

Chapter 11 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I'm laying back on my bed, all cried out, when I hear a knock at my door. I raise my head and groan inwardly. What's next?

Before I can get up to answer it, the door creaks open a little. I sigh. No such thing as privacy in the Mafia palace.

"Fay?"

My mouth drops open as I hear a voice that I recognize. I'm too shocked to speak as I see him peek around the door, smiling shyly.

"Are you okay, Fay?"

Daniel. I just stare at him.

He grimaces and comes into the room, pressing the door shut behind him. Then he leans back on it, staring at me, quirking his mouth into that sweet smile I used to love.

I groan and lay my head back on my pillows. "Go away, Daniel. We can talk about our engagement later."

"Fay," he says, and I can hear the apology in his voice. I hear him come closer to the bed. "Come on, Fay," he says. "It could be worse."

I open my eyes and glare at him. "Are you serious, Daniel?"

He shrugs and again gives me that charming smile, sliding his hands into his pockets. "I mean, at least we know we like each other."

"Like each other? Daniel you like –"

"Shh!" He puts a hand out towards me and looks anxiously at the door. "Seriously, Fay, watch what you say. We can't talk about that sort of thing here."

I glance at the closed door, confused. "Can they hear us in here?"

"My dad has ears everywhere," he murmurs. He turns back to me. "Are you mad at me?"

I sigh and sit up on the bed, feeling awkward. I never wanted to see Daniel ever again, let alone have this weird conversation about why I didn't want to be his mafia bride just because our parents promised us to each other.

"Daniel, I'm not mad at you," I say quietly. "It's just... I want to be married to someone who loves me. Not to someone who is only marrying me because of who my father is, and certainly not someone who –"

He gives me a worrying look and I sigh, watching my words.

"Someone who isn't attracted to me," I finish.

He sits hesitantly next to me on the bed, reaching out an arm to put around my shoulders. I shoot him a look, though, and he pulls his arm back.

"There could be good things about this, Fay," he says quietly. "Not all marriages work out anyway, and at least we know we like each other."

I look up at him, aghast. Is he serious?

"Are you actually on board with this, Daniel? Don't you want to marry someone you love?"

"I have to marry someone, Fay," he says, shrugging, his voice defeated. "This is not a world where what I want, personally, really matters. And with you, well. At least I know we get along, like the same things."

I huff a laugh at this.

"I mean, you were really upset when we broke up!" Daniel continues, trying to be upbeat. "And I really am sorry about what happened in the coffee shop. But isn't it kind of weird that we found each other out there on our own anyway, and we were engaged the whole time? It's kind of like...fate."

"It's not fate, Daniel, it's fake," I say, looking at him with all of my pain showing. I can't help it – he was my first love, and he totally betrayed me, and now here he is asking me to jump right back in?

"I don't want a husband who is unfaithful to me," I say, spreading my hands out in emphasis. I lower my voice to a hiss. "And I don't want a husband who is into men, considering I'm a girl. Do you really want us to be in a fake marriage for the rest of our lives? Just because it's what your dad wants?"

"Please, Fay," Daniel says, his eyes skittering for the door. "I get that you're upset –"

I nod fervently at this.

“But seriously, that’s not something we can talk about there. Please,” he turns worried eyes to me and I’m surprised to see true fear in his face. “You’ve got to promise to keep it a secret.”

“Daniel,” I say, my heart going out to him. “Why is it such a big deal? It’s the twenty-first century – it’s so backwards to think that way about sexual orientation –“

“You don’t understand,” he says, shaking his head and looking down at the floor. “It’s a different world here, Fay – that’s why I spend so much time outside of it, at school, in the bookshops and coffee shops.”

“This world, this family,” he says, “all their values are 100 years old, maybe more. And tradition is everything, family is everything. If I don’t get married, don’t have kids to carry on the family line...not only will they consider me a failure, but it will cause massive chaos in the city as the other bosses try to grab what my dad has built. What I will inherit, whether I want to or not.”

I study Daniel’s perfect face, feeling for him. He’s trapped and he knows it.

God, was I trapped now too?

“Do you know what they do to people like me, Fay?” Daniel asks, turning to look at me, agonized.

I shake my head no, not even wanting to imagine it.

“They beat the crap out of them,” he says, “make them denounce their sexuality, who they are, and if they do it again, they...they mutilate them...”

He says quickly, shaking his head. “One of the other boss’s sons. He shamed the family and...” Daniel shakes his head, unable to finish.

“Why don’t you just leave, Daniel,” I say, horrified for him. “Why not just run?”

He laughs, a harsh thing. “You think I haven’t thought about it?” He shrugs. “They’ll just find me, Fay. There’s no getting out of it. I’m the sole heir to my father’s game. If run, they’ll find me. If I defy expectations about the kind of life I’m supposed to live – wife, family, taking a role in the organization, they’ll...well, they’ll straighten me out.”

His lips quirk at his little play on words. Mine do too.

“Daniel, this all sucks,” I say, and he laughs at my understatement. “But is the solution really just to give them what they want? You know what your dad did to me today – made me give up everything I love, say horrible things to my family so that they’ll let me go.”

Daniel looks at me, hopeless.

“Why give them what they want? Why don’t we both run? Maybe together...”

He shakes his head, sighing. “You don’t get it, Fay,” he says. “You can’t just disappear anymore. Your in his world now, there’s no escape.”

“My mom did it,” I say quietly, realizing it myself for perhaps the first time. “She ran from my father, stayed away.”

“Yeah,” Daniel says, looking me in the eye. “And even after she died, the world came and found you, her daughter, and pulled you back in even when it couldn’t take her. Don’t you get it, Fay? Even if you got away, got married, had kids, had the life you wanted – my dad? Your dad? They would find your kids, and pull them in. There’s no getting out.”

My stomach drops like a stone when I realize that he’s right. Even if my mother did get out – here I was, right back in it.

But still. I couldn’t just give in. Maybe Daniel has been more beat down than me – or maybe just more realistic – but this isn’t the life I want. I have to try. And in order to try, maybe this means I have to go deeper into this world. Study it. Figure out what makes it tick.

And then, when I find a loophole. I’ll run.

“Well, Daniel,” I say, taking his hand again and giving them a squeeze. “You may have given in, but I’m not sure I have yet. All I ask is that when the time comes, you don’t stop me from leaving.”

He looks at me, sadness etched on his face, and says nothing.

Chapter 12 – Breakfast with Daddy

Chapter 12 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I spend a restless night in my new room. When the clock reads 7:00, a knock comes at my door and it opens without waiting for a response. I glare and make a mental note to somehow get a lock.

“Ah! You’re awake.” The same woman who dressed me last night bustles into the room. “You’re already late, my dear.”

“Seven?” I ask, looking at the clock again. “Seven is late?”

“The household starts at five,” she says, coming over and starting to make the bed while I’m still in it.

When I head for the door in my pajamas, she makes a small noise of warning. I look back at her. “You’ll want to change, my dear,” she says. “This house dresses for its meals.”

No one is downstairs in the hall when, dressed in tight fawn-colored pants and a silky green sweater, I walk down the stairs. I hear some noise at the end of the hall and push through the little door there.

I blink in surprise as I suddenly find myself in a gigantic kitchen filled with people. There are mismatched tables scattered all around and, behind a low wall, a restaurant-sized cooking range. From it wafts the scent of breakfast foods – sharp with onions and rich with butter.

“Fay!” Daniel says, spotting me from across the room. His face lights up. I can’t help returning his smile, he’s so cute.

“Hi,” I say, my eyes scanning the busy room as I hurry over to him.

“Are you hungry?” he asks, giving me a happy grin and sitting back down in his place at a small table.

“Um,” I say - honestly, when was the last time I ate - but my stomach answers for me, giving a big growl.

He laughs lightly as I sit. “Good, we’ll get you something.” He raises a hand to signal someone by the cooking range.

The room is just buzzing with people. Guys in suits drinking tiny cups of espresso, guards pass with guns – big guns – passing through, housekeeping staff on their way to their jobs.

Everyone is chatting happily, moving along in what is clearly a well-oiled machine.

“Wow, it’s so busy in here,” I say, staring around at everyone.

Daniel looks around and shrugs. “I guess.”

At that moment, I’m shocked, again, to see Kent come around the corner from the cooking area carrying a big plate of food. I stare at the long white butcher’s apron wrapped around his waist, the taut strings only serving to emphasize his trim figure, his broad shoulders.

When I realize I’m biting my lower lip while I look at him, I quickly spit it out and close my mouth.

“Good morning, Fay,” Kent says, laying the plate in front of me. Shocked, I look back and forth from him to the plate, noting that his apron is spotted with grease.

“Did you...did you make this?” I ask. On the plate, scrambled eggs sit next to sausage and peppers, accompanied by a buttered slice of crusty Italian bread. It looks delicious.

“Surprised?” Kent says. I whip my head up to see that he’s smirking at me.

Truly, I am surprised.

“An Italian can’t call himself a man if he can’t cook his own breakfast,” Kent says, glancing around the room with a proud smile. “A breakfast he’d feed his mother, at that.”

