

THE MAFIA'S OBSESSION

Ayla

Talbot fidgets as we ride the elevator up to his apartment. "First of all, I just want to say-"

"Shut up," says Alessio. "We'll speak once you've invited us into your lovely home."

We get to the 16th floor, and the admissions officer takes us down the hallway and into his apartment. It has this funny vibe, like the furnishings are nicer than the place itself demands. There are display cases on the walls filled with figurines and autographed sports jerseys.

"You ever consider selling some of these?" Alessio asks, pointing. "Would be an easier way to pay what you owe than Photoshopping an innocent student using drugs."

"I'll get right on that," says Talbot, now looking thoroughly spooked. "Whatever you want."

"What I want is for you to get Ayla Gonzalez back into Bover City University."

"I told you," Talbot says, "it's not that simple. I already showed them photos of Ayla using cocaine. How am I going to explain that away?"

"Show us the pictures," I demand.

Talbot glances at Alessio, who nods his head. "Do as she says."

He scurries to the desk in the corner of the living room and boots up his computer. An anime girl in a bikini greets us as his desktop background.

"The pictures," Alessio prompts him.

Hand shaking on the mouse, Talbot navigates to a folder filled with images. He starts to sort through them, and I see that the files are organized by last name.

"What are these?" I ask, frowning. "Wait, open that one up." I point at random to one of the files.

"This doesn't have anything to do with you," he protests. "I really don't see-"
"Open it," Alessio growls.

Talbot does, and I see a screenshot of an Instagram exchange. Scanning over it, I read part of a conversation where one party admits to buying custom essays from a website and turning them in for good grades.

"You faked these messages?" I ask.

He chuckles nervously. "Didn't even have to fake it. Pretended I was a friend of his using a new profile. He was almost proud to admit it."

"So you make a business of getting kids kicked out of school?"

"I make a business of getting kids into school. Only time I have to kick somebody out is when it's the middle of the school year and attendance is full. And that costs extra."

He closes the screenshot and opens another. I see two images, side-by-side, of myself in a grungy room snorting lines of white powder off a coffee table. I know it isn't me. I've never done coke in my life. But the images look so real. They'd be enough to fool anyone.

"Fuuuck," I breathe, staring at the fake photos.

Behind us, Alessio opens the briefcase. Inside are stacks of bills. "This looks like a good business. What is this, 30 grand?"

“50,” says Talbot, looking just slightly smug.

Alessio chuckles. “You must really have a gambling problem to be owing Gonzalez big with this kind of income. From now on, you work for me. I’ll send someone every month to collect my 50 percent.”

Talbot’s face reddens. “50 percent?”

“That’s if you promise to get Ayla back into school. If you say no, you’re going over the balcony.”

“You’re not listening to me. I don’t even know how I would-”

“16 floors. Long way down. Figure it out.”

“But the arrangement I had with Mr. Gonzalez-”

Alessio grabs Talbot by the collar of his polo shirt and drags him across the living room, through the sliding glass doors, and to the balcony. I follow, my adrenaline spiking.

“I don’t give a shit about your arrangement with Mr. Gonzalez. You want to visit him in prison, that’s your business. But you’re kicking up your 50 percent to me, and you’re getting Ayla back into school. It does not matter what lies you have to make up. You’ll come up with something.”

He forces Talbot against the railing overlooking the city street, hoisting him by the waist so his feet leave the ground.

“Either that, or we do a little experiment in human flight. Get ready to flap those arms real hard.

“Okay! Okay!” Talbot gasps, his eyes bugging out as he stares down at the street so far below him. “Jesus, I’ll do it! I’ll do whatever you want.”

“You’ll do what?”

“I’ll get her back in. And I’ll pay you half.”

Alessio allows Talbot's feet to return to the ground, although he keeps him pressed against the railing. "Good answer. But I have to ask. Are you going to forget about our deal when I leave here? I really wouldn't want to have to come back."

"No! I won't forget."

Alessio steps backward, calm now. "Good. You're not going to see my face again. If you do, it's because you haven't held up your end of the bargain. And that means my face will be the last thing you ever see."

"Understood," Talbot babbles, quaking with relief. "I'll find a way to-"

He breaks off as Alessio sticks a syringe into his neck.

"He was talking too much," says my husband, shrugging.

Alessio

"Was that really necessary?" Ayla asks, wide-eyed.

I drag Talbot's unconscious figure back into the apartment and dump him on the carpet. "No."

"You didn't... kill him, right?"

I chuckle. "Of course not. He's my new business partner. And he can't very well get you back into BCU if he's dead. He'll wake up tomorrow with a headache." I walk to the kitchen and grab a beer from the fridge. "Want one?"

She stares at me. "Do I want a beer? Shouldn't we be getting out of here?"

"What's the hurry?"

She starts to answer, then stops herself, as though struggling to come up with something. "I mean... leaving the scene of the crime?"

“So you don’t want a beer?”

Ayla stares at me again, then she laughs. “Fine, fine. Beer me.”

I toss her a bottle, which she misses. It shatters on the floor.

“Nice throw.”

“Nice catch.”

