

THE MAFIA'S OBSESSION

2

Ayla

"Did you know she wasn't even raised in this lifestyle?" I murmur to Belle-Ann as the bride passes us, radiating happiness. "Can you imagine willingly marrying into all this chaos?"

"Unbelievable," my friend responds, shaking her head with a dark chuckle.

"She probably has no clue what she's signing up for."

"Or maybe she does, and she's just twisted."

"Could very well be." Belle-Ann grins mischievously. "Wanna ditch this place and find somewhere we can..." She brings her fingers to her lips, mimicking taking a puff from a joint.

I laugh. "You brought something?"

"Of course, it's in my purse."

"Thank goodness. It's the only way to survive this nonsense. Which way should we go?"

We navigate through the crowd until we reach the orchard on the grounds of the wedding venue. Rows of apple trees provide us with ideal cover. Carefully, we walk in our heels down one of the rows until we feel it's far enough to stop.

"At least it's good to see you," Belle-Ann says, pulling a dispensary pre-roll and a lighter from her purse. "How was backpacking in Europe?"

"It was incredible," I sigh. "Just having that much freedom was eye-opening. It made me realize for the first time how restricted my upbringing was. You

know, always being told what to do by my parents and expected to meet their standards. In Europe, I woke up whenever I wanted, went wherever I pleased, and even got lost a few times. I loved it. I've honestly been dreading this month of being stuck at home again before the semester starts."

"I can imagine. It's awesome that you took a gap year," she remarks, flicking the lighter and taking a long drag. "I should have done the same. But I can't wait for you to come to school. If you weren't staying in the dorms, I'd suggest we be roommates."

"Next year," I reply, taking the joint from her. "Do you think that..." I pause, coughing heavily. "Damn, I should've started slow. It's been a while since I smoked."

She chuckles, taking the joint back. "You'll be fine. What's the wildest thing you did last year? I still can't believe you didn't lose your virginity to some hot Spanish guy or something."

"Um, nothing too crazy, really. Maybe wore a thong on the beach in Italy?"

"You wild thing," Belle-Ann teases, exhaling smoke. She imitates our mothers. "Now no man will want you! How will you ever find a husband?"

A sound catches my attention. "Hey, maybe I'm just high, but do you hear someone coming?"

She falls silent, and indeed, the sound of footsteps becomes audible. Not from the venue, but from the opposite direction, the far side of the orchard. Two figures emerge, strolling down the row of trees towards us.

My gaze shifts to the joint. "Should we hide this?"

Belle-Ann shrugs and takes another drag. "Eh, who cares? It's legal now, anyway."

I watch nervously as the figures approach. Perhaps it's just being around family again, but I can't shake the feeling in the back of my mind that I'm going to get in trouble. College really can't start soon enough.

"Hide it, put it out," I hiss anxiously. For all I know, it could be my dad out for a walk with one of his associates. While what I'm doing might be legal, getting caught would make my last few weeks at home unbearable.

Rolling her eyes at me, Belle-Ann extinguishes the joint on the tree trunk behind her.

The men stop. They both appear tall, fit, and attractive, maybe around 10 years older than us. The one with curly hair seems interested in striking up a conversation, but his friend appears completely disinterested. He exudes an air of brooding darkness, barely acknowledging our presence.

"Oh, look at these ladies out in the trees at night," remarks the curly-haired man in a playfully innocent tone, gesturing with his wine glass. "We were taking a stroll and thought we caught a whiff of someone smoking weed. Perhaps they passed by here and you caught sight of them? Or maybe they're hiding behind you?"

Belle-Ann bursts into laughter, and even I can't help but giggle. My friend offers the joint. "Okay, busted. Want a hit?"

The other man, with the dark hair and darker eyes, takes a deep breath, as though being offered a hit of weed is just another in a series of tortures he's endured.

"You might want to keep your friend away from knives and sharp objects," I quip to the friendly one, enjoying a nice buzz from the hit I just took. "I think this might be the last straw."

Belle-Ann snickers.

“Sorry about that. This is Alessio,” he introduces his friend, waving away the joint. “And I’m Dominguez.”

Belle-Ann shrugs and relights the joint. “I’m Belle-Ann, and this is Ayla.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Alessio responds curtly, turning pointedly back toward the reception. “Dominguez, shall we?”