“Do you want some coffee?” Daniel asks, leaning forward. I nod and he looks up at his dad. “She takes cappuccino. Is anyone free –“

“I’ll see it’s done,” Kent says and I follow his eyes to a gigantic vintage Gaggia Orione espresso machine in the corner. My jaw drops – it’s probably the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever seen.

“Eat up, girl,” Kent says, heading back to the kitchen.

I pick up my fork and eagerly start to eat, shaking my head at Daniel who just laughs.

A few minutes later, when my plate is half cleared, Kent comes back with a tiny cappuccino that he slides next to my plate. I give him a smile in thanks and take a sip.

It’s absolutely delicious. I lean back in my chair, closing my eyes and savoring the taste of the bitter liquid that coats my tongue, balanced by the sweetness of the milk. These flavors are complimented, somehow, by...

I open my eyes and my mouth to ask what that extra flavor is, but I freeze when I see Kent staring down at me, his eyes somehow...hungry.

A blush spreads across my cheek and nose. Why is he looking at me like that?

“So you like it,” Kent says, his voice low, possessive.

“I do,” I say, hesitating. “Is there something extra...”

“Amaretto,” he says. “Adds notes of apricot and bitter almonds.”

“It’s delicious,” I say, holding his gaze while I raise my thumb to my mouth to wipe a little fleck of foam from my bottom lip.

He watches me do it.

“Good,” he murmurs. “I don’t want Alden to hear anything except that you were treated like a princess in my house.”

I suddenly look back at my plate as I remember that I’m more captive than guest here. I’m fed good food not for my pleasure, but so that I’ll give my “father” a good report when he comes to claim me.

“It’s almost as good as my dad’s breakfast,” I murmur, suddenly angry. At Kent, but also at myself. For forgetting.

I feel a finger on my cheek, firmly turning my face back towards the Mafia King. “You only have one father now, Fay. You have no ‘dad.’ Though if you’re really missing it,” he smirks cruelly at me here, his voice slow and luxurious, “you can always call me daddy.”

My jaw drops open in shock and my face turns beat red. He laughs a little at my reaction.

“Dad, seriously,” Daniel says, and I glance at him to see anger written on his face.

Kent laughs darkly at Daniel too.

I turn my head harshly. Kent’s fingers lose their grip.

“If you want me to respect you,” I say, my voice shaking with anger and embarrassment, “you should be more polite to me. I’m sure my father won’t like to hear that I’ve been disrespected in your home.”

Kent puts his whole hand on my cheek this time, turning my head to make me look at him. “You will receive respect,” he says, his voice low and even, “when you learn your place. Say thank you for your breakfast, Fay.”

I stare up at him, breathless, as he raises his other hand – a soft cloth napkin in it – to dab gently at my chin. He lingers, though, staring at my mouth, dragging the napkin across the length of my lower lip.

“Th...thank you...” I whisper, captivated, not knowing what else to say.

“You’re welcome,” he replies, releasing his hold on me and turning to walk back to the kitchen.

“I’m so sorry,” Daniel mutters, but I don’t look at him. Instead, I watch Kent go, shocked and confused. Fascinated.

As he turns the corner into the kitchen, I realize that I have goosebumps all over my arms. I shudder and rub my hands up and down my forearms to warm myself up.

“Doesn’t he have any boundaries?” I mutter to Daniel. “Or does he just do whatever he wants all the time?”

He sighs as he raises his coffee to his lips. “The latter, unfortunately. You get used to it.”

I shake my head, thinking that I don’t think I ever will, when the door to the kitchen flies open and a woman breezes in.

My eyes follow her, unable to look away as she saunters into the cooking area, her fuzzy slippers flopping on the floor, her silky leopard-print robe barely tied.

“I thought you dressed for breakfast in this house,” I mutter, an eyebrow raised.

“We do,” Daniel says. “But Fiona...also does what she wants.”

I hear a laugh come from the kitchen – a full-throated, happy thing - and am surprised to see this woman throw her arms around Kent’s neck, standing on her tiptoes to demand a kiss.

He obliges her and I feel something twist inside me. He whispers something in her ear and she turns, suddenly, to look right at me.

She gives me a broad, red-lipped smile while he says something else in her ear. I give her a tentative smile back, so she winks and blows me a kiss.

Her energy is effervescent. I can’t help but like her.

“Who is she?” I ask, still watching her.

“Fiona,” Daniel says, a little pained. “My father’s mistress. Or, at least...one of them.”

Chapter 13 - Fiona

Chapter 13 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Fiona finishes saying good morning to Kent and stops at our little table on the way out.

“This beauty must be Fay,” she says as she arrives, giving me a big smile.

She has a thick New York accent, a little like Fran Drescher, and I can’t help but be charmed by her sweet, brusk nature.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I say.

“Oh baby,” she says, wrinkling her nose at me. “I already know all about you. Big Boy over there told me everything,” she says, nodding at him over her shoulder.

I blush again. Big Boy?

Seriously?

What woman has the balls to call Kent Lippert Big Boy?

I laugh despite myself. "All good things, I hope."

"Only the best," she replies. "I'll catch you two babies later," she says, swooping down to give Daniel a kiss on the cheek as she goes. "And you," she points a manicured nail at me, "you're going shopping with me later, okay? Okay."

She leaves without waiting for a response.

I watch her as she goes, a little jealous of her confidence as well as her raw sensuality. Fiona is the kind of buxom beauty who I imagine thrives in a world like this.

I look down at myself, feeling like a flat piece of plain white paper beside her.

"Sorry about that," Daniel says, his voice a little frustrated.

"Why?" I look up at him, surprised.

"It's just embarrassing, to have them around," he whispers, leaning forward so that only I hear him. "My dad could fill every room in this house with his lovers, if he wanted to," he says. "Although Fiona is...a favorite."

I nod, understanding. "I can see why. She's so beautiful."

He sighs and I cock my head to the side. "What's wrong?"

"My whole life there have been women all over. Some stay for a night, some for months. Fiona has lasted years now, but it's only a matter of time before she's gone too. Women just love him." He scowls.

I can't help but feel a little sorry.

"Well, I don't like him at all," I say, trying to cheer him up. "I think he's rude, and domineering, and he likes to make people feel uncomfortable to make them fall in line. I think you're ten times the man he is."

Inside, I know it's a lie. But it's worth it for the burst of sunshine it brings to Daniel's face.

"Thank you, Fay," Daniel says, looking at me with real affection. "You're the only one who thinks that. I'm glad to have you on my side."

I smile at him and put my hand on top of his.

A few hours later, I jump out of my skin when the door to my room flies open again. "Shopping time!," Fiona says, almost pulling me off my feet as she grabs my hand.

“Wha –“ I say, laughing a little as she eagerly bustles me out of the room. “Where are we going!?”

“Shopping, baby!” she laughs, pulling me down the steps. “I’m just so glad Daniel finally brought a girl home so I have someone to play with.”

I bite my lip as I hurry behind her. “Shopping? I really don’t think Kent’s going to let me leave the house.”

She gives me a wink as we arrive at a set of double doors close to the garages. “That’s the great thing about this place, we don’t have to leave. The shopping come to us.”

With that, she pushes open the doors, revealing the treasure trove beyond.

I can’t help but gape at what I see before me. There are stacks and stacks of luxury goods neatly arranged on hangers and racks. There’s even a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling. To my left is an entire two-story wall just of shoes.

“Oh my god,” I say, looking around.

“You like?” she asks, standing proudly in the middle of the room. “Kent used to have it all neatly put away in boxes, but I made him let me organize it. You know,” she shrugs, “really give it that Rodeo Drive feeling.”

It really is dazzling. Everywhere I look I see brand names I’ve only ever seen in fashion spreads – Balenciaga, Hermes, Dior, Chanel.

“Where did it all come from?” I ask.

She shrugs, beckoning me over to her. “Personal shoppers, mostly. Kent likes to look good, but he doesn’t like to go to stores.” I join her at a velvet settee in front of a trifold mirror. “The rest,” she says, “are…gifts. Donations.”

I cock my head at her, confused.

She gives me a wink. “You know. From people who owe him big but don’t have the cash.” She wrinkles her nose and smiles. “That’s how he got me my Porsche.”

“Oh,” I say, my eyes going wide.

“Oh, little baby Fay,” she laughs, putting an arm around my shoulders. “You’re so cute with your little blushes. It’s nice to have someone so fresh around.”

I smile at her, biting my lip as she moves over to a pile of silk and satin that she has draped over a chair.

“Now,” she says, “I picked these out for you, but if you see anything else you like, just tell me.” She starts to hold up dresses for me.

“Um,” I say, hesitating. “Picked them out...for what?”

“For the party!” she says, beaming. “Did no one tell you? Tonight! The party so you can meet your father!”

Fiona smiles at me like I’m the luckiest girl in the world but I feel my face go as white as a sheet. Seeing the change in my demeanor, Fiona puts down the dresses and comes over. “Aw baby,” she says soothingly. “Too much? Too soon?”

I take a deep breath. “Yeah, I guess. I’ve never met this man – didn’t know he was my father until yesterday. It’s all just a shock.”

She gives my shoulders a quick squeeze. “Well, nothing’s going to make you feel more confident than looking absolutely fabulous.”