We make eye contact, then both of us start laughing. “Here,” I say, carefully handing her the bottle this time. “Want to sit out on the balcony?”

She walks over to the coffee table, past Talbot, and picks up what seems to be a jar of weed and some rolling papers. “Sure, if you’ll smoke a joint with me.”

I give her the side eye. “You want me to smoke weed with you?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“You wouldn’t smoke with us that night we met. I’ve been dying to see what you’re like stoned.”

“Really?”

She interprets my response as a yes, picking up the jar and papers and walking out to the balcony with them. “Come on, it’ll be fun.”

I haven’t smoked weed in years. The last time was with Dominguez, now that I think about it. I’m weirdly apprehensive as Ayla rolls the joint next to me with practiced fingers.

“Should I make a joke about how good you are at that?”

My wife shrugs. "Second semester of senior year, all I did was smoke. I got pretty good at rolling."

"It's still weird for me to hear that and realize you mean your senior year of high school."

She looks at me out of the corner of her eye, sealing the joint with her tongue.

"I think it's a little late to be having concerns about the age gap. You know we met before? When I was 14?"

"Fuck, really? Not exactly helping me feel less creepy."

Ayla leans closer, looking at me with big, fuck-me eyes. "If you felt creepy for being with me, you probably should have thought of that before you fucked me and came inside me a bunch of times. I am on birth control, if you were wondering."

"I wasn't wondering."

She looks at me sharply, then gives a shudder, putting the joint to her lips.

"Got a light?"

"Actually, no."

She hands me a lighter from her pocket. "It's okay, I have one. Want to do the honors?"

"I feel like I'm from a 1940s film noir movie, lighting your cigarette for you," I say, flicking the lighter and holding the flame in front of her as she inhales.

"Like I'm Humphrey Bogart and you're Lauren Bacall or something."

She giggles. "I barely know who those people are."

My mouth opens in mock-offense. "Come on, I'm not that much older than you."

Ayla takes a drag, the tip of the joint glowing orange. "Tell me more about the 1940s. What was it like back then? Did you fight in World War II?"

I laugh. "Oh, no, they only drafted the young bucks. I was much too old. The last war I fought in, we were using rocks and clubs."

"Yeah, and riding to battle on a dinosaur, right?"

"Right. My favorite was the Triceratops."

"Not the T-Rex?"

"Nah. Too nippy."

Ayla hands me the joint. I hold it warily, watching smoke trail from the tip.

"It won't bite, you know," she says, looking amused. "Just start slow. I got way more stoned than I expected to when I was smoking with Belle-Ann at the wedding."

She means the wedding where we met in the orchard, I realize. The day I got made. How far away that feels.

Okay, here goes nothing. I put the joint to my lips and inhale, coughing as the smoke hits my lungs.

"There you go," she says, patting my back and taking the joint back from me.

"Let's see how that treats you."

I allow the remaining smoke to trail out of my mouth, almost like a ghost.

"Tastes nice."

"Yeah, apparently Talbot smokes the good stuff. Makes sense, considering the briefcase full of cash."

My mind jumps to the BCU admissions officer, lying on the floor of the apartment while we sit on his balcony, smoking his weed and drinking his beer. A laugh escapes me, and once it starts, it doesn't stop.

"What's so funny?" asks Ayla, taking another hit. "Somebody got the giggles?"

I can't even get the words out. Objectively, I can't really defend the situation being funny enough to justify laughing like this, but it doesn't seem to matter right now. The giggles have a life of their own.

Ayla watches me, and soon she's laughing at the fact that I'm laughing. "You are so adorable," she says, putting her head on my shoulder. "Oh my god. I'm so glad I got you high."

"That's a new one," I choke out, getting control of myself.

"What is?"

"'Adorable.' Pretty sure I've never been called that before."

"Not even when you were a kid?"

I scowl. "Definitely not."

"That's sad."

Is it? It never occurred to me to think about it that way. Also, we aren't talking about my childhood. That topic would make her pity me, want to comfort me, bring us closer. I'm not doing that.

"The city lights look amazing," is what I end up saying, staring at the skyline in the fading evening light. "Are they always this bright and colorful?"

"Okay, you're definitely high."

"How can you tell?"

"What you just said. And the look on your face."

I feel defensive. "Hey, it was your idea."

"I'm not complaining! You're cute."

Ayla leans against the railing and we watch the city together, glistening brilliantly with life.

“I had a dream about you, you know. Before we were married.”

I turn sharply at my wife’s words. “You did?”

She looks down. “More than one. When I was hiding at that hotel in Parker Springs. I kept having them.”

“What kind of dreams?”

Even with the limited light, I can see her blushing. “It was always the same. First, like, I’m running, trying to hide. Then I’m at that party, fucking the guy with the ghost mask. Then the mask comes off, and it turns out to be you. And in the dream, we were married. That’s when I would always wake up.”

I lean forward, my fuzzy brain trying to make sense of her words. “Wasn’t that... before you knew?”

“Before you told me that it was you in the ghost mask? Yeah. I was having those dreams before that.”

