

Chapter 111 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“What!” I shriek, shocked, a noise that makes Kent laugh.

“Kent!” I hiss in a whisper, remembering that this is apparently a secret and that I should be quiet, “put me down! I need my pants!”

“No, you don’t,” he replies, laughing a little with derision as he climbs. “Those ugly shorts – where did you get those anyway?”

“They’re comfortable!” I protest.

Kent shocks me then by delivering a punishing little smack on my ass, making me yelp. He laughs again and I can feel his head moving against my hip, shaking from side to side in frustration. “All the resources in the world,” he mutters, “and you order polyester pajamas – honestly Fay –”

“They’re cute!” I retort, shocked and a little offended as he continues to carry me up the steps slung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

“They’re horrible,” he mutters, pushing open a door and passing through it. As Kent turns to close the door behind him, I look around and am mildly surprised to see that we’re in his bedroom. “I’m going to put those clothes in the incinerator first thing in the morning,” Kent informs me, pulling me off his shoulder and lowering me down to my place in his bed.

“Rude,” I retort, laying back against Kent’s pillows and narrowing my eyes at him. A little smile grows on my face when I see him pause, looking over my naked body. “If you burn my clothes, what will I wear?”

“Nothing,” he drawls, sliding his hands into his pockets and looking hungrily down at me. “Ever again, if I have anything to say about it.”

I laugh, then, and am pleased when I see him smile. “I’ll get cold,” I protest, giving a little pout.

“We’ll wrap you up,” he retorts, bending down to pull back the comforter and sheets and tuck me into them, his hands lingering unnecessarily long on my ass as he does. Then, that done, Kent picks a book up from the nightstand – my nightstand, apparently, and a book I didn’t place there – and tosses it to me to keep me occupied while he turns and heads to the closet.

As Kent pulls the closet door open and disappears inside, I cock my head, considering...does Kent Lippert have pajamas?

What do they look like?

Biting my lip in anticipation of finding out, I look down at the book, a well-loved hardcover with a gilt title that reads Control and Manipulation. I flip it open, wondering if Kent just tossed me the first book he found to keep me occupied, or if he picked this for me...

I look up, distracted, when Kent comes out of the closet again wearing nothing but his underwear. I can't help the way my eyes follow him as he crosses the room, as I admire his well-muscled form, his eight-pack abs, his strong legs and his round ass.

I'm still watching him, unable to tear my eyes away, as he moves to his side of the bed, picking up his alarm clock. "Kent?" I ask quietly.

"Hmm?" he replies, only paying half attention to me as he sets his alarm.

"When do you work out? And like...where?"

Kent snaps his head to me, baffled, and I grin. I like him like this – when I can see the always-controlled Kent thrown off by something I say that he wasn't expecting.

"What?" he breathes, frowning at me in confusion.

"Well, this," I say, waving a general hand at his physique, "this isn't genetics. And I don't think you go to like, the community center to make it happen. So? Where's your gym?"

Kent smirks and shakes his head, finishing with the clock and placing it on his bedside table before he sits on the bed, sliding close to me.

"Why?" he asks, putting an arm around my shoulders and tugging me close. "Are you going to start working out with me? Want me to put you through your paces, Fay?"

"God no," I say, hastily sticking out my tongue to let him know precisely what I think about that idea. "Just," I tilt my head, considering. "This house is gigantic, and I haven't seen half of it – and I just found out that there's a secret passage to the dungeons in the back of my wardrobe, so," I shrug. "I just want to know what else is in the Lippert House of Mysteries. To begin, do you have a gym where you spend many hours lifting weights? Or is this physique the result of...I don't know. Beating people up in back allies?"

Kent laughs at me, shaking his head. But then he surprises me by pulling my body close so that I'm pressed tight against him, as if he doesn't want any space between us at all. "I have a gym, Fay," he tells me quietly. "No back alley beat-downs. I'm past that part of my life. The gym is private – just mine. It's in that corridor that you just passed through, behind one of those grey

doors. It can only be accessed through the door in this room, and – well, the door in the back of your wardrobe. Which I suppose counts as an entrance, now that you know about it.”

“You know that’s weird, right,” I ask, looking up into his face, my eyebrows raised. “That it’s weird that you had a secret entrance to my room this whole time and never told me? What, did you like, sneak in and...”

Kent laughs then, shaking his head at me. “No, Fay,” he scolds, but I can tell he’s amused more than offended. “I never snuck in and watched you sleep. I’m not a pervert.”

I raise one eyebrow at him, skeptical, and he laughs harder, but moves in to kiss me.

Before he can, though, I swat him away.

“Wha-“ he says, surprised when I scootch away from him, brandishing my book like a defensive weapon.

“No way, Kent!” I protest. “You don’t just get to wipe away all of my anger with really good sex, and then throw books at me to distract me, and expect all of the reasons for that anger to go away as well!”

I see a smirk form on his lips, telling me that was indeed what he was hoping would happen. I hold up a scolding finger and point it at his face. “I admit,” I continue, “it was a good plan. It almost worked. But we have to talk.”

“Fine, Fay,” Kent murmurs, grabbing the offending finger in his gigantic hand and bringing my hand close to his face to kiss it before releasing me. “We’ll talk. I know why I was pissed off tonight,” he says, his habitual glower coming back to his face as he and I remember – perhaps simultaneously – my little stolen moment with Ivan. “Why are you?”

“Because, Kent,” I say, my bravado collapsing a little bit as I remember everything I’ve been feeling these past two days. My anger wiped it away for a moment – or perhaps focused it into a burning thing rather than a nagging, sad one – but...it’s been a difficult couple of days.

“Right before Natalia and Alessi came,” I begin, raising a hand to twist in the ends of my hair, “you basically told me that I’m your dirty little secret, and that this –“ I point between us – “can never be more than this,” I finish, waving around at Kent’s secret lair, where he’s hidden me away.

“Do you want it to be more than this, Fay?” Kent asks quietly, and I sense, somehow, that the question is not a trap. He genuinely wants to know.

Chapter 112 – The Real Threat

Chapter 112 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I blink, realizing that I never thought about it, about the question of what I want to be to Kent. And what I want him to be to me.