She hurries back over to the pile of dresses she set aside for me. “For you,” she says, “I think, this one.” Her voice is reverent as she holds up a gorgeous velvet gown, midnight blue with gauzy fabric trailing from the shoulders to create a diaphanous train.

I gasp when I see it, unable to help myself as I move forward to touch the material. As I turn it over in my hands, I catch a view of the price tag. I blanch and drop the fabric.

“What?” she says, peering at me. “I thought you liked it? With that red hair you’ll be a masterpiece.”

“Fiona,” I say, laughing a little, “that dress is the same price as a car, and not even a cheap car.”

She shrugs. “So?”

“It’s just...it’s too extravagant for me!” I say, shaking my head.

“Baby,” she says, coming forward and taking my chin in her hand, a little good-natured pity in her eyes. “This isn’t extravagant enough for you.”

I blink at her and she turns to hold the dress up so that I can see it against my body in the mirror. “This is the stuff that Kent lets me wear, Fay. And I’m just the goomah – the lady on the side,” she says, winking at me. I can tell she doesn’t feel any shame.

“You though,” she says. “Baby, you’re royalty in this world. You’re a princess.”

I stare at myself in the mirror, suddenly worried. I’m no princess – not in any world – I’m a just a psych major –

But as I stare at myself in the mirror, with that dress pressed against me, I have to admit...I look, just a little bit, like royalty.

“You’ve gotta get used to the luxe life,” she says quietly. “Kent told me to dress you in these tonight, but a girl like you should be wearing couture. To make up for it, though,” her face lights up with excitement, “Kent says I get to pick you out some jewels!”

She squeals, clapping her hands. I laugh as well, unable to help myself – she’s so infectious.

Ten minutes later, when I see myself in the dress with sapphires draped around around my neck, I shake my head a little in disbelief.

“There she is,” Fiona says, her voice awed. “The future wife of the most powerful heir in the city. Ladies and Gentlemen,” she says, giving a little bow, “may I present your future Queen.”

My heart sinks as I look at myself. Who even am I anymore?

Chapter 14 – Meeting my Mafia Dad

Chapter 14 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

The party is, above all, impressive. Drinks are flowing, a whole twelve-piece band is at the back of the room playing hits from the fifties and sixties. Everyone is having a good time and, thank god, mostly ignoring me.

Even though it’s technically my party, everyone’s too caught up in their own business to do much more than send me a curious glance.

I’m grateful for Daniel, who sticks close by my side. Even though he was raised in this environment, I can tell he’s more comfortable with me, sneaking sips of his champagne and making wry comments that only I can hear.

I can’t help but laugh at the things he says. He’s right – we always did get along.

Fiona sweeps around the room, looking almost indecently sexy in her black Versace gown. Looking around, though, I can see that she has competition for her daring choice of clothes. This group of mob bosses and wives do tend towards the sexy.

There are lot of women’s bodies on display around me, many of them enhanced with plumped lips, breasts, asses. Whatever they felt was lacking.

In comparison, I look demure in my sweeping blue gown. But Fiona picked well – if she had put me in something that showed a lot of skin, she knew I'd feel shy. As it is, the blue velvet gown makes me feel regal.

“You do look amazing,” Daniel says, smiling down at me. “I mean, you were always pretty, Fay. But wow.”

I smile up at him, pleased by his compliment. I knew he wouldn't say it unless he meant it.

We both watch as Fiona greets new guests, directing servants to take their fur coats and ensuring that they have drinks in their hands within half a minute.

“She's really the hostess here,” I say, fascinated. “What would your dad do without her?”

“Yeah,” Daniel says, studying her. “She's definitely taken up that wifey sort of roll.” He shrugs. “But who knows, my dad is fickle. One wrong move and she could be out the door.”

I look up at him, wondering if that's why he keeps his distance from her, emotionally. How many mother figures has Daniel had in his life who have disappeared in the night, never to be seen again?

Beyond that, where is his real mom? I frown, making a mental note to ask some other time.

Daniel gives me a smile and then clinks my empty champagne glass with his. “Refill?” he asks.

I give him a nod and he heads off to the bar. I tap my foot to the music, enjoying it while I look around at all of the guests. Is my father here yet? Will I even recognize him when he arrives?

A voice rumbles, shockingly close to my ear. “If you like the music,” it says, sending shivers down my spine, “why don't you dance?”

I turn to see Kent standing behind me, his hands clasped casually behind my back.

He stares baldly down into my face, his own only inches away. My heartbeat ratchets up.

“Um,” I say, working to calm myself. God, why does he always get me so worked up, just by standing next to me? “I'm not much of a dancer.”

He smirks, his eyes traveling over my body, taking in the way I look in this too-gorgeous gown. “Shame,” he says. “That dress was made for dancing. You should let them see you in it.”

I blush. That was breathlessly close to a compliment for Kent Lippert.

“Do you know,” he continues, leaning even closer to murmur a secret in my ear. “I met your mother once, at a party like this.”

I spin to look up at him. “You – you knew my mother?”

“Not well,” he says. “But I remember that she was very beautiful. She had hair much like yours,” he says, his voice wandering with memory as he raises a hand to curl a tendril around his finger. “And she was not afraid to dance.”

I blink at him, suddenly terribly sad to have never seen her like that.

He presses his lips together, studying me. Then he clears his throat and pulls his gaze away, scanning the crowd. “I have word from your father’s people,” he says. “He’ll be here very soon.”

My eyes widen. I mean, of course it was the whole point of the evening, but now that it’s close?

I’m terrified.

Kent clenches his jaw as he observes my reaction. “Chin up, girl,” he says, his voice steady, giving me strength. “Meet him with pride.”

I swallow and nod, trying to embody that. But inside I’m quailing.

Daniel walks back over to me, his steps slowing and his face growing worried when he sees who I’m talking to. When Kent catches sight of him, he nods. “Good,” Kent says, beckoning Daniel closer.

As Daniel hands my glass of champagne to me, his father holds out a black velvet box to him. Frowning with confusion, Daniel takes and opens it. His face falls slack as he sees what’s inside.

My own jaw drops when I see the size of the diamond sitting on the little velvet pillow. At least ten carats, emerald cut, set in an art deco style.

“It would be appropriate,” Kent says, his voice commanding, “for Fay to wear your family’s ring tonight, since you are engaged.”

“Dad,” Daniel says, looking up at him. “This was mom’s ring...”

Kent nods sharply, holding out the box to him. It’s not really an offer.

Daniel sighs and takes the box, lifting the ring from it. He looks at me and cocks his head to the side. My fingers shaking a little, I raise my hand. As Daniel takes it and starts to slip the ring onto my finger, I wonder what this means.

Is this a tacit agreement to the engagement? Or some sort of ploy for when I meet my father? Is Kent trying to mark me as part of his own family, even as I meet my own?

My questions are interrupted, though, by the feeling of the ring sticking at my second knuckle.

Daniel pushes harder, but it won't budge.

"Um, dad," Daniel says, looking between us. "I think it's too small."

I bite my lip, embarrassed. I guess Daniel's mom had slimmer fingers than me.

Kent glares at Daniel and then nudges him aside, taking my hand in his own. Deftly, he angles the ring so that it slips over the knuckle, and then presses down. I look up into his eyes as the ring slides home to the base of my finger.

I hold my breath, almost, as I feel my cold hand in his warm one, the weight of his ring on my finger.

He stares back at me, his lips parting slightly, revealing clenched teeth behind.

"Thanks dad," Daniel says, a little awkward, breaking the tension as he takes my hand out of his father's grip, holding it gently in his own. He gives his dad a weird look and then turns his attention to the ring.

"It looks good on you, Fay," Daniel says, looking me in the face and smiling.

I hesitate a little, trying to smile back, and then focusing on the ring. This incredible, gigantic, insane rock on my finger.

It's beautiful, but...

Before I can consider it any more, the room goes quiet, the band dying awkwardly off as they notice that everyone has stopped dancing and has turned towards the door.

Footsteps echo as a man walks in, a woman in a slinky grey dress only a few steps behind. Following her are at least four guards, probably more, though I can't see any further behind them to count.

He's a tall man – as tall as Kent, but older, bulkier. His fine pinstriped suit is tight across the paunch of his stomach, but he has a certain power as he begins to cross the room towards us, surveying the crowd as he goes. The woman he came with moves away to the bar.

I hold my breath as the man walks over to us, his eyes sweeping over me from head to foot.

He shocks me, though, by ignoring me when he finally arrives. Instead, he turns to Kent and puts out a hand.

"Lippert," the man says, not smiling. Kent accepts the hand, shaking it.

"So glad you could come, Alden," he says and then silently returns his hands to his pockets. He lets Alden take the lead.

Alden nods and looks back at me. “So. Is this her?”

Kent nods, putting a hand between my shoulder blades. Encouraged, I raise my chin and stand before this man, letting him look at me, feeling, more than anything, like a horse at the market. I wonder, passively, if he’s going to start counting my teeth.

“Alden,” Kent says, “this is Fay Thompson. Your daughter.”

Chapter 16 – Mental Health Awareness

Chapter 16 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

The party ended quickly after that. Alden left after one drink and, afterwards, since the apparent draw of the evening was gone, all of the rest of the guests began to filter out as well.