“That’s... wow. That’s crazy.”

“I know. It’s like somehow, I knew. Even though I didn’t... know.”

“And you said we were married in the dream?”

“Yeah. I guess my subconscious was trying to make sense of all the different ways I was feeling about you.”

She looks away, as though she’s revealed too much. My heartbeat quickens.

“All the different ways?”

Ayla keeps her eyes on the skyline as she replies. “Yeah. Being attracted, and scared, and not wanting to marry you, but knowing deep down that was probably always what was going to happen.”

I want to touch her, but in that moment, the three inches between us feel like such a distance. My hand doesn't even leave the railing. "Why did you think that was always going to happen?"

She gives me a funny look. "Because my dad wanted it." There's venom in her voice. "And my dad always gets what he wants."

The change in tone is sudden, and I try not to react. "Not this time."

"Not this time? I mean... not to be shitty, but look who I'm married to."

Her words cut me, even though I know that isn't their intent. "That's not what your dad wanted, that's what I wanted. Your dad's in jail. He doesn't get a say."

"Yeah, but for how much longer?"

"I have no idea. But let me make one thing very clear: he doesn't get to control your life anymore. Not ever again."

Ayla makes eye contact with me, and her face softens. For some reason, this brings me relief. We've been clicking today. I want to keep that feeling going.

"Thanks for today," she whispers, stepping closer to me. "For helping. It means a lot."

"Yeah. Of course."

I put an arm around my wife and pull her closer, holding her from behind as we watch the sunset. She leans against me and I allow myself to nuzzle her hair. God, I love that smell. It's like being home.

"Ayla?" My heart beats faster as I say her name.

She leans her head back. "Yeah?"

I'm so glad I married you, is what I want to say.

"I... this is nice. Being here together."

Fucking coward.

She pauses, as though allowing me the chance to say more.

“Yeah,” she whispers finally, putting her hand on my wrist and squeezing it.

“This is nice.”

I hold her as tightly as I can, and it’s like I’m begging the universe not to take her away from me. The protective walls I’ve built around myself are crumbling, leaving me more exposed than I’ve ever been.

It would be so easy to let her in. To follow that siren’s call that always leads to pain.

Maybe she’s worth the pain.

Ayla

Three days later

I feel a grim sort of satisfaction as the guard leads me to the clear pane of bulletproof glass separating me from my father. I sit down, unable to read the expression on his face. With a deep breath, I pick up the phone receiver and put it to my ear.

“Hey, dad.”

He stares at me like he doesn’t know what to say, then nods several times.

“Ayla. My only daughter. Congratulations on your marriage. Sorry I couldn’t come to the wedding.” There’s bitterness in his voice. “I would have loved to give you away.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet you would have.”

A lengthy, awkward pause. I'm waiting for his retort. My father shakes his head. "Happy?"

I gulp. "Yeah. I am happy."

"I understand why you did it, you know. In a way, I respect it. You beat me. You're more ruthless than I thought."

I think back to huddling in the closet of our "vacation" home and making the fateful decision to reveal our location to Alessio. How much has changed since then. "I wasn't trying to be ruthless. I was trying to take control of my life. Did you think I was just going to follow your orders forever?"

"Hey, take some credit. You deserve it. Setting up your father for a prison sentence is pretty ruthless. You'll go far with that mindset."

It takes a moment for it to hit me that we aren't talking about the same thing.

"Wait. Do you think I set you up? I was talking about..." I try to choose my words carefully, knowing we're being recorded. "I was talking about marrying Alessio."

"Oh, I'm sure he helped. Are you denying it?"

"Yes, I am denying it. Do you think I would do that to my own father?"

He raises his eyebrows. "I already know the way you betrayed me that you can't deny. Don't pretend it's a stretch."

"Well, I didn't."

He pauses, somewhat thoughtfully, and I honestly can't tell whether he believes me or not. "I suppose it doesn't matter now."

"And what exactly does that mean?"

"It means that whatever happens next, my grandchildren will inherit what I've built. Whether I give it to them, or you do."

“And how would you give it to them?” I snap. “You got a way of getting through this bulletproof glass I don’t know about?”

The guard next to us raises his head, staring at me pointedly.

My father shrugs. “It’s amazing what’s possible in this great legal system of ours. God bless America.”

I glance at the guard, choosing each word with caution. “And you think you can just get it all back? Even if they let you walk out of here? Things have changed since you’ve been gone.”

“Oh, I’m sure they have. Is that why you came to visit me? To tell me things have changed?”

My fists clench. “Yes. I wanted to tell you that BCU reversed its decision. I’ll be starting school as a freshman next fall. Funny how you couldn’t do anything about that.”

He tries not to react, but I see his eyes flash. “Like I said, ruthless. That’ll take you places. You really are my daughter.”

“I would never take away from you what you tried to take from me.”

“Like my life? My freedom?”

I stare at him. “You really still think I set you up?”

He sneers. “No, of course not. 20-year-old cold cases get prosecuted all the time.”

“It’s like you can’t decide if you’re proud of me, or want to kill me.”

“Yes. Exactly.”