I mean, Kent is overwhelming – even just learning to be around him is a lot, let alone considering if I want to be with him. I mean, is that even what I would want, if it was a possibility? Do I want to be more than Kent's mafia mistress? Do I want to be his girlfriend? His –

"It's all right, Fay," Kent whispers, moving closer to me and putting a gentle hand on my cheek, probably seeing me think it through and freak out a little bit. "You don't have to know now."

"Okay," I say, biting my lip. "I don't know – but Kent, I don't want to live my life in secret. I don't want to have to scurry around like a little rat, worried about who is going to find out. I don't want to have to lie – and people are going to find out – they already have!"

"Who?" Kent asks, frowning. I hesitate but he glares at me a little, so I give in.

"Well, Daniel, obviously," I say and he tilts his head, because he knows by my tone that there's more. "And...Jerome."

"Jerome?" Kent asks, surprised.

"Jerome is smarter than you give him credit for," I say, raising my eyebrows.

"He's...perceptive."

"He's also obsessed with you," Kent mutters angrily, looking away, his expression mildly murderous now. I burst out into a little laugh now because – well, because I'm not the member of this household who Jerome is actually obsessed with. Kent snaps my gaze back to me, curious, but I shake my head a little as I smile, letting him know that I'm keeping this secret. He sighs and lets me.

"Fay," Kent says quietly after a moment of silence. "I'm sorry."

My mouth falls open a little bit in shock. An apology? From Kent?

He takes a deep breath. "This hasn't been fair on you – you're right. We should – and we can – make...changes. Be more flexible. I don't want you to feel like I'm ashamed of this. Because I'm not. But Fay," Kent tilts his head to the side and I see him worried now. And I know exactly what's caused it.

“Natalia,” I whisper. And I only mention her because I know that while Alessi is Bianci’s son...Natalia is the real threat here.

“It’s...too precarious, Fay,” Kent whispers to me, holding my gaze so that I can see how serious he is. “I am on such shaky ground with them already. If they find out this – that my relationship with Alden hangs in the balance because of this, with you...” he shakes his head, letting me see just how close we are to the edge of the cliff.

“Is it that bad?” I ask, worried now. Slowly, he nods.

“They could destroy us. Alden would take it as a grave insult that I’ve...despoiled you.” He sighs and covers his face with his hand, looking ashamed of himself. “And he’d be right, Fay – another boss wouldn’t marry you now –“

I feel myself smirk at this, thinking that that’s not quite right – that Ivan might - but then I wipe my face clean before he sees it.

Kent drags the hand from his face and looks at me again. “If Bianci discovered that I’ve put my business with Alden at risk – given Alden every legitimate reason to declare war on me –“ Kent pauses, seeking the words, apparently at a loss to describe the magnitude of it. “Bianci and Alden could unite and just...wipe me off the face of the earth. And Daniel. And everything I’ve built. And...you.”

My eyes go wide as I realize how serious he is. How serious this is.

“Kent,” I whisper, staring at him. “Why don’t you just let me go? If the risk is that high?”

Kent goes dead still as he looks into my face, silent for too long. His next words shock me to my core. “Fay,” he whispers. “Don’t you think I’ve tried?”

The two of us are very, very still for the next few moments, and as it turns out I’m the one who can’t take it. I break the silence, the stillness, taking a sharp inhale of breath and moving closer to him and pressing my body up against his.

Because – despite everything – despite the threat –

I don’t think I can stop either.

“Okay,” I breathe, wrapping my arms around Kent and tucking my head under his chin, pressing my ear to his chest and listening to his heartbeat. Kent pauses for a moment and then folds his arms around me, holding me lightly to him, a gentle grip that lets me know that if I want to run from him...I can.

“All right,” I sigh, giving in. “Until they leave, Kent. Until it’s settled, until they’re gone, I’ll be your secret, and you’ll be mine. And then, we’ll...decide.”

“All right,” Kent agrees, tightening his hold on me in such a way that feels like...relief, more than affection, or ownership. Like he has finally relaxed.

“But Kent?” I ask, turning my head up towards him.

“Hmm?” he replies, encouraging me to ask.

“Can you just be like...a little nicer to me?”

Kent laughs at this, apparently surprised. He looks at me curiously. “What? Have I been mean to you?”

“Well, no,” I murmur, wiggling a little discontentedly beside him. “But Natalia – she is a...” I blow out a breath there, letting him know precisely what I think Natalia is without having to say it. Kent laughs and hugs me tighter, pleased.

“Natalia is a dragon,” he remarks. “I thought you’ve been doing quite well against her, Fay – especially tonight, when you didn’t cry or run away after she told me about your little interlude with him –“

“She’s making my life a living hell!” I protest, ignoring his mention of Ivan. “She’s so mean to me Kent – you don’t see half of it, because she saves it for when you’re not around! Which is always! I have to spend all day with her and it’s just insult, insult, insult!” I shake my head, amazed and frustrated.

Kent just laughs at me further. “All right, Fay,” he concedes. “I’ll do a better job of being on your side, when I can. But I can’t be around all the time, and if you’re going to play the role of Daniel’s fiancé it’s your job to entertain his guests –“

“I never knew that!” I retort, pulling my hand up and smacking him on the chest. “No one told me – no one prepared me for any of this! I told her I can’t cook pasta, and she looked at me like I said I committed a war crime! I would have learned to cook pasta! I mean, it can’t be hard – you just boil it, right?”

Kent laughs harder at this, at me, but not in a way that makes me feel bad. Instead, I feel heard by him, and like he’s helping me see the lighter side of it. I can’t help the little smile that blooms on my face as I laugh at it too.

“She’s walking all over you, Fay,” Kent murmurs, bringing his face close to mine, “because you’re letting her.”

“I’m letting her –“ I gasp, “you’re letting her! And Daniel!”

“It’s not our job to defend you,” he pushes back, shaking his head, “not against the words of a clever woman, a rival.”

“Oh! Yes, a rival!” I say, crossing my arms and pulling away from him a little, though he tightens his grip on me, not wanting me to move away. “And don’t think Daniel didn’t tell me about that –“

“What?” Kent asks, a little grin on his lips, because he already knows where I’m going with this.

