it?"

I take my fork and dig into the dessert sitting in front of me. "Really good. Although..." I give a little shiver, the topic that's been on my mind more and more lately coming to the surface.

He raises his eyebrows, chewing his own bite. "Yes?"

I lean in, dropping my voice to a whisper. "Well, now that I'm out of school, I was thinking maybe... maybe you could start giving me a different type of creampie."

I blush desperately as I wait for his reply.

My husband's eyes flash. "As though I don't give those to you almost every-"

"But like, if I stopped taking my birth control."

"I know what you meant."

The topic hangs in the air between us, the sexual tension instantly raising a couple notches.

“If you have any pills left,” says my husband, “you’re throwing them in the toilet.”

“I already haven’t renewed my prescription.”

Another pause, even thicker.

“Finish your cream pie,” says Alessio. “We’re going home, and then you’re getting another.”

He calls for the check while I take another bite.

Alessio’s touch is already possessive as he leads me out to the car, his hand never leaving my waist.

“Well, this got you frisky,” I laugh, trying to keep up with him in my heels as he speeds me away from the restaurant.

“Yes,” he answers bluntly. “From now on, its creampies only. Every time I come, it’s going in your pussy.”

“Does that mean no more-”

“I’m still going to fuck you any way I like,” he growls. “But my cum goes inside you.”

I shiver. “I like that.”

“Good. It’s happening.”

We get to the car and he pins me against it, pressing his knee between my thighs. I grind against him instinctively, already turned on.

“Fuck, I want you pregnant so bad,” Alessio groans, holding me by the waist.

"You're going to have to get me home first," I giggle, still grinding, "unless you want to bend me over the car in the parking lot."

He glances around, then shakes his head with a frustrated snarl. "Let's get you home." He opens the passenger door for me, and I get in.

Alessio orders me to hike my dress up, then slips a hand inside my panties and cups my pussy as he drives us back to our penthouse. By the time we get home, I'm leaking with wetness. Both from his touch, and the exciting new element that's we're adding to our sex life.

Ordinarily, I would be taking my birth control right about now. But not anymore.

"Congratulations, graduate," my husband whispers, circling my clit with his finger as we pull into the garage. "

"Just fuck me already," I gasp, squirming. "I need you inside me."

He doesn't say anything, just gets out, opens my door, and pulls me out of the car. My feet don't even touch the ground as he carries me inside.

We don't reach the bed. The moment we get to the living room carpet, I'm on the floor, and Alessio is on top of me, unbuckling his pants.

"Oh my god," he growls, slipping his cock inside me without preamble. "Oh my fucking god, yesss."

I whimper, achingly full, but wet enough to accept him. "Alessio... Alessio..."

"I love you, Ayla," comes his voice, hoarse, desperate. "God, I love you..."

Rough fingers dig into my ass, my hips. He holds me as he slams his cock into me, stretching me open, going as deep as I can take. I wrap my legs around him, the pleasure building, his throaty growls rumbling in my ear.

When I'm close to coming, I ask Alessio for permission, as I always do. At this point, I could barely imagine not asking.

It's his decision, not mine. And that's exactly the way I want it.

"I'm close," I gasp, as I have a thousand times before. "Sir, can I come?"

"Yes," he grunts, his own voice breaking. "Come for me, baby. Oh fuck, I'm coming too..."

He buries his face in my neck and we grind our bodies together, coming at the same time. This orgasm feels intimate, shared. My pussy clenches around him as he throbs, filling me with his hot seed, and the pleasure burns through me like a flame.

"I didn't take my birth control today," I whisper, still reeling as he pants for breath.

He just squeezes me, kissing my cheek.

"I love you, Ayla," he whispers back finally, holding me tight. "I love the life we're building together. I can't wait to see every version of you that comes next."

Epilogue II

Ayla

Six years later

The breeze tickles my bare skin, reminding me of my nakedness. I walk across the sandy beach, waves crashing next to me.