In spite of how hard I’ve worked to cut him out, to not care, my lip still quivers. He’s my dad. I don’t want us to be enemies. I want him to love me. “Why did you even force me to marry him in the first place?” I ask bitterly, close to tears.

“What is wrong with you? Why would you arrange that if you were just planning to take it away at the last minute?”

My father closes his eyes. When he opens them, his face is impassive. “I did intend for you to marry Alessio. You’ve been pledged to him for a very, very long time. Since you were young.”

What? It’s impossible to hide the shock on my face. “I... what do you mean, since I was young?”

He just laughs, eyes gleaming with the realization that he’s finally found some power over me, even from behind the bulletproof glass. “You think you know everything about this? Oh, I guess you don’t. Why don’t you ask your husband about it, if you think he’ll tell you.” He leans back in his chair.

A familiar sense of resentment washes over me and I stand up, my own chair flying out behind me. “Enjoy prison.” I drop the receiver and storm out.

Ayla

“Ayla! I’m so happy!” Belle-Ann wraps her arms around me as we meet outside Gino’s bar, a popular Gonzalez family hangout.

I squeeze her back, grinning. “And you thought you were going to be rid of me.”

We’re here to celebrate me getting back into Bover City University.

Dominguez and Alessio stand behind us on the sidewalk, waiting to go inside.

As we find a table and sit down, I try to ignore the swirl of misgivings I have after the conversation with my father. I don’t know how to understand what he just told me. I’ve been pledged to Alessio since I was young? Fucking yuck. And also, what the hell?

Ask your husband about it, if you think he’ll tell you.

I make eye contact with Alessio, sitting across from me, and his handsome face smiles back. What does he know that I don't? What game am I a pawn in that he never even bothered to tell me about? I squirm at the feeling of being used, and I hate it. It's exactly why I wanted to leave this life behind me.

"Mr. and Mrs. Razione! So good to see you you here. How's your night going?" The bar owner approaches us, beaming.

Alessio puts his arm around me. "Good, thank you, Luigi. We're celebrating Mrs. Razione getting accepted to her first-choice college."

The owner claps his hands. "Congratulazioni, Mrs. Razione! But seeing as this is a bar... Can I see some ID?"

I freeze. Alessio assured me we wouldn't get carded here.

Luigi's face breaks into a smile. "I joke, I joke. The look on your face. Where are you going to school?"

"Bover City University," I tell him. "Not too far from home."

"A splendid choice! My niece studies there. Psychology. Very good school. I'll send a dessert to your table, on the house."

I blush. "Oh, it's okay, you don't have to-"

"Nonsense! I'll pick it up myself from the bakery across the street. Only the best for the Razones."

He scurries off, and I'm left blinking. Even as Anthony Gonzalez's daughter, I never got that kind of treatment. But walking in here now with Alessio, the boss of the two most important families in Bover City, is different. I can feel that everyone in the room knows who we are, and wants us to approve of them.

Playing pool near us are two guys I recognize from the wedding circuit. Gonzalez family associates, I'm pretty sure. They come up to our table and congratulate me, making sure to shake Alessio's hand.

“Feel like the boss now?” Dominguez smirks, lowering his voice after they leave. “They’re like dogs begging for scraps.”

“Shit, that’s my dad,” says Belle-Ann, ducking.

Belle-Ann’s father is a captain in the Gonzalez family. I turn and see him walking into the bar, along with Gio the Butcher.

“And that’s Giovanni Lombardo,” says Dominguez, looking out of the corner of his eye. “Two Gonzalez captains. Let’s see what they do.”

They see us as they enter and immediately walk over to our table.

“Mr. and Mrs. Razione!” Belle-Ann’s father greets us, smiling a little too broadly. “And in such great company!” He leans down and kisses Belle-Ann on the cheek. “Gio, have you met my daughter, Belle-Ann?”

“A pleasure,” says Lombardo, his own fake warmth slightly more believable. He shakes hands with Alessio, nods to Dominguez, and gives me a kiss on the cheek while I try not to cringe.

I feel awkward, but no one else seems to. Apparently, I’m the only one who cares that the last time we saw each other, Alessio and Dominguez fed Gio the Butcher’s second-in-command to his own piranhas.

The bar owner comes back with a box of cannoncini, flaky Italian pastry horns filled with velvety cream. He congratulates me again as he places the box in front of us.

“Special occasion?” asks Belle-Ann’s father, eyeing the pastries and then his daughter, as though trying to figure out what she’s done to earn a seat at the boss’s table.

“Ayla just got accepted to Bover City University,” she tells him, nudging me. “We’re celebrating.”

“Ah! I forgot you two were close. Such a wonderful thing, to stay in touch with our childhood friends. Ayla, I hope you have a wonderful time in school.”

“Thanks,” I say uncomfortably. Everyone is being so nice to me now, even more than they were before. I guess boss’s wife trumps boss’s daughter. Did my mom get treated like this when my dad was in charge? She probably did.

“Well, don’t let us interrupt,” says Gio, glancing at his companion. “Enjoy your dessert! Congratulations, Ayla. I’m sure you’ll have a wonderful time at BCU.”