“About this,” I say, lifting my left hand and waving it at his face, my engagement ring still perched on it. “And whose finger it sat on before mine!”

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Chapter 113 – Refuge

Chapter 113 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Just briefly,” Kent murmurs, grabbing my left hand and pulling it to his mouth, kissing my knuckles like a prince and then turning my hand over and starting to drag kisses up the length of my forearm. “Not as long as it’s been on your hand, even,” he murmurs against my skin, trying to distract me. “A youthful mistake.”

“Mistake!” I cry, aghast, ignoring the tingles on my skin where Kent has placed his lips. “Kent, you loved her.”

Kent looks up at me seriously, then. “I thought I did,” he replies, lifting my arm and pulling it forward to loop it around his neck, where he wants it. “Natalia was...light and fire, so alive and passionate in comparison to Lenai’s cool disdain. I...misunderstood how she made me feel. I thought it was love.” Kent hesitates and then shrugs. “It’s complicated, Fay. And it was a long time ago.”

I study him for a moment and then nod, not pressing him any further. He’ll tell me if he wants me to know. Otherwise, I can press Daniel for more information if I need it.

“Either way,” Kent smoothly moves on, a little smile coming to his lips now as he nods to the book of military strategy that’s fallen on the bed next to me. “There are ways to counter her, Fay. She’s not smarter, or more powerful, or better supplied with resources than you. If she’s walking all over you, Fay, it is because you’re letting her.”

I open my mouth to protest but then I realize that Kent is just saying to me precisely what I thought to myself, tonight, when Natalia caught me with Ivan. Right before I told her to shove it, which was one of the more satisfying moments of my life. Slowly, I close my mouth, thinking, and then I look back at Kent.

“All right,” I say. “So what do I do?”

“You study,” he says, reaching out to tap the book. “And you plan. And you learn her moves, and figure out ways to counter them.”

I cock my head to the side, considering this. That I’ve...never quite thought, concretely, about making a larger plan regarding how I move through Kent’s world, four or five steps ahead rather than just one or two. So far, I’ve mostly been acting on impulse – and it’s worked, as far as it goes.

But what would happen if...

Suddenly eager to get started, I drop my arm from Kent’s neck and reach for the book –

But before I can grab it, he swats it out of my reach.

“No,” Kent groans, laying down and pulling me on top of him. “Start tomorrow. Tonight is for sleep.” I glance at the clock and laugh, realizing that it’s nearly one in the morning. “You’re exhausted, we’re exhausted. For one day...” he sighs as I settle against him, my head on his chest, “it’s enough.”

“Okay,” I agree, closing my eyes and finding myself yawning a little bit, realizing that he’s right. Even if my mind is on fire to begin strategizing, my body is ready to sleep.

A few minutes pass and I feel Kent’s breathing soften, hear his heartbeat slow.

But I can’t help myself as my mind continues to turn.

“Kent,” I whisper, nuzzling my face a little against his warm chest. “Can I ask you something?”

“No,” he murmurs, laughing a tired little laugh. “You get six thousand questions each day, Fay, and today, as usual, you’ve used them all up.”

But I smile and press on anyway, ignoring him. “Kent,” I ask, “if Natalia was light and fire, and Lenai was cool distain...what am I?”

“Irritating,” he grumbles. “Loud. Awake, when you should be asleep.”

I laugh, shaking my head, but not really bothered. It wasn’t a fair question anyway. I know that I’ll never be on Lenai’s level – can never be. She was his first and only love. As I think it, something twists low in me – but I push the feeling away, not letting myself address it.

And then I close my eyes, ready for sleep, and am surprised when Kent raises a hand, bringing it up to gently stroke his fingers down the length of my hair.

“My refuge, Fay,” Kent answers, his words hardly more than a whisper. “You’re peace.”

The next morning I'm not startled awake as I was before, but instead slowly awoken to the feeling of Kent's warm hand sliding up my stomach to cup my breast. And, as I stretch a little and turn curiously towards him, I feel Kent's mouth on mine, gentle and sweet.

"Hey," I murmur, smiling and turning my body towards him. "No horrible shrieking today?"

"We've got about two minutes before that," Kent replies, his voice still rough with sleep as he takes a deep breath, sliding his hand back down my belly and using the pressure of it to pull me tight against him.

"What?" I ask, confused, still blinking awake.

"It's 5:58. Alarm's set for six."

"What!?" I cry, and then I tilt my head back and groan. "Seriously, Kent? You wake up before your alarm? After five hours of sleep?"

"I almost always wake up before my alarm," Kent murmurs, burying his face against my neck, dragging kisses along the length of it. "Complete diligence. Like a hawk."

"You're more like a bat," I sigh in response, not making much sense in my half-asleep state as I look anxiously towards the alarm, "I'm starting to suspect that you don't sleep at all and you just wait for me to fall asleep and then you hang from the ceiling —"

"What?" Kent asks, picking up his head and laughing at me.

"And stare at me all night, obsession in your eyes —"

"You wish," he mutters, shaking his head at me as he brings his lips back to my shoulder.

"Kent, please," I beg, still looking anxiously towards the clock, "turn it off before it goes — I'm still half asleep —"

"Up!" Kent commands, giving me a smack on my ass that makes me yelp as he obligingly leans over to grab the clock before it goes off. It starts to ring against his hand just as he grabs it and I give a little shriek and cover my ears. Kent just laughs at me, though, tossing the clock aside and pulling me back to him as I turn away from the racket.

"Seriously, Kent," I moan, tucking my head against him and sighing. "Can't I sleep? It's only been five hours..."

"No," he replies, and I can feel him shake his head even if I can't see it. "You have to go back to your room before someone notices that you're missing."

I groan and wrap my arms around him, defiant and determined not to move. I even lock my legs around his like a little sloth clinging to a tree, which makes him laugh again.

“Come on, Fay,” Kent coaxes gently, nudging me with his nose. “If it were up to me, we’d stay in bed all day. But we have things to do.”

“Yes, but mine are way worse,” I murmur. “I have to go shopping with Natalia.”