Yesterday was a spa day: massage, mani-pedi, facial, and hours soaking in the hot springs. It was the first part of my anniversary present, before Alessio gave me a pill and whisked me away on a plane to St. Ives Island.

It's slightly hard to take my mind off the kids, even though I know they're being well taken care of in Bover City. But for our 10-year anniversary, there was no way we weren't going to come back here.

St. Ives Island is special for us. It's the place that unlocked so much between us.

Being back here is insanely exhilarating. Since the twins were born five years ago, Alessio and I haven't had nearly as much time to explore the more intense, primal side of our relationship. I've been mom, and he's been dad.

Now I'm being hunted again. And when he catches me, I'm going to be overpowered, tied up, and roughly fucked in any way he chooses. He's not going to be gentle, and he's not going to show mercy unless I use my safe word.

The knowledge of what's coming makes my hair stand on end.

In the distance, the buzzing of an engine. I stiffen, primed for action.

Crouching low on the beach, my eyes scan the forest behind me, searching for any sign of the ATV.

There's nothing, but I know how quickly that thing can appear over the horizon. I walk closer to the water, keeping a sloping hill of sand between me and the forest. That way, there's no direct sightline if he's scanning the beach from the trees.

The buzzing gets louder, and by the time I realize it isn't coming from the forest, it's already too late. Alessio's jet ski kicks up foam as it splits the ocean, following the shoreline. He sees me just as I see him, and he aims his vehicle for the beach.

My feet dig into the sand as I take off running for the trees. Behind me, I hear the jet ski slide onto the beach, and then the sound of my husband sprinting. He jingles with every step, and I realize he must be carrying handcuffs.

I know I can't outrun him, but I still try. I give it everything I have, my thighs burning.

It's pointless. His footsteps crunch into the sand behind me, and then a strong arm wraps around my waist, halting my momentum.

"Got you," Alessio growls, holding me firmly. "Nice try, babe."

I keep trying to get away from him. I'm going to force him to use those handcuffs. He does, chuckling as he effortlessly pins my arms behind my back and clips the cuffs around my wrists.

"Yeah, you're not going anywhere," he tells me, putting a collar around my neck and attaching a leash. "Keep struggling and you're going to get spanked right here."

Oh, no, wouldn't that be terrible. I struggle until he grabs my hair, forces me to the ground, and holds me down as he spanks my ass firmly.

"Cut it out or you're getting pussy spanks next," he growls, finishing with a stinging slap.

I'm more obedient after that.

Alessio leads me to the treeline, then secures my leash to a palm tree, giving me very little slack. I watch as he takes off his backpack, pulls out some kind of long strap attached to a grappling hook, and throws it up in the air.

"You missed," I tease as the hook lands in the sand next to him. "Doing some tree climbing?"

"Not quite," he says, throwing it again.

This time, he wraps it around the bent-over trunk of a tall palm tree. The strap dangles down, almost reaching the ground. He tugs it, making sure that it's secure, and his eyes narrow.

“Now I’m going to have some fun with you,” he growls, unclipping my leash. I don’t dare try to escape again, even though it’s tempting. I know he would catch me immediately, and I would be firmly punished for it. Alessio leads me to where the strap dangles, then attaches it to my handcuffs and pulls it tight. My arms are yanked above my head, and he keeps tightening the strap until I’m almost on my tiptoes.

Then he steps back, smirking. I’m trapped in place, fully naked, arms above my head.

Unbidden, my breaths grow shaky. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt this vulnerable, this exposed. My husband watches me, drinking me in with his eyes, enjoying the fact that I couldn’t get away if my life depended on it.

“How’s it going, Ayla?” he teases me. “Feeling a little bit trapped?”

“Just... a little bit,” I grunt, testing the limit of how much I can move.

Turns out the limit is, not at all. I am very much stuck in place. All I can do is stand there, waiting, the blush on my cheeks getting hotter.

“Look at you blushing,” he whispers, stepping closer and running a finger up my navel as the flesh ripples. “You don’t usually get embarrassed.”