Both men give Alessio a deferential nod, then they find seats at the bar.

Belle-Ann taps my foot under the table. “Did you see my dad’s face when he realized I was sitting with his boss?”

An hour and a few drinks later, we’re having a good time. Belle-Ann lets loose a bit after her father leaves, making all of us laugh with a story about how she and I used to sneak out of our high school English class.

“And the best part is,” Belle-Ann chokes, “we managed to convince Mrs. Rivera that we had a conflict with an elective on Fridays, so she wouldn’t even mark us absent!”

“I knew you were a pair of delinquents,” chuckles Dominguez. “From the first time I saw you hiding in the orchard smoking pot at that wedding, I thought, ‘these girls are trouble.’”

“Didn’t do a very good job of staying out of trouble, then,” says Belle-Ann. “Didn’t you take a hit from my joint?”

He shrugs. “Hey, I never said I had a problem with trouble. I love trouble.”

The door to the bar opens and three tall, athletic-looking men enter, all wearing hoodies for the BCU football team. Belle-Ann glances over, then ducks, her face turning red.

“What is it?” I ask. I don’t recognize any of the guys.

“That’s Jason,” she mutters. “The one I told you about.”

“Shit. Do you want to leave?”

“Wait, what’s going on?” Dominguez asks. “Do you know those guys?”

Belle-Ann looks like she doesn’t want to answer. I glance at her. “Is it okay if I explain?”

She nods. “Go ahead.”

I sigh and turn to Dominguez. “The blond one is somebody Belle-Ann matched with on a dating app a couple weeks ago. Quarterback on the BCU team or something. They went on one date, she broke things off, and he’s been borderline-stalking her ever since.”

“Borderline-stalking her?”

Belle-Ann rubs her forehead, still keeping her face turned away from the group of football players. “He keeps ‘running into me’ on my way to class and asking why I won’t give him a second date. Was sending about 20 texts a day until I blocked his number.”

“Jesus. Want me to go have a talk with him?”

She looks sharply at Dominguez, as though somewhere between impressed and tempted, but shakes her head. “I don’t want to make a scene. He hasn’t bothered me since last week. Maybe he got bored.”

“Well if you change your mind,” says Alessio, “Dom and I have your back.”

“I thought that was you!”

Belle-Ann and I both wince at the sound of Jason the football player’s slurred voice. He swaggers over to our table, confident as can be, eyes narrowing cruelly.

“Can I help you?” Alessio asks.

Jason ignores him. “Hey, Belle-Ann! Remember me?”

“My friend asked if he can help you,” Dominguez growls.

The football player takes a step closer to him, puffing out his broad shoulders.

“Shut up. I’m not talking to you.”

Immediately, the atmosphere in the bar changes. Less chatter, more people paying attention to our table.

“I don’t want to date you,” says Belle-Ann, face bright red, “so just fuck off and leave me alone.”

“You should go rejoin your friends,” says Alessio, his voice low and deadly.

“Or what?” Jason turns his attention back to Belle-Ann. “You think I want to date you? You wouldn’t put out anyway, you bitch.”

Dominguez stands up from his chair instantly, getting in his face. The football player looks like he outweighs him, but I know that whatever confidence he draws from that fact is badly, badly misplaced.

“Get the fuck out of here,” says Dominguez. “Or you’re going to get hurt.”

Jason takes a step backwards, but he seems more amused than intimidated.

“Ooh, I’m so scared, your new boyfriend threatened to beat me up. Whatever shall I do?” He looks over at his group of friends, who laugh.

Dominguez doesn’t budge. “Last warning.”

Jason’s eyes flash. “Hey, wait a second. I just realized something!” He looks over at Belle-Ann with an evil grin. “You’re only 20 years old. It said so in your profile. Are you drinking illegally?” He raises his voice so the whole bar can hear. “This one’s underage! She’s drinking with a fake ID!”

Luigi the bar owner stomps over to our table holding a bat."Out!"he yells. "Get the fuck out of my bar!"

Jason eyes the bat, then laughs. "Just having a little fun. Don't worry, I'm going. Come on, guys."

He motions to his friends and they get up, one of them intentionally spilling a drink on his way out.

Luigi lowers his bat as the door closes behind them. "Those three aren't allowed in here anymore," he says to the bartender. "Sorry about the disturbance, folks."

But about 15 minutes later, the door opens again. It's the three football players, and this time, they have a police officer with them.

"This is the place," Jason announces proudly. "They allow underage drinking in here. The bar condones it." He points to Belle-Ann. "Ask for her ID. She's only 20 years old. If her license says otherwise, it's a fake."

The police officer walks slowly over to our table, then stops. Belle-Ann stiffens.

"Sorry to interrupt your evening, Mr. Razione," the cop addresses Alessio. "I'm happy to book the three of them now, keep them in the drunk tank overnight. Or I can fuck off back to my beat and let you deal with them your way."

My husband gives him a tight smile. "Thanks, Paul. No need to add paperwork to your night. We'll take it from here."