Kent chuckles at me, a low and pleasant sound, and I glare at him a little bitterly, my expression clearly communicating glad you’re getting such enjoyment out of this, Kent. He just laughs harder and nudges me with his nose.

“If you’re good,” he whispers, “I’ll send you through the passage with a coffee.”

“Really?” I ask, perking up. Then I blink and sit up all the way. “You have coffee here?”

“I have everything here,” Kent murmurs in reply, sitting up with me and pulling me back against his chest like he doesn’t want to get me go. And I let him, for a moment, trying to decide what I want more...

Coffee? Or a little bit of Kent for breakfast?

Chapter 114 – No More Hands

Chapter 114 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Hey,” I protest, smiling up at Kent as he brushes a thumb against the underside of my breast. “I thought you wanted me to get up?”

“I wanted you to wake up,” he replies, sighing a little contented breath through his nose. “Out of bed is...harder.”

“Fine by me,” I murmur, turning my face up towards his, but Kent sighs and loosens his grip around me.

“No,” he says, shaking his head and groaning as he moves away from me. “I’m already two hours late. If I get started doing what I actually want to do this morning, we won’t make it to breakfast until eight.”

“Fine,” I sigh, watching him get up with a little pout. “But then I demand coffee,” I quip, looking around again for this miraculous coffee machine while I wrap the sheets around my chest, a little

cold and not wanting to be quite as naked as I am right now if nothing is going to come of it.
“Where is it?”

Kent stands up from the bed and I bite my lip and grin a little as I watch him cross the room in nothing but his tight little boxer briefs. Then, to my surprise, he presses against a little section of the wall that, like the back of my wardrobe, has a hidden magnetic clasp that clicks and then –

My mouth drops open a little as the wall spins, revealing a perfect little Italian coffee bar hidden on the other side, complete with an espresso machine, and a tiny fridge with cream, and perfect little white cups –

“Oh!” I say, my eyes going wide, completely charmed by it. Before I can think I’m up and moving towards it, clutching Kent’s sheets to my chest and dragging them with me as I hurry over.

“Fay,” Kent sighs, “you’re messing up the whole bed –“

I flick a lightning-fast eye roll his way and then reach out towards the machine, wanting to press all of the little buttons, my mouth watering a little at the thought of a nice espresso to start the morning –

“Don’t touch,” Kent scolds, slapping my hand away territorially. I gasp and glare at him but he just laughs, putting a hand on my lower back and nudging me towards the closet. “Go put on something warm, Fay, so you can go back through the tunnel. I’ll make you something for your trip.”

A little chagrined, but not really minding – Kent and Daniel’s coffees are always better than mine– I do as Kent says and head over to the closet, dropping the sheets on the floor along the way because I know it will both piss Kent off to have his linens on the ground and to give him a look at what he passed up in the name of responsibility. As I pass into the closet and glimpse over my shoulder, I’m rewarded by the sight of Kent groaning and passing a hand down over his face, shaking his head both at my sloppiness and my cute butt.

When I come out a minute or two later, dressed in a Kent-approved pajama set with matching slippers, I’m rewarded by the sight of my delicious coffee waiting in the hands of my very handsome...what? I look up at him consideringly as I walk over to him. My boss? My boyfriend? My lover? I smirk at the thought of the last word, feeling like that’s...too dramatic a term, even though it’s probably the most accurate.

Kent looks at me curiously as he hands me the coffee before shaking his head and looking away. “I don’t even want to know, Fay,” he says, fighting the smile I bring to his face.

“Probably not,” I quip, taking a sip and making a pleased little noise. As I lower the tiny cup to its tiny saucer, Kent puts an arm around my waist and pulls me close, making me tilt my face up to look into his.

"I'll see you tonight?" he murmurs, his voice soft and dark with promise in a way that makes my stomach twist in anticipation.

"Okay," I whisper, pleased. "Are you going to be mean to me all day before then?" I ask, tilting my head to the side.

"If you deserve it," he growls, narrowing his eyes at me a little, daring me to try. I can't help but grin, which makes him laugh. "I can't even scare you into good behavior anymore," he sighs.

I shrug. "It's not my fault if I like you a little scary. Very scowly and dark. Just my type, apparently."

"Really?" Kent asks, lifting a brow as he studies me and leaning back a little, though he keeps the arm around my waist. "I thought you were into blondes these days."

I blush a little, looking down at my cup, but I can't help but smile – a little – at the hint of jealousy in his voice. "Terrifying doesn't have a default hair color," I say lightly, trying to be funny. But I raise my eyes again to Kent in surprise when he takes his hand from my waist and crosses his arms over his chest.

"I don't want you to see him anymore, Fay," Kent declares, looking down at me sternly.

"What?" I ask, shocked.

"I'm serious," Kent replies, shrugging and pretending a casualness I know he doesn't feel. "It's getting too dangerous – and you've already got the information from him that we need –"

"Kent," I cut in, glaring. "You know this isn't about danger, or information."

"Fine," he snaps, his expression matching mine. "I don't want his hands on you anymore, Fay. I don't like it."

"Oh?" I say, moving to cross my arms and nearly spilling my coffee everywhere. Kent curses and catches the cup before I knock it over, taking it from me and giving me an exhausted look. I grimace in apology but then continue.

"Seriously, Kent?" I ask, more perturbed by him making this demand than by the actual result of it. I may not have admitted it to myself in words yet – not completely – but I'm very aware of the fact that Kent has my attention now, romantically. Ivan and I have a connection but –

I sigh a little bit, dismissing the thought from my mind and making myself concentrate on the situation at hand.

"Seriously, Fay," Kent replies, re-crossing his arms while holding the coffee in a way that I could not. "End it with him."

“And what about you?” I ask, a little impulsive as well as angry. “Are you going to be exclusive with me?”

Kent blinks at me in surprise but doesn’t answer. Instead, he just glares down into my face, not giving anything away. I let a few heartbeats pass and then laugh a little as I realize that he has no intention of answering my question, let alone promising fidelity.

“Whatever, Kent,” I say, a little pissed and reaching out to take my coffee back from his hand. “I’ll answer your question with the same response you gave me.”