As I watched them all leave – none saying a word to me, though they certainly looked me – I wondered about the point of this party.

Why had Kent wanted to introduce me to my father in front of all of these people, instead of in private? It certainly hadn’t been a party to celebrate me. Instead, it was more like a proof of life. Kent was demonstrating to the world that I exist – and that I’m in his power.

I stare down at the diamond on my finger, twisting the ring back and forth, seeing how it catches the light. Even though I’ve changed and into a pair of leggings and a super soft sweater – honestly, how do these clothes keep showing up in my room? – I don’t have the heart to take the ring off.

It’s just so beautiful. I’ve rarely had anything really pretty in my life and this was...stunning. And priceless, I think.

Maybe if I run away, I can sell this at a pawn shop and use the money to get to Europe, where Kent and my father can’t find me.

I grimace at the impossibility of all of that, though. I don’t even have a passport.

As I stare at the ring, I realize that I had higher hopes for that meeting with Alden. My father. I had kind of hoped he would be my ticket out of the Lippert house, maybe even to a place where I’d have a better chance to get back to my normal life.

But after this evening I realize that I’m just as much of a pawn in Alden’s world as Kent’s. And after seeing his crazy mood swings, I’m not sure Alden would be a better choice. Kent can be cruel, but at least he’s always in control.

Suddenly, outside of my door, I hear a huge thump and a groan. What –

I jump up from the bed and stare at the door, expecting it to swing open like it always does.

But nothing.

I hear the groan again.

Scared, but needing to know, I run to the door and pull it open.

I gasp at the sight before me.

Kent Lippert is laying on the ground of the hallway, groaning, his eyes pressed closed as he clutches his chest.

“Oh my god!” I say, looking either way down the hall for help. No one’s there.

I fall to my knees beside him, reaching out to quickly feel for a pulse at his neck.

“Kent,” I say, “are you all right?”

“I’m. Fine.” He says, teeth gritted.

My eyes flick to his face because – obviously – he is not fine. But I’m relieved that he’s conscious, at least. I hesitate, trying to remember the First Responder course I took in college.

“What’s wrong? Are you having pain in your chest, your left arm?”

“I’m fine –“ he says again, his eyes still pressed shut as he begins to pant. He tries to sit up but I put hands on his shoulders, pressing him down to the ground.

“Just stay still,” I say, my head whipping around, still looking up and down the hall for help. Still, no one appears. How can I possibly be the only one who noticed!?

“I’ll go for help,” I say, rising to my knee, but he grabs my wrist.

“Fay,” he says, opening his eyes a little to squint at me. “Don’t go anywhere. Tell no one.”

“What!?” I hiss at him, appalled. “Kent, you could die –“

“I’m not going to die,” he grumbles, forcing the words from between his clenched teeth. “This happens sometimes. It will –“

He groans before forcing out the last word in the sentence.

“Pass.” He rests his head back against the floor, squeezing his eyes shut and grimacing in pain.

I gape at him. Is he serious? Is this honestly a common thing for him?

“Well, what can I do to help?” I ask, still frantic.

He opens one eye and looks at me, clearly annoyed. “Go away, that’s what you can do.”

“What!?” I stare at him. Was he crazy? “Kent, you’re probably having a heart attack –“

Suddenly, footsteps sound in the hall below. He freezes, tries to sit up, and then groans in pain as he cannot. “Fine,” he says, looking at me. “You want to help? Get me into your room.”

“What!?”

“Stop saying what,” he growls, trying again to sit up. “Just help me!”

I hesitate and then get to my feet. I move behind Kent as he sits up and hook my hands in his armpits. Then, I heave with all my might, pulling him towards the open door to my room. Kent helps as much as he can, pushing with his feet to speed us along.

When he’s fully in my room, I drop him and he collapses again on the floor with a heavy groan. “The door,” he murmurs, and I quickly close it. Then, I lean back against the door, staring at Kent on the floor as he breathes hard.

A few horrible minutes pass when I consider what the hell will happen to me if people discover the Mafia Boss’s dead body in my room.

But, during those minutes, Kent’s breath softens. The horrible, crinkled look of pain disappears and his face takes on its normal lines. He’s still sweaty and exhausted but he was right. It passes.

“Are you...are you okay?” I venture after a few minutes of calm breathing.

He doesn’t open his eyes. “I’m fine.”

“Um,” I hesitate. “Are you sure you don’t want me to call someone? A doctor?”

He sits up on my floor, hooking his arms around his knees for support, and then straight at me. “I don’t need a doctor.”

I stare at him, and I’m sure he can tell by my face that I think he’s definitely wrong. He shakes his head and looks down – embarrassed, I think – and pauses before he speaks.

“It’s just...” he says, “something that happens to me. From time to time. It’s been happening for the past couple of years. At times of...stress.”

I sink to the floor, my back still against the door, putting the pieces together.

I can't believe it. "Oh my god," I say, not even thinking about whether or not I should say it. "You have panic attacks."

He glances up at me.

"They're really common," I continue, "but not usually to this extent. But we learned, in my program, that when they're really severe they can present with the intensity of a heart attack..."

He doesn't look at me or say a word. I bite my lip, feeling suddenly sorry for him. I can't help it. I've never really been able to see another person in pain and not want to help them.

"You know," I say quietly. "There are doctors that can help you with this sort of thing. You shouldn't suffer like this, if they happen all the time."

"I don't need to see a doctor." He says, his voice determined.

I roll my eyes at him, a gesture I'm not sure I'd make if he were looking at me.

"Well, if you don't want to see a doctor," I say, hesitating again. "Maybe I could help?"

He lifts his head, his eyes open now. "How could you possibly help me."

I purse my lips, frustrated. "I mean, I am a trained therapist. I wouldn't think you'd forget that, considering it's how we met."

He laughs a little. "Yes, Fay's little certificate," he says, his voice derisive.

"Kent, this can be a seriously debilitating mental condition –" I say, but he interrupts me.

"I have spoken to my doctor, Fay," he says. "There is nothing wrong with me."

But my training, and my desire to help, push back against my instinct to follow his command. "You have an anxiety disorder, Kent," I say, my voice serious.

He just laughs at me. "An anxiety disorder? A mental illness? Sissies make those up terms so they can have an excuse for why they're so inadequate."

With that, he pushes himself to his feet. I do too, blocking the door with my body. "It's not for sissies – it's an important aspect of your health –"

"Fay," he says, angry with me, pressing his hand flat against the door so that I'm trapped between him and the exit. "Do you know what would happen to me in this world, if word ever got out that I have some kind weakness in my mind?"

I hesitate. I can guess, but I choose silence.

“I’d be dead, Fay.” He says, glaring at me. “If they ever found my body, it’d be at the bottom of a lake with cinder blocks for shoes. And while I was missing, all of my enemies would come – like the carrion birds they are – and pick pick pick –“he taps the top of my head, like a little bird pecking – “at the world I’ve worked so hard to build.”

I stare up at him, not knowing what to say.

“So, if you don’t mind,” he says, still glaring, “I think I’ll decline your offer of mental health services.”

He pushes himself up off the door and I step aside so he can leave. He twists the handle, but he hesitates before he pulls it open. “You will tell no one what you witnessed tonight. Ever. Not even Daniel. Do you understand?”

Slowly, I nod as he strides out of my room and down the hall.

I watch him go, still shocked at the events of the evening.

Then, a slow smile creeps over my face.

Well. It looks like I finally got my first little piece of power in this mafia game. The question was, how would I use it?

Chapter 17 – Freedom and Dominion

Chapter 17 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

The next morning, Kent is working in his office when a knock comes at the door.

“Come in,” he calls, hardly paying attention.

The door creaks open but no one says anything. Annoyed, Kent looks up, ready to tell whatever captain or guard was coming to report to get on with it and stop wasting his time.

To his surprise, though, Fay stands in the doorway. Kent leans back in his chair with a smirk, curious. What on earth could she want now?

“Yes?” he asks.

“Um, can I come in?” she says, anxiously playing with her hair.

“I already told you to come in, Fay,” he says evenly. Annoyed, she drops her hair and takes two steps into the room, pushing the door closed behind her. Then, she leans against the wall, a little afraid.

Like a kitten in a tiger’s cage. Kent can’t help but smile at the sight of her.

Today she’s wearing brown riding boots over tight jeans, a green cashmere sweater on top. The green brings out the cream of her complexion, the fire of her hair. As he knew it would.

He’d selected the sweater for precisely that reason, had it sent up to her room with the housekeeper.

She starts to play with her hair again, and Kent decides that he likes it down better than up. He makes a mental note to tell the housekeeper to leave it down more often.

“Yesss...?” Kent prompts, impatient.

“I just wanted to talk. About last night.” She hesitates again. “Is it safe to talk in here? About...”

He sighs and gives her a little glare. “Yes, Fay. Go ahead.”

“I just wanted to offer, again, to help. In whatever way I can. I’m happy to offer my services.”

“Your...services,” he says, letting his eyes rove over her body as much as they want to, deliberately trying to be lewd. If he embarrasses her, she’ll give up, he thinks. As she’s done before.