“Yeah, well, it’s been a long time since you’ve had me likethis,” I mutter, cheeks burning.

Alessio grins mischievously. “I suppose it has. Don’t worry, I intend to make the most of this... indignity.”

He brushes my clit with a finger, causing me to moan.

“Oh, I missed this,” he whispers, stroking my inner thighs, my shaved mound. “I missed having you helpless for me.”

I whimper, my brain flipping back into that wonderful, submissive headspace that only he can create. There's nothing to worry about right now, nothing to keep track of, no one who needs me. Just pure, blissful surrender.

Him and me. That's all there is. The two of us, and all the filthy, dominating things he's going to do to me.

My only option is to submit.

I inhale sharply as I see him pulling a vibrator out of his backpack. Oh, fuck, I need him to use that on me. We lock eyes as he steps closer, and my clit gives a hungry twitch.

The wind rustles through the trees around us as Alessio flicks the vibrator on and hovers it over my clit, watching my face. "It's so easy to give you pleasure," he whispers, tapping my little nub so I moan and my legs get weak. "And so easy to take it away." He pulls the vibrator back with a smirk.

I glare at him, panting. "You really don't get tired of being in charge, do you?"

"No," he gloats, giving the pleasure back. "I really don't."

Alessio brings me to the edge twice, and both times, I beg him for an orgasm he doesn't give me.

"Not yet," he whispers for the second time as I thrash around in frustration, pussy twitching. He strokes my face, enjoying my consternation. "But I can tell how much you want it."

"Asshole," I grunt under my breath, squirming in place. I'm so turned on that it's starting to drip down my inner thighs now. My pussy is aching with need.

He gives me a sharp spank on the ass. "Who decides when you get to come? Me, or you?"

“You,” I grudgingly admit, looking down. “Sir.”

“Good girl,” he breathes, pressing the vibrator against me once again.

“Are you... going to let me come this time?” I ask, my eyes closing as the pleasure overtakes me.

“If you’re good.”

I wiggle in frustration. I know from experience that his standard for “good” can be quite demanding.

He circles my clit slowly with the vibrator as my climax builds again. If he denies me this time, I think I’m going to cry. My whole body is burning for a release that I have no control over.

“I’m so close,” I whimper, grinding my pussy against the vibrator with all the movement I’m capable of. “Please, can I come?”

“Beg,” he growls, hand wrapping around my throat. “Be a good girl and beg me for.”

“Please!” I plead, abandoning any sense of dignity, of self-control. “Please, Alessio, I need it. I need it so bad. Please, please...”

“Come for me, good girl,” he purrs, rubbing the vibrator against my clit. “You can let go now. You’ve earned it.”

My eyes roll back as the pleasure hits me like a tidal wave, washing away everything else.

My legs are shaky from two consecutive orgasms as my husband leads me to the beach house, holding my leash.

“That second one seemed like a strong one,” he says, looking satisfied as he opens the door for me.

“They were both strong,” I admit, barely able to meet his eyes. “Fuck, something about that denial just makes me explode.”

Alessio grins. “Good things come to those who wait. Maybe I should make you beg more often.”

“Maybe you should. Oh, god dammit. I’m going to regret saying that.”

“You said that same thing when we first got married. Doesn’t seem like you’ve regretted it.”

“I said that?”

“Yeah. That first conversation about the dom/sub stuff. You told me you liked the orgasm control, that it made your orgasms stronger. Then you said you would regret saying that.”

“You have a hell of a memory.”

“For stuff like that? Yeah, I do. I was so excited about that conversation. I thought about it the entire night.”

“Aw. I didn’t know that.”

“I couldn’t believe how perfect you were for me.”

“Now you’re just being sappy.”

He shakes his head. “I thought you were perfect for me then, and I think you’re even more perfect for me now. I can’t believe I’ve had you for ten years.”

Alessio uses the leash to pull me closer to him, and we kiss. It’s such a perfect reflection of our relationship: him saying sweet, romantic things, even as I’m naked, collared, and leashed.