And then, snatching my coffee away from him, I head for the door that I now know leads to the stone steps and the downstairs passage.

“Fay,” Kent calls after me, and I turn at the door. “What do you want for it?”

“For what?” I ask, confused.

“To leave him,” he clarifies. “What will it take?”

Chapter 115 – Strategy for Breakfast

Chapter 115 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I stare at Kent for a second, shocked and confused. What, really, is he asking me?

“I’m serious, Fay,” Kent continues. “What’s your price? An adjustment to the contract? Money? A condo in Milan?”

I go still for a moment, considering that a condo in Milan sounds amazing –

But then I turn fully to him, frowning. “Kent, do you ever consider that my continuing to communicate with Ivan might benefit you too? That I might be doing it for your sake?”

“Really,” Kent says, his voice rich with sarcasm. “You kissed Ivan last night for my sake.”

“One,” I say, taking a few quick steps closer to him, “I did not kiss Ivan last night –“ I grimace a little inwardly, thinking that Kent doesn’t really know that I was definitely going to kiss Ivan last night had Natalia not interrupted – “and two,” I continue, interrupting Kent before he can object, “that last night Ivan told me some really interesting stuff that you might want to know.”

Kent snaps his mouth shut and considers me for a moment. “Fine,” he says, giving in. “What did he tell you that was so worth it?”

“Kent,” I hesitate, coming to stand in front of him again and look up into his face, wanting to see how he reacts. “Ivan asked me again to come to his side. He insisted – insisted that you’re going down. I don’t know why he wants me to do it – if it’s because he has feelings for me, or wants the allegiance to my dad, I don’t know – but Kent,” I pause, shaking my head and hoping he hears me, “Ivan was sure. He says it’s dangerous for me to stay in this house. He wants me out.”

Kent grits his teeth and looks away from me, his eyes going vague as he processes this news. “It doesn’t mean anything, Fay,” he mutters. “I can protect you.”

“I know,” I say, putting a hand on his arm and making him look down at me again. “But Kent, if you let me talk to him, maybe I can find out more. Don’t cut off this connection. We can get more from it.”

“Fine,” Kent growls, leaning down and surprising me by pressing a kiss to my mouth, a lingering one that floods my stomach with heat. “But Fay,” he says when he pulls away. “No hands. All right?”

“You know Kent,” I murmur, looking up at him from under my eyelashes. “If you were just willing to admit that you didn’t want him touching me because you have feelings for me,” I whisper, smirking, “I might be obliged to do it for free.”

Kent glares at me, but I see the smile starting on his lips as he considers my counter-offer. “Two condos, Fay. Milan and Paris.”

I laugh, shoving away from him and wrinkling my nose. “Show me the property listings,” I say, giving him a little wink and turning to head back to the door. “And we’ll talk.”

I finish my tiny coffee by the time I finish climbing the winding iron stair and, after I push through the back of the wardrobe and duck back into my room, I place the empty cup on my bedside table as I yawn and head for the shower. Honestly, after five hours of sleep, one cup doesn’t cut it.

I smirk as I turn the shower on and, stripping off my barely-worn pajamas, I consider whether I can convince Kent to let me install a fancy little coffee bar of my own in my room...

By the time I come of the bathroom, though, I’m feeling much more awake. I’m also pleased to see that my clothes for the day have been delivered. I move to them, unfolding them quickly and finding that a frown comes to my face as I consider the perky little white sundress that Kent has sent me for the day – patterned with sunflowers and tied with yellow ribbons at the shoulders.

I mean it’s...just not quite right.

I mean, I didn't get into any of the strategic books that Kent recommended for me, but my mind is starting to mull over some of the things that Kent said last night, especially now that I've got a little espresso in me to fuel my thoughts.

And while this little sundress is very cute, and fashionable, and the perfect dress for a day of summer shopping...it also feeds into everything Natalia says about me that makes me feel bad about myself.

Natalia already talks to me like I'm a stupid little girl whose role in this family is strictly as an ornament, if that. In many ways she looks at me as less than that - as a weight, a detriment, someone who cannot take care of Daniel (which she implies is my job) and a silly little nothing who distracts the men from their duties.

So showing up to breakfast today in sunflowers and ribbons?

It only reinforces what Natalia already thinks of me.

Very suddenly, I shake my head and re-fold the dress, moving to my wardrobe to tuck it away for a better moment. Then I sort through the selection of clothing that Kent keeps stocked in my wardrobe at all times, pulling out a simple pair of tight black cigarette pants, a black belt, and a form-fitting green turtle neck as well as my favorite pair of comfortable black pumps.

My outfit chosen, I move towards my vanity and suddenly notice the little manila folder sitting on my bed which was apparently tucked under the clothes that Kent sent. Curious, I pick it up and flip it open, laughing when I see a printed real estate listing for a ridiculously gorgeous, ridiculously expensive flat in Paris overlooking the Sienne. At the top of the page, in Kent's neat and precise handwriting, is written "in exchange for no hands."

I toss the little folder away on my bed, shaking my head, taking it for the joke that it is.

Honestly, Kent's much funnier now that he's getting laid consistently.

I sit myself down in front of my mirror and quickly braid my hair so that it falls straight down my back. That done, I apply very simple, very serious makeup and quickly dress, glancing at the clock and realizing that I'm about five minutes late for breakfast.

Perfect, I think, slipping on my shoes and smirking a little as I head for the door.

As I push through the door into the kitchen, I see that Daniel, Alessi, and Natalia are already seated at our little table for two, which has been expanded recently to make room for our guests. Daniel is the only one facing the kitchen door and his eyes go wide with surprise when I walk in. I give him a little wink and then walk coolly past our table, heading directly for the espresso machine. There, I take my time making a double and then - in a move I've never been brave enough to make before - I stop by the table of old men who are always in the corner at breakfast time.

They greet me warmly, as if I do this every day, and I slide one hand coolly into the pocket of my tight pants as I ask how they are and talk playfully with them about their plans for the day as well as my own.