She blushes deliciously – he feels a stirring within himself, watching her squirm – and then stands up straight.

“You know what I mean, Kent,” she says. “I could council you, offer some therapies.”

“I don’t need those,” he says, looking back to the papers on the desk as if they’re more interesting and important.

“We could just try,” she says, frustrated. He smiles and looks back at her, liking the fire he sees in her when she gets pissed off. God, but he loves to stir that fire.

“Why are you pushing so hard for this,” he asks, leaning back in his chair, studying her. He’s genuinely curious. Is she trying to get one over on him, use her new knowledge to her advantage?

She shrugs. “I just want to help – that’s why I got into counseling to begin with. I like to...help people. ”

“Well that’s nice, Fay, but I don’t need help,” he says, perfectly calm.

“And maybe –“ she continues, her voice rushing now. “If I were able to help you – to give you something – maybe...maybe you’d respect me more. Stop belittling me,” she says, frustrated, looking back down at the floor.

He can’t help the deepening of his smile. Take away his favorite new hobby? He didn’t think so.

“Thank you for your offer, Fay,” he says, “but again. No.”

With that, he turns back to his papers, deliberately ignoring her until he hears her sigh and open the door to leave. As he hears her move through the door, he glances up to catch one last glimpse before she shuts it.

Those tight jeans were a good choice, he notes. He’ll repeat that fashion choice again.

As Fay leaves, Kent turns his attention to the screen on his computer which holds all of the surveillance footage in his house. A few clicks allow him to focus the cameras on her, following her path as she goes back up the stairs towards her room. She surprises him, though, by passing her room –

Continuing down the hallway –

Stopping at Daniel’s room. Kent gives a little hum of interest, leaning back in his chair as he watches her tap gently on Daniel’s door.

His son answers and smiles at her, inviting her in. The girl disappears inside.

Kent stares at Daniel’s closed bedroom door, working to deny the jealousy that’s roiling in his gut.

Not giving himself a chance to think about it too much, he leans over to the intercom on his desk, pressing number 8 for his own bedroom. “Fiona?” he says.

A few moments later, she answers. “Hey baby,” she purrs.

“Can you come down to my office, please?”

Fay flops down on Daniel’s bed, sighing.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, sitting on the edge next to her. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” she murmurs, looking around. The room is tastefully decorated in shades of brown and green that match Daniel’s eyes, but there’s very little personal decoration – not much that seems like Daniel himself has chosen it.

“What do you guys do all day, here?” She asks, suddenly wondering about Daniel’s life as an only child in a mafia family.

He shrugs. "I mostly stay in here," he says, nodding to his computer and the several bookcases full of texts against the far wall. "I keep busy."

"Don't you get bored?" She wonders, sitting up.

"Of course," he says, laughing a little. "Doesn't everyone?"

"Do you ever get to leave?" She asks, studying her handsome fiancé.

"Of course," he replies, laughing. "Don't forget, you met me outside of this house, so, that's evidence of that." He hesitates, realizing the direction of her questions. "But we can't leave now. Not for a while. Not until things are more...settled."

Fay sighs, disappointed, and falls back against his pillows.

"It's not always going to be like this," he murmurs, sorry that she feels so discontented. "Once everything dies down, once we're married, we'll have like...complete freedom. We can go back to the bookshops...maybe to Paris..." he gives her a shy smile, knowing she'd love it there.

She gives him a little half-smile in response, but he knows she's not content with what he's offering.

"Come on, Fay," he says, scooting closer to her and taking her hand. "Some people would kill for what we have. We actually like each other's company and we have all the money in the world at our disposal. Soon you'll be one of the richest, most powerful women in this city, Fay," he says temptingly.

Fay glares at him a little. "Sure, I can have whatever I want, except, you know, the freedom to leave this house. A marriage to someone who loves me."

Daniel tilts his head, truly wanting to make it better. "I love you, Fay. In my own way."

She sighs, knowing he means well.

"I just don't care about all of this, Daniel," she says. "I don't care about this wealth and power that everyone thinks is so important. Plus, you're forgetting the fact that all of this wealth and power come with the heavy pricetag of violence."

Daniel screws his mouth to the side, admitting, silently, that she's right.

"Don't you want to choose your own lover?" She asks, leaning forward eagerly. "Instead of being assigned one?"

He hesitates, squeezing her hand. "I kind of did pick you, Fay. And you picked me. Even before I knew we were 'assigned.'"

She sighs, taking her hand gently from his. “Yeah, but that was before I had all the information,” she murmurs. Back when she thought he was Prince Charming, not the heir to a mafia cartel.

“I’m going to be a good husband to you,” Daniel murmurs, really meaning it. He always knew he’d get married to a woman, and even if he knew it wouldn’t be a sexual relationship – or even one in which he was faithful – he had always hoped it would be to someone like Fay. His best friend.

Fay flicks her eyes to him, full of doubt. “But what kind of wife would you want me to be?” she asks softly. “Would I even be able to pursue my career, which means so much to me?”

Daniel hesitates. He knows, frankly, that the answer is no – his wife would be expected to stay home, manage his social affairs, raise their kids. But he also knows that saying that aloud right now isn’t going to make this any easier.

Intuiting his response, Fay sighs again. “This isn’t what either of us really want, Daniel,” she says, speaking the truth for both of them. “But somehow, you’ve just...given in to it. I feel sorry for you.”

Her words are like a knife to his heart. Fay Thompson, this poor, delicate, timid girl, feels sorry for him?

God he must be so pathetic. He hangs his head.

“I’m sorry, Fay,” he says softly. “I’ll do my best to make you happy.”

Fay moves until she’s sitting next to him, putting her head on his shoulder. “And so will I. When I go, Daniel, I’m not going to leave you behind.”

He looks at her, then, realizing that she still plans to escape. He doesn’t burst her bubble.

But deep down, he knows it’s impossible.

Chapter 17 – Freedom and Dominion

Chapter 17 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

The next morning, Kent is working in his office when a knock comes at the door.

“Come in,” he calls, hardly paying attention.

The door creaks open but no one says anything. Annoyed, Kent looks up, ready to tell whatever captain or guard was coming to report to get on with it and stop wasting his time.

To his surprise, though, Fay stands in the doorway. Kent leans back in his chair with a smirk, curious. What on earth could she want now?

“Yes?” he asks.

“Um, can I come in?” she says, anxiously playing with her hair.

“I already told you to come in, Fay,” he says evenly. Annoyed, she drops her hair and takes two steps into the room, pushing the door closed behind her. Then, she leans against the wall, a little afraid.

Like a kitten in a tiger’s cage. Kent can’t help but smile at the sight of her.

Today she’s wearing brown riding boots over tight jeans, a green cashmere sweater on top. The green brings out the cream of her complexion, the fire of her hair. As he knew it would.

He’d selected the sweater for precisely that reason, had it sent up to her room with the housekeeper.

She starts to play with her hair again, and Kent decides that he likes it down better than up. He makes a mental note to tell the housekeeper to leave it down more often.

“Yesss...?” Kent prompts, impatient.

“I just wanted to talk. About last night.” She hesitates again. “Is it safe to talk in here? About...”

He sighs and gives her a little glare. “Yes, Fay. Go ahead.”

“I just wanted to offer, again, to help. In whatever way I can. I’m happy to offer my services.”

“Your...services,” he says, letting his eyes rove over her body as much as they want to, deliberately trying to be lewd. If he embarrasses her, she’ll give up, he thinks. As she’s done before.

She blushes deliciously – he feels a stirring within himself, watching her squirm – and then stands up straight.

“You know what I mean, Kent,” she says. “I could council you, offer some therapies.”

“I don’t need those,” he says, looking back to the papers on the desk as if they’re more interesting and important.

“We could just try,” she says, frustrated. He smiles and looks back at her, liking the fire he sees in her when she gets pissed off. God, but he loves to stir that fire.

“Why are you pushing so hard for this,” he asks, leaning back in his chair, studying her. He’s genuinely curious. Is she trying to get one over on him, use her new knowledge to her advantage?

She shrugs. “I just want to help – that’s why I got into counseling to begin with. I like to...help people. ”

“Well that’s nice, Fay, but I don’t need help,” he says, perfectly calm.

“And maybe –“ she continues, her voice rushing now. “If I were able to help you – to give you something – maybe...maybe you’d respect me more. Stop belittling me,” she says, frustrated, looking back down at the floor.

He can’t help the deepening of his smile. Take away his favorite new hobby? He didn’t think so.

“Thank you for your offer, Fay,” he says, “but again. No.”

With that, he turns back to his papers, deliberately ignoring her until he hears her sigh and open the door to leave. As he hears her move through the door, he glances up to catch one last glimpse before she shuts it.

Those tight jeans were a good choice, he notes. He’ll repeat that fashion choice again.

As Fay leaves, Kent turns his attention to the screen on his computer which holds all of the surveillance footage in his house. A few clicks allow him to focus the cameras on her, following her path as she goes back up the stairs towards her room. She surprises him, though, by passing her room –

Continuing down the hallway –

Stopping at Daniel’s room. Kent gives a little hum of interest, leaning back in his chair as he watches her tap gently on Daniel’s door.