“What’s his deal?” Belle-Ann queries. “Past his bedtime?”

“Good question,” Dominguez chuckles, glancing at his friend. “It’s been a great day for him as far as I can tell, but for some reason, he’s been acting like someone just ran over his dog with a lawnmower.”

Smoke fills the air as Belle-Ann stifles laughter mid-hit. “I can’t believe you got me laughing about a lawnmower accident.”

“Why’s it been a good day for you?” I inquire of Alessio. There’s something familiar about him to me, or maybe I’m just drawn to the tall, dark, and brooding type.

He gazes directly at me, possibly taking me in for the first time. I feel exposed as he scans me up and down. Suddenly, his eyes aren’t vacant anymore; they’re filled with a piercing, almost predatory hunger. Despite feeling vulnerable, I’m aware of my allure in my form-fitting green dress, which adds a sense of power to the moment.

“Let’s just say I received a promotion at work,” he responds in a deep voice, maintaining eye contact.

“And what do you do for work?” I tease in return. I’m puzzled by his reluctance to share. This is a Mafia wedding, after all. Does he think I’m oblivious to that?

“Would you believe me if I said waste management?”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, my dad’s in that business too.”

Dominguez laughs. “Groom’s side of the family, then. Wait. Are you Anthony Gonzalez’s kid?”

Great, my father’s reputation precedes me. I can’t wait to leave this world behind. “Yep,” I confirm.

Alessio tenses slightly. It’s subtle, but I’m more focused on him than I should be right now. “We should go,” he tells Dominguez. “We’ll smell like smoke if we stay here much longer.”

“Relax, dude, it’s a wedding reception,” Belle-Ann says, offering the joint again. “Here, you look like you could use this.”

He ignores her, but Dominguez winks and takes a quick puff. “Nice meeting you both. We’ll head back to the party now.”

“Byeeeeee,” Belle-Ann sings out, clearly in a lighthearted mood.

As they walk back to the wedding reception, Alessio doesn’t look back, but I can’t help but keep my eyes on his retreating figure, feeling incredibly flustered. Why did he bail on the conversation the moment he learned who my father was? And why does he seem so familiar to me?

Alessio

Fuck. That was Anthony Gonzalez’s daughter? That little bombshell I just bent over and had my way with in my depraved imagination?

Jesus Christ. I want to peel that clingy green dress off her and make her my absolute whore. I would do filthy, fucked up things to that tight body, things her father would probably have me killed for even thinking about. Fuck. Fuck.

Also, no. Also, absolutely not. Given my history with Anthony Gonzalez, separating myself was the only possible move. I did the right thing.

The frustrating tightness in my pants tells me I did the wrong thing. I bite my lip angrily, trying to make it go away. Grandpa Nazio naked. Grandpa Nazio getting a rectal exam.

“What’s on your mind?” Dominguez asks me, catching up as we reach the reception. “You know we’re allowed to talk to girls, right?”

“Not that girl.”

“Because she’s too young?”

“If that helps you.”

“You’re not going to tell me the reason?”

“Dominguez, do I look like I’m in the mood for pussy right now?”

He looks me up and down, then chuckles. “You do, actually.”

“Well, you’d be wrong about that.”

“Hey, I just call ‘em like I see ‘em. You weren’t exactly subtle checking her out. I can hardly blame you. I was certainly eyeing the other one.”

I scowl. “I’m not shitting where I eat.”

He lowers his voice. “You’re next in line to take over the entire Razone family. This whole fucking city is where you eat. You gotta shit somewhere.”

“Not in Gonzalez territory.”

Dominguez’s eyes focus on someone behind me, and he nods respectfully. “Don Nazio.”

My grandfather greets him, then puts his hand on my shoulder. “Come with me now, figlio mio. There is someone I’d like you to meet.”

Grandpa Nazio escorts me to a secluded area of the wedding venue, designated for staff only. We ascend a flight of stairs and enter a cozy room dominated by a large table adorned with a decanter of whiskey and several glasses. We sit in silence. I refrain from drinking or questioning our purpose here. Finally, after what my watch indicates is 18 minutes, the door swings open, revealing a familiar face.

“Good to see you, Don Antonio,” I greet Anthony Gonzalez, rising from my seat.