Jason and his two friends watch with mouths agape as the officer walks past them and exits the bar, whistling to himself. One of the men drinking by the door locks it behind him.

“Uhh, what the fuck just happened?” asks Jason’s friend, staring at him in confusion.

Jason doesn’t get the chance to answer before someone smashes him in the back of the head with a bottle. The other two football players have no time to react. They’re surrounded by a group of Mafia guys armed with bottles and pool cues, beating them down viciously in an attempt to impress the boss.

I turn to my husband, torn between horror and a dark sense of satisfaction. He’s watching with a blank, dead-eyed look on his face, the same one I remember from his grandfather’s funeral. It’s like he’s been transported to a different place. Next to me, Belle-Ann is frozen, staring at the table in front of her as the beating continues.

Then suddenly, Alessio stands up. “Enough!” He holds out his hand.

The beatdown stops. Instantly. Jason and his two friends stay on the ground, bleeding and groaning.

“Get them out of here,” Alessio snarls.

A couple of men rush to pick up the football players. They drag them out the back door and leave them in the alley.

Dominguez turns to his friend. “You think we should get out of here?”

Alessio nods, his eyes still dead. “Yes.”

We walk out to the parking lot in silence. Alessio uses his phone to unlock the car.

Then flames shoot to the sky and an incredible, deafening bang shatters the night as his Tesla explodes in an enormous ball of fire. He wraps his arms around me, shielding me with his body from the heat while Dominguez does the same with Belle-Ann

Alessio

20 years ago

“Happy birthday to youuuu!”

Everybody claps as they finish singing. Perched on my bar stool, I blow out my candles, all 10 of them, and look around at the friends I have celebrating with me. I feel like the coolest kid around. I’m not even a teenager yet, and half the guests at my party are grownups. These are men of honor. That’s what my dad calls them. And they’re treating me like part of the crew.

“Happy birthday, kid,” says Uncle Sal, clapping me on the back and stuffing an envelope full of cash into my hand. “You’ll turn out all right.”

I make eye contact with my best friend Dominguez, beaming. We love birthdays. His was last month, and he got a lot of envelopes. But I wasn’t jealous. My grandpa is the boss. I knew when my birthday came, my envelopes would be fatter than his.

“Is Nonno coming?” I ask dad hopefully, tugging his sleeve to get his attention.

“Look at that fucking piece of shit,” he mutters, staring across the bar at a man I don’t recognize. “Coming in here.” He nudges Uncle Sal. “You see this?”

Sal glances over his shoulder, then whispers something. My heart sinks.

“Dad?” I try again, hoping I can distract him. “Is Nonno coming?”

Uncle Sal ruffles my hair. “I don’t think so, kid. Your grandpa’s a very important man. He’s got business today.”

Dad makes eye contact with Sal, and I’m not having fun anymore. Dad scares me when he’s like this.

Dad lets me eat lots of cake, so I end up having a pretty good time. Most of the people leave, and Uncle Sal plays games with me until I get tired and fall asleep with my head on the counter.

When I wake up, I'm curled up with his jacket in a booth in the corner. I can hear dad talking to someone at the bar behind me:

"To be honest, Jackie, you've got a lot of nerve coming in here after what you pulled. It was me, I wouldn't show my face."

Someone puts a glass down hard. "You really gonna give me this fuckin' shit? That motherfucker got what he was owed. Tell me like you would do any different."

Uncle Sal's voice. "All we're saying is, it's Andres's cousin we're talking about. Barely more than a kid. You really hurt the guy. You gotta show some respect."

"And where was my respect when he was ripping me off? Thanks, fellas, but I'll drink where I please. I ain't paying nothing for that little shit, all respect to you both. I'm glad he's in the hospital. Maybe if it's a long recovery, it teaches him a lesson."

I sit up, almost choking on the cigarette smoke, just in time to see my dad smash a bottle into the back of the man's head. He slumps forward, knocking over his beer, and dad keeps stabbing him in the back and shoulders with the jagged edges of the broken bottle. Sal rushes over to the door and locks it. The bartender is nowhere to be seen.

A horrified whimper escapes me. Now the man is lying in a growing pool of sickly dark blood, my dad standing over him, and I can't look away from it. I've never seen anything like this before.

Uncle Sal runs back to dad and they kick the guy a bunch of times even though he's already not moving. "There's your fuckin' respect," Sal grunts.

Then they look up and notice me watching them. Sal shakes his head. "Sorry about this, kid. Your birthday and everything. Had to be done."

"He's old enough," growls my dad, shirt painted red. It looks so much brighter on the white cloth than oozing over the tiled floor. "He'll be a man soon."

I keel forward and throw up.

"You gotta make sure to leave all the pieces in different places," my dad explains, his words punctuated by the dullthunk of his cleaver chopping through flesh and bone. "You get lazy, that's how they catch you."

Uncle Sal grunts, focused on his own chopping. "You listen to your old man. Don't ever get sloppy. You want to be here a long time, mind your P's and Q's."

My eyes are fixed on the floor of the wine cellar. I'm pretty sure I'll retch again if I look up.

"You got that, kid?"