His son answers and smiles at her, inviting her in. The girl disappears inside.

Kent stares at Daniel’s closed bedroom door, working to deny the jealousy that’s roiling in his gut.

Not giving himself a chance to think about it too much, he leans over to the intercom on his desk, pressing number 8 for his own bedroom. “Fiona?” he says.

A few moments later, she answers. “Hey baby,” she purrs.

“Can you come down to my office, please?”

Fay flops down on Daniel’s bed, sighing.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, sitting on the edge next to her. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” she murmurs, looking around. The room is tastefully decorated in shades of brown and green that match Daniel’s eyes, but there’s very little personal decoration – not much that seems like Daniel himself has chosen it.

“What do you guys do all day, here?” She asks, suddenly wondering about Daniel’s life as an only child in a mafia family.

He shrugs. “I mostly stay in here,” he says, nodding to his computer and the several bookcases full of texts against the far wall. “I keep busy.”

“Don’t you get bored?” She wonders, sitting up.

“Of course,” he says, laughing a little. “Doesn’t everyone?”

“Do you ever get to leave?” She asks, studying her handsome fiancé.

“Of course,” he replies, laughing. “Don’t forget, you met me outside of this house, so, that’s evidence of that.” He hesitates, realizing the direction of her questions. “But we can’t leave now. Not for a while. Not until things are more...settled.”

Fay sighs, disappointed, and falls back against his pillows.

“It’s not always going to be like this,” he murmurs, sorry that she feels so discontented. “Once everything dies down, once we’re married, we’ll have like...complete freedom. We can go back to the bookshops...maybe to Paris...” he gives her a shy smile, knowing she’d love it there.

She gives him a little half-smile in response, but he knows she’s not content with what he’s offering.

“Come on, Fay,” he says, scooting closer to her and taking her hand. “Some people would kill for what we have. We actually like each other’s company and we have all the money in the world at our disposal. Soon you’ll be one of the richest, most powerful women in this city, Fay,” he says temptingly.

Fay glares at him a little. “Sure, I can have whatever I want, except, you know, the freedom to leave this house. A marriage to someone who loves me.”

Daniel tilts his head, truly wanting to make it better. “I love you, Fay. In my own way.”

She sighs, knowing he means well.

“I just don’t care about all of this, Daniel,” she says. “I don’t care about this wealth and power that everyone thinks is so important. Plus, you’re forgetting the fact that all of this wealth and power come with the heavy pricetag of violence.”

Daniel screws his mouth to the side, admitting, silently, that she’s right.

“Don’t you want to choose your own lover?” She asks, leaning forward eagerly. “Instead of being assigned one?”

He hesitates, squeezing her hand. “I kind of did pick you, Fay. And you picked me. Even before I knew we were ‘assigned.’”

She sighs, taking her hand gently from his. “Yeah, but that was before I had all the information,” she murmurs. Back when she thought he was Prince Charming, not the heir to a mafia cartel.

“I’m going to be a good husband to you,” Daniel murmurs, really meaning it. He always knew he’d get married to a woman, and even if he knew it wouldn’t be a sexual relationship – or even one in which he was faithful – he had always hoped it would be to someone like Fay. His best friend.

Fay flicks her eyes to him, full of doubt. “But what kind of wife would you want me to be?” she asks softly. “Would I even be able to pursue my career, which means so much to me?”

Daniel hesitates. He knows, frankly, that the answer is no – his wife would be expected to stay home, manage his social affairs, raise their kids. But he also knows that saying that aloud right now isn’t going to make this any easier.

Intuiting his response, Fay sighs again. “This isn’t what either of us really want, Daniel,” she says, speaking the truth for both of them. “But somehow, you’ve just...given in to it. I feel sorry for you.”

Her words are like a knife to his heart. Fay Thompson, this poor, delicate, timid girl, feels sorry for him?

God he must be so pathetic. He hangs his head.

“I’m sorry, Fay,” he says softly. “I’ll do my best to make you happy.”

Fay moves until she’s sitting next to him, putting her head on his shoulder. “And so will I. When I go, Daniel, I’m not going to leave you behind.”

He looks at her, then, realizing that she still plans to escape. He doesn’t burst her bubble.

But deep down, he knows it’s impossible.

Chapter 18 – Every Little Girl’s Dream

Chapter 18 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Fiona pants, her mouth open and her eyes closed, as she and Kent finish in his office.

She's straddling him in his chair, her black silk panties discarded on the floor.

Kent breathes hard too, on hand wrapped in her hair, the other pressed against her lower back. Slowly, she raises herself off of him, lowering her feet to the ground. She leans forward, her hands on the arms of the chair, pressing a kiss to his mouth.

"Thanks, baby," she murmurs. "I always like a little afternoon treat."

Kent doesn't say anything, just pulls up his pants and buckles them as she stands and leans back against the desk.

"Oh," Fiona says, looking casually at the security monitors still on his screen. "Lookie here," she points a finger at the little rectangle that shows the door to Daniel's room. "Looks like the love birds were having a little tryst."

She laughs but Kent can't help himself from clamping his teeth together, watching closely.

Fiona notices Kent's tension and tilts her head with curiosity, looking between Kent and the screen. Kent ignores her.

Kent is not used to having to control himself around the women that he wants. Usually, it's not very hard to seduce them, and he can pick and choose who he wants and when he wants them. Women like him, he knows. They come willingly to his bed, or wherever else he takes them.

But as he stares at Fay on the screen, walking back down the hall to her room, he fights to control himself. He knows that he wants her – can't deny it any more – in a rough, primal sort of way. Different than the way he wants Fiona, who slakes his thirst.

But Fay? She leaves him parched.

Fiona smirks, watching her lover stare at the girl on the screen. "You know," she says, folding her arms and keeping her voice light. "I don't think anything funny even went on in that room."

Kent's eyes flash to her. "What?"

"Just look," Fiona says, gesturing to the screen, where Fay has reached her door. The camera shows Fay's face as she twists the knob and walks in. "Can't you see? Her hair isn't mussed, and neither is her makeup. Her lips aren't even swollen."

Kent, unable to help himself, turns to study the image, nothing that Fiona is correct.

“She’s not even walking funny,” Fiona says, smirking and watching Kent’s face. “If Daniel had really given it to her –“

“That’s enough,” Kent says, his voice harsh. Fiona’s secret smile only deepens.

Kent stands up, ready to move on with his day. “Of course nothing happened in there,” he says. “She’s his fiancé, he respects her. Daniel knows it’s impious to have sex before the wedding.”

Fiona laughs and stands up as well, crossing herself casually as she does so. “Oh, I didn’t know we were suddenly so pious in this house,” she says, heading for the door. “I’ll have to say a couple of Hail Mary’s to wash away my sins from this afternoon,” she says, winking at him and heading out.

Kent grunts a goodbye in her direction and returns his attention to some paperwork on his desk.

Still, unable to concentrate, his mind turns again to the innocent, untouched young woman upstairs.

That afternoon, Fiona opens Fay’s door and gives her a big smile. “I have a surprise for you, baby,” she says.

Putting down her book, I look at her with curiosity. “What is it?”

“Come and find out.” Fiona holds the door open and I hop out of bed to follow her.

Fay leads me downstairs towards the front of the house, where she throws open the doors to the parlor. My eyebrows shoot up and I cover my mouth with both hands when I look inside.

Everything is covered in white – white tulle, white lace, white silk, white satin – hanging from racks, draped over chairs, stacked on the sofa. The only dark spot in the room is Kent, before the fireplace, directing the workers who carry piles of garment bags.

“What’s going on?” Daniel says, peering into the room behind me, a sandwich in his hand.

“Don’t bring that in here,” Fiona scolds, swatting at him. Daniel laughs and finishes the sandwich in two big bites, brushing his hands on his pants to get free of crumbs. Fiona glares at him a little but then nods, deeming him clean enough to enter.

“Is this…” I say, looking around in awe, a little anxiety roiling in my stomach as I realize what all of these white things are.

“Wedding dresses!” Fiona says, clapping her hands. “Aren’t they gorgeous? They’re all brought in from Kleinfeld.”

“Now, you come stand here,” Fiona says, pulling me and Daniel further into the room to stand by Kent, “out of the way, while I get everything set up.”

With that, she bustles away to shoo everyone unessential out of the room. As she works, I look up at Kent.

“Was it like this?” I ask. “For your own wedding?”

He glances down at me but looks back at the room as he answers. “No. We had a small wedding, in Sicily. That’s where she was from.”

I raise my eyebrows, surprised. “Oh,” I say. “Is she...still there?”

I scream at myself, inwardly, for such an awkward question. But come on – I can’t just blurt out is she dead? How did she die? Which is what I really want to know.

Kent looks down at me with a withering look. I work hard to keep my face straight, but I feel so terribly awkward that I open my mouth to say something else – anything else -

Daniel saves me. He links elbows with me and pulls me closer. “My mom died when I was young,” he says casually. “Her marriage to my dad was actually arranged,” he notes cheerfully. “Like ours.”

“Oh!” I say, looking between Kent and Daniel, genuinely surprised. “Um, was her death...an accident? An illness?”