He approaches and embraces me, a gesture I hadn’t anticipated. “No need for formalities, Alessio! This is a joyous occasion.” He pours three whiskeys and distributes them to my grandfather, myself, and him.

I express my gratitude with a nod and feign a sip. “So, what’s the occasion? I must admit, I didn’t expect you to be pleased to see me. The past was tumultuous, and I want to extend my apologies-”

“Water under the bridge,” Gonzalez interjects, dismissing it. “What brings us together today is the union of two families.”

I shoot a quick glance at my grandfather, but his expression remains impassive. He locks eyes with Gonzalez, and I follow suit as the other mob boss elaborates:

“While I may not be as advanced in years as old Nazio here, I’m mindful of my legacy. Let’s be realistic. We’re the two dominant families in Bover City, and while we may spar over territory, I’m not keen on dividing the city in half for my descendants. And I suspect your grandfather feels the same way.”

Suppressing the urge to clench my fists, I remind myself that I consented to this. I agreed to fulfill my grandfather’s wishes.

“I have one grandson,” Nazio interjects, directing his attention to me. “Anthony has no sons, only a daughter. She’s of marriageable age, and you’re now a

man of honor. You will wed her, and when Anthony and I have passed on, you will inherit both legacies for your progeny.”

For a moment, my mind goes blank. Panic sets in, but I maintain composure, controlling my breathing and keeping my eyes open.

“Is this your desire, Nonno?” I inquire, meeting his gaze.

His cold stare meets mine. “It is, figlio mio. This marriage will solidify our legacies.”

I close my eyes momentarily before reopening them. I’ll have time to rage in solitude later tonight. But here, I must project strength.

Drawing a deep breath, I acquiesce. “Then a wedding shall take place.”

“Fantastic!” Anthony exclaims, raising his glass. My grandfather follows suit, despite his usual aversion to alcohol. We clink glasses, and this time, when I bring the cup to my lips, I take a sip. To my dismay, it’s not whiskey but brandy, sickeningly sweet to my palate.

A fitting metaphor for the entirety of this cursed evening. And apparently, for the rest of my life as well.

Ayla

I’ve sobered up from the weed by the time Marco, one of my father’s associates, tracks me down amidst the crowd. It’s quite amusing to see him in a tuxedo, his muscular, steroid-enhanced physique threatening to burst through the seams of his jacket. “Ms. Gonzalez? Your father wants to see you.”

Locking eyes with Belle-Ann, I let out a sigh. We're both accustomed to these interruptions growing up in the Mafia world. "I'll catch up with you later, Bella."

She embraces me, whispering, "I'll send you the party address!"

At least I have something to anticipate once this ordeal is over. That's the thought running through my mind as I follow Marco out of the bustling reception area and up a staircase, allowing myself a glimmer of excitement. My first official college party at Bover City University awaits. I'm eager to ditch this wedding and start preparing as soon as my father grants me permission to leave.

Marco gestures for me to enter through a door and stands guard outside. My stomach churns when I see my father isn't alone; accompanying him is an older bald man whom I recognize as the head of the Razon family, and Alessio, the enigmatic and brooding individual from earlier. What on earth is he doing here?

"Hi, dad, what's up?" I inquire, avoiding Alessio's gaze. This situation is entirely unexpected.

His tone is grave. "Take a seat, Ayla." He gestures towards a chair. "We need to discuss something important. I'd like you to meet Nazio and Alessio Razon."

My heart rate quickens as I comply with his request. "I hope this won't take too long? I have plans afterward."

I steal a glance at Alessio. He remains stoic, fixated on the table in front of him, his previously immaculate dark hair now slightly disheveled. My confusion deepens, along with a growing sense of apprehension.

"You're of age now," my father states bluntly. "And that entails certain responsibilities your family expects of you."

My eyebrows just about hit the ceiling. I'm not, like, shocked by his words, but that line sounds a lot more like my mom than my dad. I have a very bad feeling about where this is going. "Duties?"

He nods solemnly. "I've arranged a marriage for you."

I scoff in spite of myself. That's so ridiculous. "Excuse me? You've arranged a marriage? What century is it?"

His expression doesn't change, and the room suddenly feels cold as I realize that he's completely serious. I steal another glance at Alessio, but he's still not looking at me, his eyes drilling a hole in the table.