An arm lands in the bucket in front of me. I do my best to ignore it, lip trembling. "Got it."

Dad walks over to me, and I wince. "Look at me, Alessio."

I heed his words, knowing he expects me to be strong. My eyes snap reluctantly to his face and he towers over me, holding a severed foot.

"Do you know why we had to do this?"

I nod. All I want is for this to be over.

"No, you don't."

I say nothing. I'm not going to risk guessing wrong.

"Family," my father growls, crouching down to my level. "You must always protect your family. Nothing is ever more important."

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Alessio

Present day

My pistol is in my hand before the debris is finished falling. Car alarms ring out through the parking lot, flames now flickering lazily from the burned-out shell of my vehicle. All around us, bits of ash waft down from the sky like snow.

Next to me, Dominguez has his gun out as well, shielding Belle-Ann with one arm as he looks around for a threat. "Are you okay?" he calls through the cacophony.

I verify that Ayla is also unhurt. "Yeah, we're fine. You and Belle-Ann?"

"We're okay. Fuck. Car bomb?"

I nod grimly, a familiar sense of dread coming over me. Memories start punching into my brain, memories I've tried very hard to escape.

My father's Mercedes, reduced to a charred skeleton just like this. I only ever saw it in the news reports, which means I never had to endure the image of my parents' incinerated corpses in the front seats. But I imagined it. So many times.

A crowd gathers in the parking lot as people come out of the bar and surrounding buildings to check on the commotion. Dominguez and I put our guns away, saying nothing. The authorities will be here soon, and this time, they won't all be on my payroll.

Dominguez drives us home in his car. I stew next to him in the passenger seat, staring out the window. Behind us, the two women sit in silence.

“Who do you think did it?” Dominguez finally asks, breaking the quiet.
“Maroney?”

I stroke my bruised knuckles, the result of sending a message to one of Colin Maroney’s enforcers. “Maybe. Probably. I didn’t think we were done with him.”

Ayla pipes up. “Who’s Maroney?”

“Colin Maroney,” says Dominguez. “Irish mob. His crew’s been trying to muscle onto our turf in South Bover. We had a little problem with them recently.”

“And you think he planted the bomb?”

“It makes the most sense. Who else is gunning for us right now?”

Ayla hesitates, then takes a deep breath. “Could it be... do you think it could be my father?”

Dominguez doesn’t answer that one, instead glancing in my direction.

My voice is hoarse. “I doubt it. It’s possible that he has ways of getting word to the outside, but no one on the street is taking orders from him anymore.”

I’m present, but I’m not. Half my brain is still in that memory where I’m 15 years old, obsessively looking up every news report, every bit of information I can find on my parents’ murder.

I still don’t know who killed them. But I know how it felt to lose them. I don’t ever want that pain again. And I can’t let Ayla feel that pain about me.

If I die in a fiery wreck or a hail of bullets, will it leave her just as broken?

My most important purpose is to protect her. Even if that means adding stones and mortar to the wall around my heart.

Ayla

My hands are still trembling when Dominguez drops us off at the penthouse. I cling to Alessio as we ride the elevator to the top, needing the security of his closeness. The explosion rings in my ears. I can still feel the heat on my skin, the smoke in my nostrils, the pulse-pounding fear of what might come next.

Alessio holds me, but I feel a distance in his actions. And even though I'm feeling the distance too, ever since the conversation with my father, I don't want that right now. I want to feel close. To feel safe. For us to be a team, like we were when we threatened Jacob Talbot.

"What are we going to do?" I ask as soon as we enter the apartment. "You think it's the Irish mob who are after you?"

He barely looks at me. "California or Oregon? What's your preference?"

I frown. "What?"

"Could be anywhere, really. I was just thinking West Coast. Are there any states you've always wanted to live in?"

"What are you talking about? Are you saying you want to leave Bover City?"

"You're leaving Bover City. I'm staying here and handling business."

My face falls. "I'm not leaving. I'm staying with you." I reach for his hand, but he pulls it away.

"It isn't safe for you here. I'm a target in my own fucking territory. You're getting on a plane tomorrow and leaving the state."

"Fuck that. If it isn't safe for me, it isn't safe for you."

His face twitches, but he keeps his expression blank. "... can't."

"Can't what?" I demand.

"I can't have you here. I can't lose you. I can't have-" He cuts himself off. "I can't put you in danger."

"If it's really so dangerous, why don't you seem scared?"

"I don't get scared. Not anymore. Not for myself."

I roll my eyes. "Okay, Mr. Edgy."

His voice hardens. "I didn't choose this, Ayla. I was made this way. You grow up the way I did, the softness gets beaten out of you pretty quick."

I take a step closer to him, and he doesn't step back. "So let me stay with you. You can be hard with everyone else, and soft with me."

His face twitches again, and he can't hide the pain behind his eyes. "You think I don't already do that? You are my soft spot, Ave. The only soft spot that I have. That's why I can't have you here."

I step forward again, into arms' reach, and Alessio reaches out to hold me as though he can't help himself. I breathe against his chest, listening to his heart thump.

"Is the apartment safe?" I ask.

