

THE MAFIA'S OBSESSION

Alessio

Sitting beside me in the car, Salomon Marco , whom I refer to as “Uncle,” runs his fingers through his graying hair. “Your father would be immensely proud of you, Alessio. May he rest in peace.” He kisses his fingertips and touches his chest with reverence.

My grandfather, Nazio Razione, the head of our family, nods from the passenger seat. “Indeed, he would. You’re upholding the family’s honor.”

“In your own time, though,” Sal remarks, attempting humor when I remain stoic. “Hey, just busting your chops. You had your reasons. We’re just glad you’re back.”

I clench my jaw. Sal isn’t really my uncle, but he was close to my father. Now, he’s my grandfather’s top-earning lieutenant. Like everyone else, he’s curious about my return to “the life” after rejecting it for so long.

“You’ll be an asset to us,” Sal persists in the silence. “Everyone knows about your solid work as a freelancer. Maybe you can help us deal with those Irish bastards, huh? We could use someone like you who doesn’t take any nonsense.”

An enforcer? Not yet. I haven’t informed him. Which means no one else knows either.

I suppress a grimace. This conversation is wearing thin, and my facade is already slipping.

“Thanks,” I grunt.

“What prompted your return? Business drying up? Or did you find the grass isn’t greener elsewhere?” Sal probes.

As if I would willingly choose this.

Before I can respond, my grandfather interjects. “Alessio was always destined to return to the family,” he asserts with satisfaction. “He was merely waiting for the opportune moment, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” I grind out, gazing out the window.

Only he and I understand the real reason behind my return.

The needle pricks my finger, and I smear the drop of blood onto a card adorned with the image of a saint. The specific saint doesn’t matter to me.

“This blood signifies our unity as one family,” my grandfather announces, gesturing to the table where two pistols rest beside a human skull. “From this moment forward, you live and die by the gun. Family comes before all else.”

He ignites the card, and I hold it as it turns to ash in my hands.

“Now, repeat after me: as this card burns, so may my soul burn in hell if I ever betray my family.”

I’ve rehearsed for this moment, so I manage to suppress my discomfort as I recite the words I’ve been dreading. “So may my soul burn in hell if I ever betray my family.”

It’s done. I’ve been “made”-officially inducted as a full member of the Razione Mafia family. To the men present, it’s a significant honor.

But to me, it’s a tightening noose around my neck. It’s the very thing I’ve spent my entire adult life trying to escape.

My grandfather beams with satisfaction, pulling me into an embrace. "You're now a man of honor. Welcome to the family."

The assembled captains and made men offer their applause.

"Congratulations, kid," Sal chimes in, embracing me warmly.

As we part, I notice someone in the group whom I hadn't seen before. And for the first time today, I feel a hint of happiness.

"Dominguez," I exclaim, over to him and enveloping my old friend in a hug. "It's been too long, hasn't it?"

"A few years, at least," he agrees, grinning. "Good to see you, Alessio."

Dominguez Gary appears more polished than I've ever seen him. His suit is impeccably tailored, his short, curly hair neatly groomed, and there's a newfound confidence about him that I don't recall noticing before. As adults, we took divergent paths, with him choosing a career within the family while I ventured outside of it. It's gratifying to see his success.

"I was made last year," he informs me, his nonchalant demeanor belying his obvious pride in the accomplishment. "I think your grandfather invited me tonight because he remembers we used to be childhood friends. What prompted you to return to the family?"

Before I can respond, my grandfather's tinkling of a pistol against a wine glass interrupts us. "Gentlemen, I have an announcement to make while we're all gathered here."

Drawing a deep breath, I turn to face him, along with the rest of the room. I alone know what's about to be revealed, and I anticipate it will wipe the smirks off their faces. They're not going to like it.

Neither will I.

“I may be old,” Nazio begins with a chuckle, “but that’s not the announcement. I don’t need to dazzle you with my shiny bald head to make that point. But someone needs to take the reins of the Razione family when I’m gone, and I want to avoid any squabbles over leadership. So, to prevent any power struggles, I’ve decided to designate a successor.”

Several of the captains stiffen around me. Ambition glints in their eyes, and tension thickens in the air.

“My son Andres was taken from us too soon,” he continues, eliciting respectful nods from some. “But his legacy lives on through his son. My grandson. Alessio, where are you? Come forward.”

The atmosphere shifts as the attendees begin to comprehend the gravity of the situation. Though no one voices dissent, I can sense their excitement curdling into resentment as I navigate to the front.

“Alessio will assume leadership of this family after me,” declares my grandfather, either oblivious to or choosing to disregard the simmering animosity his words have stirred among his men-men who have dedicated their lives vying for a shot at the top position. “And when that day arrives, you will afford him the same respect you’ve shown me.”

“That played out pretty much as I anticipated,” I murmur to Dominguez, letting out a slow exhale. With the ceremony concluded, people are now milling about before we all move on to our next engagement—a mob-affiliated couple tying the knot in what I imagine will be a lavish affair.

Dominguez arches his eyebrows. “You knew Nazio was going to do that?”

I nod. It was no surprise. Whether I approve or not, I’ve agreed to this.

“Hey.” Dominguez extends his hand. We shake, then he pulls me into a hug and plants a kiss on my cheek. “Congratulations, man. Let the chatterboxes chatter. I’m genuinely happy it’s you.”

"I think you might be the only one," I mutter, catching a glare from one of the captains out of the corner of my eye.

"Let them gossip," my friend shrugs. "You hold the power now, whether they like it or not."

Uncle Sal joins us, offering a rare smile. "So damn proud of you, Al. Your father would be too." He shakes my hand and kisses me on the cheek.

With the most influential Razon captain publicly congratulating me, the others reluctantly follow suit, lining up to pay their respects. Mustering false warmth, I shake hand after hand, meeting gazes filled with animosity or, at best, resentment towards me.

Each handshake drains me a little more. I'm only sociable in small doses, and this feels like a fucking overdose.

And now I get the pleasure of shaking more hands at a wedding.