"You know what kind of family you grew up in. You have a legacy to continue. There are traditions. Your mother and I..."

"I don't care what you and mom decided, or what you want!" I all-but scream. "I don't want to get married! This is my life!"

For the first time, a trace of guilt creeps into my father's eyes. "I'm sorry, Ave. I know you had other plans. Sometimes part of life is doing things you don't want to do."

I stand up, chair skidding out from behind me. My phone crashes to the floor from my lap, but I don't even care. "This isn't part of life for normal people! Just in your weird, fucked up world where you trade off your only daughter like a fucking object! What are you getting for this? Money? Territory?"

"Enough!" Alessio stands up from his seat now, finally looking directly at me with fire in his eyes. "You will be my wife, and our children will inherit this city. That's the end of the conversation."

"Fuck you," I spit, spinning around and kicking my chair even further out of my way. "I'm a grown adult, I'm a citizen of the United States, and you can't make me."

I head for the door, then realize my phone is still under the table. Alessio hands it to me, the hint of a smirk on his face. Snatching it from him angrily, I walk out of the room, blow past Marco, and take the steps two at a time. Fuck this. I'm going to a party.

Alessio

“Should I go after her?” I ask, glancing at the still-open door. The sound of Ayla’s footsteps going down the stairs starts to fade.

Ayla’s father shakes his head. “Don’t bother. She’ll come around.”

To be honest, I’m disappointed. My interest in marriage is zero. But right now, she’s all I can fucking think about. Seeing her fiery defiance makes me need to tame her, to claim her, to break her. To make sure she knows just how wrong she is with that you-can’t-make-me bullshit.

My grandfather cocks his head at the other boss. “You’re sure we won’t have any issues with this, Anthony ?”

Gonzalez drains his glass. “There won’t be any issues. You know 19-year-olds, what can you do? They think the world revolves around them.”

19 years old. Jesus. No wonder she looks young.

My mind flashes to the notification I just saw on her phone. An invite to a party, scheduled tonight. The address is still burned into my brain. She’s probably going there now.

I finish my drink, savoring the brandy as I swallow. It’s too sweet. But I think I have a taste for it tonight.

Ayla

In my bedroom back home, my phone vibrates beside me, signaling a message from Belle-Ann inquiring about my arrival time at the party. My hands shake slightly as I type a response, then I carefully slip out of my dress, making sure not to mess up my hair or makeup.

The knot in my stomach from the earlier meeting with my father still lingers. Damn him, damn him for thinking he can dictate my life choices. It's my life, my decision, and I'll stand firm on that principle no matter what he tries to force upon me.

There's no way I'm marrying Alessio Razoné.

I punch my pillow in frustration, attempting to shift my mindset. What I asserted in my defense remains unequivocally true: legally, they cannot compel me into a marriage against my will. All I have to do is remain resolute and endure until I leave for school. The law is on my side. Ultimately, the worst this situation can do is ruin my evening. And I refuse to let it.

Alright, shifting focus. The party. The theme is "Halloween Starts in August," essentially an excuse for everyone to arrive in costume. Rifling through my closet, I locate last year's Halloween ensemble: a red bodysuit with a forked tail, horned headband, and a plastic pitchfork prop. I swiftly slip into it, pairing it with fishnet tights and thigh-high boots.

I'm a seductive devil.

Worried that my parents will get home before I leave, I glance at myself quickly in the mirror, fix my hair, and hurry out to my car. It is officially time to party and think about anything other than my dad and the annoyingly attractive gangster he thinks I'm going to marry.

Maybe I'll even fuck someone. I'm not saving my virginity for an arranged marriage, that's for sure.

Alessio

I park my car across the street from the address I saw on Ayla's phone. It's a frat house, one of those places that throws ragers just about every weekend during the semester. I can see tons of college-aged kids milling around outside, holding red solo cups. Most of them are wearing some type of costume, like it's Halloween.

Actually, this place is huge. It's not just one frat house, it's three, all on the same property, sharing a yard. There must be at least 100 people, not including the line of hopeful freshman queued up to get in the door.

I'm out of my suit now, wearing black jeans and a matching shirt. Grabbing a black bandanna from the glovebox, I wrap it around my face. There, now I'm in costume. A western outlaw or something. Who cares.