He nods. "It's a rich neighborhood with a solid police presence, and building security is top-notch. They won't be able to hit me at home."

"So I'll stay in the apartment. You can handle what you need to handle, and I'll be your little toy waiting for you at home."

He stiffens, and I can tell he's thinking about it. I wait for his reply, hoping he'll bite on the sexual offer even if my emotional plea falls flat. I don't want to

leave. I want to be at home with my husband. Not alone in some sad hotel room in Oregon.

“Okay,” Alessio says finally. “You’ll be my little toy at home. You will submit to me in every way that I expect. And you will not leave this penthouse until I say. Is that understood?”

“Yes,” I tell him, my body responding to our closeness, the adrenaline, the general concept of being his toy. “Sir.”

His eyes flash as his hands move lower, cupping my ass. “Good girl. When you’ve gotten settled, wait for me in the bedroom. I’m going to fuck all three of your holes tonight. And I’m not going to be gentle.”

Alessio

For a while, I’m able to lose myself in Ayla. I strip her naked, put her on her knees, fuck her perfect little mouth until I can’t bear it anymore. Then I climb on top of her on the bed, rail the fuck out of her cunt, and leave my cum dripping out of her ass.

She wants to cuddle after that, and reluctantly, I curl up next to her. All I can think about is that bang, the exploding car. What if she’d been inside it? She looks so small snuggled up against me, so soft and delicate.

It would be so easy for someone to take her away from me.

The next day, I meet with my capos. All of them. That means Uncle Sal and the captains who pledged loyalty to my grandfather, as well as the captains who used to kick up to Anthony Gonzalez. It’s the first time I’ve gathered everyone together as the new boss of both families, and it feels significant. Not just because I was almost killed last night.

For a moment, I allow myself to remember Nonno. He would be so proud of me right now. This is exactly what he wanted for me, and what I never did. Not after my parents died.

Bravo, Nazio . You got your wish. You raised me better than my father, at least.

My parents. I think of them as little as I can, although for different reasons. My mother was a sweet, loving woman. She didn't want this for me, but she never had a choice. She always knew what I was going to be. What my father was going to make me.

He got what he wanted, and what he deserved.

Sorry, mom. And fuck you, dad. I'm glad you never got the chance to be proud of the monster you created.

I turn my face to stone before addressing the group of men in front of me.

"Last night, someone made an attempt on my life. A car bomb. I'm sure you've all seen the news reports."

Angry murmuring fills the room in response.

"May they rest in shit when we find them," scowls Uncle Sal next to me. Everyone hurries to agree.

"It must've been the Maroney crew," says Vittorio Conti, Belle-Ann's father.

"Their dealers have been pushing into our territory in South Bover, giving us a lot of problems. It's been hard to respond without escalating, but it seems like they want to escalate. I was just talking to Gio about this last night."

Gio the Butcher speaks up in agreement. "I know those Irish boys don't push up on Razione territory much, so maybe they aren't on your radar. But we've been having problems with them for a long time."

“Hey, Colin Maroney and his brother have been a thorn in my side for years,” says Sal. “I’ve got South Side properties, too. If Colin’s getting too big for his britches, we gotta slap that little cunt down.”

“I don’t want anyone escalating tensions with Maroney’s crew until we have more information,” I say forcefully. “Sal, see if you can set up a meeting with him. No need to start bloodshed unnecessarily. But if he did it, we nail him to the fucking wall.”

I’m not looking forward to seeing Ayla at home.

That’s a lie.

Truthfully, it’s all I’m looking forward to, and that’s the problem.

When I didn’t have attachments, I didn’t have weak points. Now I’m wearing my weak point on my sleeve. Around my fucking finger.

I’m one big weak point.

She’s all I think about. Keeping her safe. Keeping her out of the darkness that surrounds me. Keeping the dangers of my world from ruining her the way they ruined me.

She’s my beacon of light in this darkness, and if I’m not careful, it’s going to get extinguished.

Ayla greets me wearing nothing but a red, see-through lingerie set, and I have my moment of release. I collar her, lead her roughly to the bedroom, have my way with her. Then I make her wear the ball gag and the remote control plug. I eat my dinner at the kitchen table, her tied to a chair next to me, vibrating the plug whenever I please. It’s fun, having that power, seeing the way she pouts at me even though she’s loving the loss of control.

When I’m dominating Ayla, everything else melts away.

Ayla

This is the only time I feel close to him. The only time I feel like myself.

Alessio puts the ball gag back in as soon as I'm finished eating, and it's almost a relief. He doesn't have his guard up when I'm like this, in the position of firmly submitting to him. Losing myself in this role feels so right, so needed. To be used, reduced, owned, and valued all at the same time. Things are simple when I'm his toy. I follow his orders, or I get punished. Either way, I'm the center of his attention.

"Spread your legs for me," my husband whispers, pushing me down onto the couch in the living room. "That's it, good girl. Don't close them."

I obey, looking up at him as his eyes devour my naked body.

His voice is barely more than a rasp. "Fuck, I love your pussy. So perfect and pink and swollen for me. Does she want some attention?"