“I’m so lucky to have you, Ayla,” he tells me, breaking the kiss and nuzzling my forehead gently. “You, and our family. There’s nothing that means more to me than you and the kids. You know that, right?”

I rest my head against his chest, listening to the beating of his heart. “I know. We’re lucky, too. Who would have thought you would turn out to be such a great dad?”

“Not me,” he chuckles. “Not me.” ***

My ankle is tied to the bedpost in the beach house when I wake up the next morning.

“Look,” says Alessio, holding up his phone. “Belle-Ann sent us a picture.”

On his phone screen is a picture of our five-year-old twins, Daniel and Natala. They’re posing, identical big grins on each of their faces. Daniel is doing the two-fingered “bunny ears” gesture behind his sister’s head.

“I wonder how long it took her to get that shot,” I laugh. “Aw, look at them. They’re so sweet.”

“Precious,” my husband agrees. His eyes are soft, filled with love. “Daniel sure is going through a phase with the bunny ears.”

I keep looking at the picture, my own eyes starting to wellup. God, I love them.

“I’m going to go make breakfast,” Alessio tells me, getting up from the bed. “You want to come down with me, or stay here?”

“Mind unlocking me for a sec? I have to pee.”

“Yeah, no prob.”

He releases my ankle, then goes downstairs to the kitchen. I head into the bathroom, brush my teeth and do my thing, then creep down the steps as quietly as I can.

Alessio is in the kitchen, his back to me as a pan sizzles on the stove. I glance at him, and then at the door to the outside, right by the bottom of the stairs. He'll hear me if I open it. But he also won't be able to get there in time.

I open the door, lock it from the inside, then run out and slam it shut behind me. As I sprint through palm trees, ocean waves crashing in the distance, I hear my husband fiddling with the lock, trying to give chase.

Epilogue III

Ayla

Five years later

The sound of Daniel, Natala, and Alessio laughing in the living room causes me to look up. I can't quite see them from the kitchen, just the Christmas tree sparkling in the corner and the flicker of orange from the fireplace. I pour the popcorn into a bowl, dress it with butter and salt, and carry it out to join them.

"Did you put nutritional yeast on it?" Daniel asks immediately, referencing his favorite popcorn topping.

"No, because your sister doesn't like it," I say, putting the bowl down on the coffee table. "If you want, you can go get your own bowl and put yeast on that. You know where we keep it in the cupboard?"

"Aw, can't you get it?"

"Mom already made the popcorn," says Alessio. "You can go get your own bowl and toppings. Actually, why don't you get a big bowl. I'll have the nutritional yeast with you."

"Ew, yuck!" says Natala, wrinkling her nose. "Terrible taste, dad."

I giggle at her reaction. Nutritional yeast on popcorn has become quite the divisive topic among the 10-year-olds in our house.

Daniel comes back with a mixing bowl and a container of yeast. He and Alessio divide up the popcorn and sprinkle it with the yellow powder while Natala makes an exaggerated display of being grossed out by it.

“Okay, are we ready to start?” I ask, setting up the movieElfon the TV.

“Can’t we open one now?” asks Natala, staring longingly at the pile of presents underneath the tree. “You said we could open a small present on Christmas Eve.”

I glance at Alessio. “Now, or after the movie?”

“Let’s do it now!” says Daniel excitedly.

“Yeah, come on, dad!”

“Well,” says Alessio, “youcouldopen your presents now. But if you do that, I’m going to eat all the popcorn before the movie starts.” He crunches a piece.

“Up to you.”

“Let’s do presents,” says Natala. “You’re just going to eat the gross popcorn, anyway.”

“Wait!” says Daniel, grabbing the bowl topped with nutritional yeast. “Don’t eat it! Let’s watch the movie first.”

I make eye contact with my husband as the kids continue to squabble, and the understanding that passes between us brings a tear to my eye.

This is perfect. As good as it gets.

THE END