Exiting my car, I walk confidently to the front of the line and push past the frat bro guarding the entrance without breaking my stride. He makes as if to stop me, but I'm already past him and walking quickly. He doesn't follow.

I know how to get into places I'm not supposed to be.

As far as anyone else is concerned, I'm part of the party now. I find a half-empty cup sitting unattended on a bench and I pick it up, the better to blend in. It's full of some kind of disgusting red jungle juice, but I don't care. The cup is for holding, not for drinking. I wander slowly around the yard, keeping my eyes peeled for Ayla.

There are two bonfires, but she's not at either one. She's not with the group doing keg stands, and she's not part of the circle in the corner of the yard passing around a pipe. There are so many people here, it's more difficult to find her than I expected.

Actually, I don't know what I expected. Coming here wasn't the most calculated of decisions. Normally, I'm calm, collected, and rational.

Ayla makes me obsessed.

"You're sure you're okay if I stay out here by the fire, Ave?"

There. Behind me. Someone just said her name. I glance around surreptitiously and...

Bingo.

That's her, all right. Now she is at one of the bonfires, standing next to her friend Belle-Ann who I met at the wedding. She's wearing this red devil costume with thigh-high boots, and it instantly gets my imagination whirring with all the fucked up ways I want to claim her for myself. She looks like a fucking snack, her bodysuit cut in such a way that I can see the soft creases of her hips tempting me.

Then something happens that makes my blood run hot in a very different way: the guy next to her, wearing a dark cloak and one of those white ghost masks, puts his arm around her and whispers something in her ear.

"I'll see you in a bit, okay, Bella?" Ayla says to her friend, giggling. "Derek is just going to show me something upstairs." I step closer, warming myself at the fire so they can't see my face.

"Okay," says Belle-Ann, then whispers, "have fun and be safe!"

Belle-Ann re-engages in conversation with the girl next to her, and Ayla starts walking toward one of the frat houses with the guy in the ghost mask. He keeps his hand on her hip, with all the possessive body language of a young man who thinks he's about to get laid. I follow them at a distance, my eyes fixed on his hand.

Not yours. Mine.

I step inside after them. The atmosphere is intense, laden with throbbing music and the smell of booze. It's even more crowded than the yard. Drunk, sweaty bodies are everywhere, shouting to be heard over the blasting speakers.

Ayla's companion pushes his mask up as they go indoors. I see a blandly handsome, clean-shaven white guy who can't contain his grin. Ayla, to my frustration, seems quite content to let him lead her upstairs, laughing at his jokes and letting him touch her. I climb the steps after them, watching the bouncing movement of the cute little devil's tail on her ass.

Fuck, I want to do bad things to her.

When they get to the top, she starts poking him with her pitchfork, giggling. He laughs, trying to dodge, then pulls it out of her hands. They wrestle playfully. My blood boils as he presses her up against the wall, both of them breathing heavily. I quicken my pace up the steps.

"My bedroom is just down the hall," I hear a ghost mask slur as I get closer.
"You want to wait for me while I take a leak? Then we can, you know..."

Whoa there, Romeo, leave some pussy for the rest of us.

"Sure," says Ayla, and I almost chuckle internally. Oh, to be 19 and horny. The bar is on the floor.

I lean against the wall, holding my red cup as a ghost mask leads Ayla through a door at the end of the hall. He reappears a moment later and heads quickly back down the stairs.

I follow.

We pass a bathroom with an enormous crowd around it, but he takes us to another area of the house that isn't so crowded. There's a door with a handwritten sign marked "OFF-LIMITS." He pulls a key out of his pocket,

unlocks the door, and steps inside. I put my cup down on a nearby windowsill and wait next to the door.

When it opens a minute later, I force myself inside, shoving ghost mask back in and closing the door behind me. "What the fuck-" he tries to yell, but I cover his mouth, pinning him to the wall and plunging the syringe I have prepared into his neck. His eyes bulged. After a few seconds of struggling, he goes limp.

I stash his body in the bathtub, removing the cloak and mask. I put them on, looking at my reflection in the mirror as I wash my hands with soap and water.

Then I pull the shower curtain closed, leave the room, and use his key to lock the door behind me.