Kent sighs and looks at me sharply. “If you want to ask, Fay, if I murdered her, or she died in a gunfight, or was kidnapped and tortured by my enemies, just be forthright about it.”

I press my lips together, embarrassed. Because of course, that’s exactly what I want to know. I say nothing.

“Cancer,” Daniel whispers beside me. I feel sadness flood me, then, and open my mouth to tell him how sorry I am, but he stops me with a smile. “It’s okay,” he says. “It really was a long time ago. Dad and I are all patched up.”

“Well,” I say, turning to smile at Daniel again. “I guess that’s something else we have in common. Both of our moms died young.”

“Rather a macabre thing to bond over,” Kent says dryly, putting his hands in his pockets. “But you will start a new family soon.”

I wonder at the truth of that, but before I can say anything, Fiona pulls me forward to try on the first gown.

The fittings take all afternoon. At first it was fun, playing princess, but after a while I get tired of fighting my way through yards and yards of tulle. Daniel and Kent leave immediately as the trials begin.

Daniel didn't want to see the dress, insisting that it was bad luck, and Kent only wants to come in once the final selection is made. He said that if he's paying for it, he wants final approval.

"Okay," Fiona says, studying me in the last dress. She holds up the beaded Oscar de la Renta that was our other top choice, an incredible off-white beaded silk that fell heavily to the floor and made a fantastic shushing sound as I walked.

"This one?" She indicates the Oscar, "or that?" She gestures towards the incredibly romantic Caroline Herrera dress that hugs my waist with a tight bodice, the off-shoulder sleeves flowing down in to the flowing charmeuse of the skirt, which sweeps behind me in a five-foot train.

"This one," I say, a little breathless, staring at myself in the mirror. I had never really been the kind of girl who dreamed about her wedding before, but in a dress like this? I am actually starting to feel like a bride.

"Oh thank god," Fiona says, wiping a tear from her eye. "That was my favorite too. If you'd picked the Oscar, you'd have broken my heart."

I laugh a little as she picks up her phone, texting someone. I realize, suddenly, that she's messaging Kent – telling him to come down for final approval.

When the door opens, I turn to face him, biting my lip, wondering, passively, if he'll approve.

He's looking down at his phone as he walks into the room but, about halfway across the room from us, he glances up.

Kent stops dead in his tracks.

I feel fear curl in the bottom of my belly. Does he not like it? Did I make the right choice?

His whole body stiffens, his arm dropping to his side as his eyes slowly rove over my form. I turn to him, running my hands across the fabric at my hips, and see his mouth fall ever so slightly open.

Then, his eyes snap back to my own and his mouth slams shut. He takes a step forward, his eyes burning, and, surprised, I take one step back –

My reaction is totally animal, that of prey flinching back from a predator. Kent sees it, registers my fear, and wills himself back into composure. His eyes flick to Fiona for a moment as he slowly rolls his shoulders back, putting his hands into his pockets.

Then, he studies me again. It's a mask, though, this time – I can tell. He's just pretending to be the passive buyer studying his goods.

Beneath, he's the wolf, and I am his supper.

I stare at him, aware, in some part of me, that I have made him ravenous. I shift my position, then, trying out how this knowledge feels in my body, twisting my hips so that my thighs rub together beneath the skirt of my gown.

Kent's eyes flash to my legs, my thighs, and I see a muscle flicker in his cheek as he clenches his jaw.

“So,” Fiona says, her arms folded, her eyes flashing between us. “I guess you like it, Kent?”

I turn my head to look at her, breaking out of my strange reverie, and blush to see the awareness on her face.

“Yes,” Kent says, and when I look back I see that he is, again, all control. “The Herrera is a good choice. Charge it to my account.”

With that, he turns and leaves the room.

“How...” I say, turning my surprise in my mind, “how does he know all the designers?” I ask.

“Baby,” Fiona says, sauntering over to me with a smirk. “He chose all of these gowns. Not me.”

My mouth falls open in surprise.

Chapter 19 – The Secret Room Downstairs

Chapter 19 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Come on, baby Fay,” she says with a smile. “Let's go have a drink.”

I shrug, not hating the idea, and let Fiona help me out of the wedding gown. After I change, I follow her through the kitchen and out into a beautiful little garden I didn't know was here.

“Oh wow,” I say, looking around. “It's beautiful out here.”

It really is. There's a full grill and wet bar pressed up against the house. Next to it is a stone patio with a hand-carved wooden table covered by a tall pergola that has grape vines curling all around it. The whole area is surrounded by tall hedges, keeping out prying eyes.

Fiona bends down to remove a bottle of wine from the fridge and pops it open, filling two delicate glasses that she takes down from the rack above the sink. I sit down at the table as she brings the glasses over.

“This is Kent’s latest vintage,” she says as I raise the glass to my lips. The wine is dry, but I feel a little bit of bubble against my lips as I sip.

It’s delicious. As I peer at it in the glass, I suddenly realize something. “Wait, has Kent been the one sending the clothes up to my room? The ones I wear everyday?”

Fiona shrugs. “Probably. He has my wardrobe restocked every couple of months, so he definitely has the stores on call.”

I stare at the door, then, a little appalled to realize that Kent has made me his little Barbie doll, dressing me up so that I look just the way he wants me to.

But behind my disgust at the idea, a very little bit of me...likes it.

“It’s so nice to have a chance to sit with you one-on-one,” Fiona says, interrupting my thoughts. “You know, have a little girl talk.”

I smile at her. “Yes, I agree. I used to do this all the time with my sister.”

“Aww,” Fiona says, giving me a warm smile. You can consider me your sister now, if you want.”

I smile at her and nod.

“So!” she says, leaning forward. “How are things going with you and Daniel?”

I press my lips together. I definitely can’t tell her the truth – I promised Daniel I wouldn’t – but, frankly, I’m dying for someone to talk to.

She leans in. “Don’t be shy,” she says. “You can trust me.”

“Well,” I say, hesitating. “I mean, I really like Daniel a lot – but, I’m just not sure we’re meant to be. Romantically.”

“Why do you say that?” she says, curious. “Is the physical connection just not there?”

I hesitate, realizing that we’re getting a little too close to the truth here.

She leans forward to whisper more. “Is he no good in bed?”

I blush terribly then, biting my lip, too ashamed to admit that I have no way of knowing. And never will.

Fiona stares at me and then figures it out, sitting back with a gasp. “You mean...you never...”

My blush deepens.

“Fay,” she says, looking actually worried for me now. “You’re not a...”

My eyes dart to her and I know she can see the truth there.

“Oh my god,” she murmurs. “You’re a virgin.”

I nod hastily and then take a big gulp of my wine. If we’re going to have this conversation, I’d rather be lubricated.

To my surprise, Fiona laughs loudly and claps her hands, tickled by the idea. “Baby Fay!” she laughs, “you are too cute!” I can’t help but laugh with her.

When she finishes laughing she shakes her head at me, truly playing the role of a big sister. “So what’s the problem, baby? Why haven’t you given it up to him? Are you scared? Shy?”

I shrug a little, not really knowing how to say it. “I’m not...opposed. I just...I don’t know what to do.”

“Well sweetie,” she says, finishing her glass of wine and standing up. “In this world, you’ve got to keep your man happy. Let me help.”

I stand up with her and swallow my glass of. Then, I follow Fiona back into the house, not really knowing what’s going on.

Fiona bustles through the house and I trail behind, following her to a door in the kitchen that I hadn’t noticed before. She opens it and heads quickly downstairs.

The air is noticeably cooler down here and we pass a series of metal doors. I slow my pace the further we go, getting anxious. What was this place?

“Just down here,” Fiona says, opening the last door on the left. I’m surprised when I enter it. It’s just a little study with a worn rug on the ground beneath a fine leather recliner. There’s a coffee table next to it and a large television facing the recliner. The walls are covered in media – old VHS tapes, magazines, books, photo albums.

“Kent doesn’t use this place anymore,” she says, “but I organized it a while ago. I thought it was better like this than everything just in boxes. This way if he needs to look through anything, he’s got a place to sit.”

“He’s lucky to have your help,” I murmur, looking around.

“That’s all old family stuff,” Fiona says, waving her hand at the far wall, “but this,” she leads me over to a corner with stacks of magazines and VHS tapes. “This is what I wanted to show you.”

Fiona picks up a stack of magazines and plops them in my hand. I glance at them, curious, and then realize that they’re all Playboys. I gasp and almost drop them, eliciting another laugh from Fiona.

“You see what I mean, baby Fay?” she says, adding another bunch to the stack in my hand. “You’re just a little too uptight about this sort of thing,” she says. “It’s just sex. I thought if you came down here, explored a little,” she raises a suggestive eyebrow at me, “that maybe you’d get a little...inspiration. For you and Daniel.”

My mouth falls open in surprise. Is that what Fiona thinks our problem is? I have to stop myself from laughing.

“Um, thank you,” I say, blushing again, “but –“

“No buts!” she says, taking me by the shoulders and settling me into the leather chair. “Listen, I’m going to leave you down here by yourself, so just go ahead and explore,” she says.

“There’s lots of VHS tapes up there,” she continues, gesturing towards the corner where she found the magazines, “if movies are more your thing. Stay for as long as you want – nobody is going to bother you here!”