“Little Fay,” one of them says – an uncle on Kent’s side, though I don’t know his name and feel guilty about it, after all these months. I make a mental note to ask Daniel. “You come see us more often, okay?” He gently pats my arm before tapping his cheek, asking for a little kiss, which I give him with a laugh.

“Knock ‘em dead,” says Anthony, another of the crew.

“Especially that flashy one,” growls the last – the eldest – glaring over at Natalia.

“I’ll do my best,” I promise, giving him a big smile before walking casually away and bringing my coffee over to my seat next to Daniel.

“Well, Fay,” Alessi says, grinning at me. “You are looking very beautiful today.”

“Beautiful,” Natalia concedes, looking me up and down, “but inappropriate for our day of shopping. Fay, what is wrong with you? You don’t know how to dress?”

Daniel opens his mouth to defend me but I speak over him, still not sitting down.

“Sorry, Natalia,” I say, tilting my head to the side in an apology I definitely don’t feel. “My plans have changed – I have a meeting today with a very important man. You’ll have to go shopping on your own. Do you think you can manage? I can show you where to pick up the bus that takes you to the shopping center.”

Chapter 116 – A Very Important Man

Chapter 116 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Natalia goes perfectly still, except for her eyes, which narrow almost to slits.

“Who are you going to see?” she asks, her voice sharp.

“Family business, Natalia,” I murmur, aloof, taking a big sip of my coffee and then placing it on the table. “You understand.”

“Family?” she asks, leaning forward. “Which family? This one, or your father’s?”

“Well, they’re one and the same now, aren’t they?” I reply, cryptic. And then I let my lips curl in a secretive little smile before turning to Daniel and ignoring her completely.

“Will you do all right without me today, sweetheart?” I ask, my voice soft and intimate. I raise a fond hand to run it down the back of his head, taking a moment to trail my fingers through the ends of his hair.

Daniel turns to look up at me, already onto my game and ready to play along. “No,” he says, wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me close. “Not if it’s a choice and pleading incompetence will keep you here.”

I laugh and pout at him, looping my hands around his neck and leaning back a little so that my hips press close against him while I look down at him with adoration. “Sorry, babe,” I say. “You know I have work to do. I’d rather be with you, though.”

“Prove it,” Daniel says, grinning at me wickedly, daring me.

And, laughing a real laugh because I’m so grateful to have him on my side, I let him tug me close and then I lower my face to his, kissing my best friend as if...

...well, as if he’s his dad.

It’s a long, deep kiss, and when I pull away I’m smiling widely at him, genuinely grateful that he’s so willing to play along. I turn my head to Alessi and Natalia then, pleased to see Alessi grinning proudly at his nephew and Natalia glaring coldly at me, her eyes calculating. But I ignore her, leaning over the table a little to grab a croissant off the plate in the middle.

“You guys have an amazing day,” I whisper, giving them both a pretty smile. “I’ll miss you!”

And then I straighten and head for the door.

I’m already past Natalia and Alessi when I see Kent leaning against the wall next to the kitchen door, his arms folded over his chest, watching my every move with a little smirk on his face. And I’m damn lucky that the Italians have their heads turned because I absolutely falter in my steps when I see him there. But he just nods his head once at me, uncrosses his arms, and moves into the kitchen as if he’s got better stuff to deal with.

Taking this non-censure as rare approval, I smile and head towards the door, thinking that it’s done.

But as I pass him, I feel the knuckle of Kent’s index finger gently, just barely, graze the side of my ass.

And I can’t help the huge smile that breaks out on my face as I push through the door.

It’s not much, but from Kent?

He might as well have given me a high-five.

As soon as I come through the door, though, I almost bang straight into Jerome.

“Whoa, speedy,” he says, catching me by the shoulders before I can knock him down.

I stumble a little but then gasp as I look down at my crushed croissant, which collided with his chest. “Why are you always outside doors I’m coming out of?” I ask, frowning up at him. “Do you just lay in wait outside of every door I go through?”

“How could I do that, Fay,” Jerome asks, looking at me slyly, “when sometimes you go into one room and, inexplicably, come out of another?”

My mouth pops open a little but then I snap it shut, wondering what the hell he knows. Has he guessed something about secret passages? Or is he just baiting me into saying something?

Jerome lets me dangle for a moment and then lets my shoulders go, trusting me to stand on my own. “Lucky timing, then, I guess. Where you off to in such a hurry?”

“Gotta go see an important man,” I reply, giving a little shrug.

“Which one?” he asks, genuinely curious.

“Nooooooooo idea,” I say. Then, I cock my head. “Want to come with?”

Jerome hesitates, looking towards the kitchen, but I grab him by the arm. “Oh, come on,” I say, pushing him towards the garage. I know Jerome has access to the car keys and I want to get out of here before Natalia can come call my bluff. “Kent will let me take you.”

Jerome laughs at this, but he lets me push him. “What am I, some Ken doll you guys trade around for the day?”

“Precisely,” I confirm as we pass into the garage and he snags the keys to the Lexus from the key cage. I grin at him over the top of the car as we open our doors. “Want to buy me breakfast, Ken? This...” I hold up my sad little semi-crushed croissant, “isn’t cutting it anymore.”

“You got it, Barbie,” Jerome quips, winking at me and climbing into the car. I grin and do the same, closing my door behind me.

Once Jerome and I finish our breakfast – he takes me to a place downtown where they serve a full English breakfast, something we’ll never get in an Italian house – and we get back in the car totally stuffed, I know precisely where I want to go.

I'm not looking forward to it, but I know what I have to do. Jerome blanches a little bit when I direct him to our next stop, but he doesn't ask questions. Instead, he just drives me up to the front of the house and gets out to lean against the car and watch my back as I climb up the steps and ring the bell.

About half a minute later, the door opens.

"Hey, Tristin," I say, giving my step-mother a little smile in response to her deep and hateful glare. "Is my dad home?"

"He is not," she snaps, hoisting baby Estrella higher on her hip. The baby, thankfully, greets me more graciously with a giggle and a little flap of her hand in my direction. I can't help but smile back at her.

"Um," I say, looking back at Tristin. "Can I come in and wait for him, then?"

Tristin rolls her eyes at me and begins to close the door.