I sigh as I find myself alone in the room, staring at the stack of porn in my lap. What the hell was I doing here? This is so not my thing.

But, well. I have to admit I’m curious about this crazy porn stash. And It’s not like there’s anything else to do. I flick through a couple of the magazines – they’re super old, definitely before Kent’s time - and wonder who collected them in the first place.

Bored with that, I wander over to the stack of movies, laughing a little at the titles.

Busty Co-Eds and their Punishing Professors

Street Skanks in 3D.

What the hell was this crap?

A few of the tapes are unlabeled in black plastic boxes. Curious, I reach up and take one down. When I open the box, the VHS inside also doesn’t have any writing on it. Maybe a home video, put over here by mistake?

Curious, I take it over to the waiting VCR and pop it in, rewinding to the start. Then I sit back in the chair and press play on the remote.

It is indeed a home video. The room being recorded is empty, though I can see a bed in a pretty room with two windows behind it. Frowning, I lean forward. Those windows look a lot like the ones in my –

I gasp, then, as a woman walks naked onto the screen. She lays herself down on the bed, looking offscreen at the person who must have turned on the video recorder. Then, laying on her back, she slowly lets her knees drift apart, beckoning with a crooked finger.

I stare, fascinated, as someone else comes on the screen. I slap my hand across my mouth when I realize that he, too, is totally naked. The man crawls onto the bed, slipping a hand beneath the woman to flip her over so that she's kneeling down, her weight resting on her knees.

When the man positions himself so that he's kneeling behind her, I get the shock of my life.

It's Kent. I'm watching Kent Lippert's homemade porn.

Mesmerized, I watch Kent reach down to touch himself. The woman is in the way – I can't see any details – but I can tell he's hard and ready for her. He gives her a loud smack on the ass and, as she gives a little yelp, plunges himself inside her, grabbing her by the hips.

The woman's mouth opens in a gasp that turns into a moan, and suddenly she's saying his name –

I lean forward, fascinated, when suddenly the door next to the television swings open.

My eyes fly to the door to see my worst nightmare –

Kent is standing right there.

Chapter 20 – Danger makes me want to...

Chapter 20 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

My heart pounding, I press the stop button on the remote as fast as I can and return my wide eyes to Kent, who is still looking at me.

Please, please, please. By all that is holy, let him not have seen me watching his sex tape.

“What are you doing in here,” he asks, angry.

“Um,” I say, terrified, hoping he doesn’t pick up on the tremor in my voice. “Fiona brought me here? Said I could look through some...” my eyes dart around the room for an answer that is not porn. “Some family photo albums? And home videos?”

He narrows his eyes at me, his eyes flicking to the pile of vintage Playboys on the floor. “She shouldn’t have brought you down here,” he says, moving aside so that I can leave the room. I quickly get to my feet, flicking the power button on the remote so that the TV goes blank.

Then, dropping the remote, I scurry out of the room, praying with all my might that Kent does not go back in to see what tape is in the VCR.

He closes the door behind me as I head for the steps. “Go upstairs,” he says. “Don’t come down here.”

Glad to obey, I hurry out into the kitchen, heaving a sigh of relief. I head back towards the main part of the house, looking forward to going to my room so I can bury my nose into a very different kind of book, my hand sliding to the back pocket of my jeans to check on my phone.

My hand slides over smooth denim. I stop dead in my tracks, panicked, and pat all over my body looking for it. Then, slowly, I turn back towards the little door. I definitely felt it in my back pocket when we left the patio...

God damnit. My phone must have fallen out in the weird porn room.

Steeling myself, I know I have to go back. If my dad or Janeen ever called I didn’t have it – I’d just die with guilt.

On tiptoes, I walk back to the little door in the kitchen, pulling it open a crack to listen. I don’t hear a sound. Tentatively, I put a foot on the step, waiting for a creak. Nothing. Then, silently, I hurry down the stairs and through the hallway.

I let myself back into the little room and grab my phone, which is sitting on the leather chair. Then, for good measure, I pop the VHS out of the VCR and put it back in its black casing, which I slide back on the shelf. There, good. Now no one will ever know.

I leave the room and, quiet as a mouse, shut the door behind me. I begin to creep back along the hallway when I hear something to my left.

I stop dead, terrified that I’ve been caught.

But no one comes out to scold me.

I hear the sound again to my left, a kind of snap, and then a muffled groan. Unable to stop myself, I consider the door from which the sound is coming. It’s thick, made of iron, with no window. It has a bolt on the outside, like a prison.

But I can also see that the bolt is not locked.

I know it's a mistake. I know I shouldn't.

Even as I know these things, though, I stare at the door, consumed by my need to know more.

I take two steps closer, reaching out a hand to grip the metal handle and then, my inner voice still screaming at me to stop, I pull it open just a crack and look inside.

The noise from inside is suddenly louder without the thick door to keep it in.

I see two men facing me, strapped to chairs, fabric gags tied across their mouths. They're moaning, one sobbing, as they look at something just out of my sight, terror in their eyes. As I watch, though, their torturer reveals himself.

Kent, dressed in his suit pants and an undershirt, steps into my line of sight. My eyes take in the strong muscles of his back, the rage that I can see pulsing through him just by the way he stands over these men.

He's wrapped his belt around his hand, a long piece of it hanging down from his fist, the buckle dangling. As I watch, Kent rips his fist to the side, letting the belt drag across the men's faces like a whip, the buckle tearing the flesh of their cheeks.

"TELL ME," Kent commands, his shoulders heaving. The men tremble before him, crying. They shake their heads no, but this is apparently not the answer that Kent wants. He drops the belt, moving to the man on the left and pulling a knife from his pocket.

The man starts to scream as Kent stands behind him, pressing the sharp edge of the knife to the man's pinky finger. The scream turns to a howl of horror, of pain, as Kent presses the blade deeper.

I'm frozen to the spot, horrified. Though I can feel myself trembling, I can't move, can't stop watching. The man not being cut begins to scream in panic, looking everywhere for a way out and then –

Oh my god –

His eyes fix on me. He sees me peeking through the door, fixates on me. He begins to scream in my direction and I think I can hear the words "help! HELP!" reverberate through the room.

Sensing a change, Kent's eyes shift to the other man and then move directly to me.

I gasp and push the door shut and then bolt – bolt – from the hallway.

Panic moves me faster than I thought I could go as I scramble up the stairs, sprint across the kitchen, pull open the kitchen door and then use the banister to propel myself up the main stairs two steps at a time.

Oh my god, I think, he's a monster, he's a psychopath!

Of course, I had already made this assessment – in jail when I'd interviewed him, then again when he kidnapped me – but now? The truth feels like it has hit home inside of me, after seeing that scene in the Mafia King's basement.

I reach the top of the stairs and throw myself towards my room, my fingers inches from my doorknob, when something grabs me around my waist, hauling me back against a solid body –

I scramble, shrieking, trying to get free, but he holds me fast. He grabs me by the hair at the back of my neck, forcing my head back, my face turned up towards his. I pant, in his arms, pinned against him, finally still. "What did I tell you to do, Fay?"

"My phone!" I gasp, remembering my rationale for being there. "I forgot my phone!"

"You deliberately disobeyed me, Fay," he says, walking forward a few steps, pressing me backwards, my feet working to keep up as I feel the door to my bedroom press into my back. It swing opens and then, suddenly, we're in my room.

Kent kicks the door shut and pushes me up against the wall. My breath comes fast then – I almost hyperventilate –

"Calm down, Fay," he says, his body pressed against mine. I blink up at him, realizing that he's completely calm. That he's been completely calm this entire time.

It takes a minute, but I force my breath to come slower. I look up into his face and he watches me, his fingers loosening in my hair, beginning to stroke slowly at the base of my neck.

I can't tear my eyes from him as he brings his face close to mine. "Did you like watching me work, Fay?" he asks, his voice dangerous.

I feel my lip starts to tremble. I see him look down at it.

"Do you know what happens to people who watch me when they're not supposed to?" He murmurs, his voice tipped with a razor's edge.

Slowly, I shake my head no.

He brings his mouth close to my ear, the stubble of his jaw brushing against my cheek. "They get punished," he whispers.

My breathing grows heavier at this. I can feel my breath matching up with my pounding heart, my chest pressing against his. I know he can feel it too.

He withdraws his mouth from my ear, looking at me again, a cruel smile lighting his lips. “What is it, Fay,” he murmurs, wondering. “It’s almost as if, disobeying me like that, you want me to punish you...”

I close my eyes as a moan slips out of my mouth when he says that. God damnit – god damnit – my whole body goes loose in his arms, pressed against him – a steady ache builds at the apex of my thighs, and, suddenly, I know that I’m wet for him.

I feel horror cross my face, shame – god, what was wrong with me –

“No, Fay,” he growls, and I open my eyes to see him staring down into mine. “Don’t fight it. You want to pretend that you don’t belong in this world, but you were born to be here. Just like me,” his voice lowers, stroking me like velvet, “you’re drawn to the danger, Fay.”

He brings his face even closer to mine so that I feel his next words like a force against my lips. “Danger,” he says. “It makes you want to fuck.”