"Tristin!" I call, putting out a hand to stop her. "Please, I'm sorry – I know whenever I come over it always causes trouble –"

"Causes chaos, you mean," she replies, still trying to shut the door – but she's only got one free hand, and I've got two.

"Okay, I buy that," I say, holding my weight against the door until she gives up, glaring at me. "Please," I say, my eyes wide and, I hope, showing my earnest desire to make peace. "Just...let me come in for a little bit. I'll help! I'll watch the baby! I'll...whatever you want! Just let me wait for my dad for a little bit."

Tristin clenches her teeth but then steps away from the door. "Fine," she snaps. "You can watch Romulus for a bit, keep him out of the electrician's hair. But one hint of drama," she says, pointing a finger up in my face, "and you're out. All right?"

"You got it," I reply, holding up my hands innocently. Tristin nods once and steps out of my path so that I can enter. I shoot Jerome a thumbs-up over my shoulder and head into the house, where I see Romulus peeking over the stairs.

"Hi!" he says, popping up and grinning widely at me when he sees me being welcomed into the house. Or at least, tolerated.

"Hi," I reply brightly, going over to him. "So," I continue, peering up at him, "word has it that I'm seeing a very important man today," I inform him. "I guess that's you."

"Makes sense," Romulus says honestly, giving me a little shrug. "I'm very important."

I laugh and hold out my hand to him, beckoning him to come play.

Chapter 117 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

A day alone with my very important gentleman Romulus ends up being way more fun than I thought it would. We ended up going out front to fetch Jerome because I figured that we were going to be here for a while and didn't want him to be left alone out in the heat. This ended up being an amazing choice because Romulus took to Jerome immediately, crawling all over him like a jungle gym.

We're all laying out in the back yard staring up at the clouds about three hours into my visit, Romulus catching his breath after another long bout of his new favorite game, Pirates, where he and Jerome basically just chase each other around with sticks, when a dark shadow falls over me.

"Oh," I say, surprised when I realize that it's not a sudden rain cloud but, instead, my father smiling down at us. "Oh, hello!" I say, laughing a little and working to sit up. "I didn't hear you come outside."

"I was quiet," my father says, smiling at me as Romulus shrieks and throws himself at our dad, clearly thrilled to see him. "It did my heart good to see you with your brother. I have...wanted to see that for a long time."

I bite my lip a little at the sincerity in my father's voice and then smile at him, this man who is a stranger but who so clearly does not want to be.

"Dad," I say, standing up and reaching out my hand towards him. Quite suddenly I feel a little pang of guilt at calling this man dad, when another man raised me – and then another pang, when I realize that I haven't reached out to my actual dad in a while. I make a mental note to fix that as soon as I can.

"Fay," my father replies, taking my hand.

"Romulus!" Romulus shouts, throwing two hands up in the air in victory. We all laugh and then Jerome takes one of the little boy's hands.

"Come on, kid," he says, "let's go get a popsicle." Then, quite politely, Jerome looks to my father with a raised eyebrow, asking if that's all right. My father nods graciously, and Jerome leads Romulus away.

"Dad," I say, starting again, squeezing his hand a little. "I want to be...better than we are. I'm sorry – I know it's not...perfect, between us. Far from it."

“Fay,” he says, shaking his head and coming closer to pat me on the cheek with his other hand. “I owe you an apology as well. I was horrible to you the last time you came to visit. Come, we’ll start again.”

He snaps his fingers to a servant standing at the back door who I hadn’t noticed – who certainly hadn’t been there all day – and then leads me over to a little wooden bench in the corner of his back garden, prettily shaded and surrounded by flowers. As we sit, the servant comes back out with a little tray with two long-stemmed glasses filled with bubbling, rich orange liquid.

“What’s this?” I ask, taking one off the tray and smiling at the servant.

My father tsks as he takes his own drink, waving a hand for the servant to leave. “A sin,” he says, smiling and shaking his head at me. “For my daughter to not know Aperol when she sees it.”

Curious, I take a sip from the little straw poking out of the glass and my eyes go wide when I realize how good it is. “Oh my god,” I say, looking down at it. “Oh wow, it’s delicious.”

“Of course it is,” my father laughs, patting me on the knee. “Aperol, prosecco, and tonic. A shame your Daniel has not taught you this.”

I shrug and smile at him. “Daniel and Kent drink more whiskey than anything else,” I say.

“Irishman’s drink,” my father says, wrinkling his nose in distaste. “A betrayal but...forgivable. At least they, too, are Catholic.”

I grin, not really getting why that matters, but...whatever. I put the phrase in my back pocket to use on Natalia later.

“What brings you to me, daughter,” my father says, turning towards me. “I know it is not merely a visit to see your brother, though I’d be happy if it was. The timing is...too rich.”

I shrug, not admitting or denying anything.

“Did your Daniel send you?” my father pushes. “To convince me, again, that your engagement to him is real? I am not fooled, Fay,” he continues, his voice taking on a bit of a warning. “I can see that you...have more for Ivan, in your heart, than you do for the boy to whom you are engaged.”

I blush a little, embarrassed that it’s been that obvious.

“You don’t get it, dad,” I say, tracing a finger along the wood of the bench before I look up into his eyes. “Daniel and I...we’re dedicated to one another.”

“Dedication makes a better match than passion,” he says, considering.

I blush again to think of my father thinking of me and Ivan in terms of passion.

“But Fay,” he continues, “I have...other reasons for wishing you’d turn your head in a new direction. Not to Ivan, if that’s not what you want. But...elsewhere.”

“What?” I ask, curious. “What reasons?”

“Fay,” he says, shaking his head. “We have...not been to each other, what a father and a daughter should be. That was your mother’s choice – not mine. I would have kept you, if she had let me, raised you to the life you should have had. I hope that you would let me give it to you now. Let me help you make the choice that will make you happy.”

“But...” I slow down here, wanting to get this right, wanting to...

I take a deep breath, thinking about what Kent would do in this situation, and realize that he probably wouldn’t say much at all and, instead, let the other person weave enough rope to hang themselves with.

“Dad,” I say, reaching out and taking his hand, doing my best to make my face look worried. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I wish for you to be happy,” my father says, clamming up a little and leaning back against the arm of the bench, studying me.

I decide to push it and press my eyes shut, making myself think as many horrible things as I can in just a few seconds – imagining everyone I love dying, my horse getting hurt, Daniel in a terrible car crash –

And when I look up at my father again, my face is red with emotion, my eyes a just a little wet. “Please,” I say, shaking my head. “I don’t know what to do.”

Something breaks in my father – I watch it happen. And he leans forward towards me, true concern in his eyes. “Fay,” he whispers, tsking again and reaching for me, pulling me close. “I would keep you safe, my darling,” he murmurs against my hair.

“Does that mean,” I sniff, allowing myself to get worked up, to actually worry now. “That...that you don’t think Daniel...”

“No, Fay,” he says, “I don’t think your Daniel can protect you, no matter your fondness for him.”

“Ivan said...” I continue, hesitating. “That he could? And I...I do like him...”

“He can,” my father says, “with my help, he can.”

“But Natalia...” I say, mentally crossing my fingers and hoping that I’m not pushing it too far. “She said...”

“What did that bitch say,” my father snaps, and I can almost feel the sneer on his face.

I push away from him then, pretending that he scared me a little, but wanting to see his face. “Nothing – I’m sorry –“

“No,” he says, his tempering rising a little as he grabs my arm. I let my eyes go wide and look at his hand, taking a sharp breath in.

“I’m sorry, Fay,” he says, releasing me and shaking his head. “My temper – I am not good –“

“She said that you were...the weakest...” I breathe. “Can you protect me?”

And my father –

I’m shocked, but he laughs. Laughs.

“Your Lippert’s Natalia,” he says, shaking his head, “she has no idea what she means. She and Alessi have been tied to the Lippert family for too long. They only know...one side.”

I don’t know what to do with myself then – and I certainly don’t want him to see my face – so I tuck myself back against him as if I need comfort – and honestly, maybe I do.

“You don’t have to make any big decisions today, Fay,” my father says, wrapping an arm around me and kissing my head. “There is plenty of time. We will make you a good match.”

And my father doesn’t say anything else on the subject, but his point is quite clear: his idea of a good match?

It’s not Daniel. Not because he doesn’t have the right lineage, but because my father, like Ivan, is convinced that the Lippert family are the ones going down.

Chapter 118 – Friend to Friend

Chapter 118 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Jerome and I stay at my father’s house for the next few hours, until dark begins to encroach on the day, mostly because...well, I can’t think of a graceful early exit that doesn’t make it look like I’m not scurrying off to Kent to tell him everything my father just said.

Which, quite frankly, is exactly what I want to do.

Instead we stay for the next few hours, drinking Aperol spritzes with my father and my step-mom, chatting lightly and watching as the Romulus runs around the back yard. The sun has

already started to fall when Jerome looks worriedly at his phone and taps its face, asking me, silently, if I've checked mine at all today.

I shrug, silently letting him know I didn't bring a phone. Jerome's eyes go wide and he exhales a huge, exasperated breath, so I make my excuses and get us out of my father's house as quickly as I can.

"Are you serious, Fay?" Jerome hisses, taking me by the elbow as we head down the front steps.

"You sure as hell sound like a Lippert now," I whisper, giving him a little glare. "Why? What'd I miss?"

"Apparently Daniel's been trying to reach you for hours," he whispers. "You were supposed to be home, and dressed for dinner, 45 minutes ago!"

"Well nobody told me!" I protest as we arrive at the car, quickly climbing in.

"Yes, Fay, they did!" Jerome retorts, sliding into the driver's seat and slamming the door behind him as I fasten my seatbelt. "You just didn't bring the very tiny, very handy communication device they used to tell you!"

"But you're my communication device," I tease, pouting a little.

Jerome rolls his eyes at me, not buying my cute act, and peels out of the driveway, clearly eager to get us home as fast as he can because he knows that he'll get blamed because...well. He's sleeping with one of the bosses, but not the right one.

We're on the road for a few quiet minutes before Jerome surprises me.

"What the hell are you getting into, Fay," he asks, his voice uncharacteristically soft.

"Huh?" is my brilliant reply.

"Why did you come here?" he asks, turning to me. "Are you like...getting information?"

"I'm seeing my dad," I murmur, turning to look away out the window.

"Fay," Jerome sighs, shaking his head.

"What?" I ask, spinning back to him, a little pissed now at being countered. Jerome, at least, I thought was on my side.

"Why can't you just chill out?" he asks, gripping the steering wheel tight in his hands. "Just...be a mafia bride? Dress in pretty things, go ride your horse, buy...literally anything you want?"

"Do you really think I'd be happy with that?" I ask, my voice soft and a little incredulous.

“Kid,” Jerome says, turning to me and staring at me like I’m an idiot. “Who wouldn’t be happy with that?”

“Do you want to be a mafia princess?” I ask, raising my eyebrows.

“Well, no,” he replies, frowning and staring out the windshield. “But I’m a –“

“A boy?” I ask, interrupting, a little miffed at his implications. “Is that the difference?”

Jerome glares at me a little, but I can see in expression that I’ve caught him a bit. “Not born to it,” he corrects.

“Jerome,” I say, sighing and slumping down in my seat. “I’m...I’m playing this day by day, as you are. We’re both mixed up with someone it’s impossible to be with. Can we just be allies on this? Support each other? I mean, neither of us has chosen the easy path. Can you please stop criticizing me for making the exact choices you have?”

My friend glances at me, a little chagrined, and I know he knows I’m right.

Jerome is silent for a moment before he speaks again. “It’s not good, Fay,” he whispers. “I know you’re figuring it out too.”

“What?” I ask, sitting up, suddenly alert.

“Alden,” he says, glancing over at me. “He asked me, today, if I would be...interested in joining his ranks,” he confesses. “He said he asked because you’re clearly so fond of me and he wants you to have someone you like when you come back into his fold.”

“What?” I gasp, shocked. I mean, I don’t know what the rules are, but I’m pretty damn sure it’s not okay to go poaching other boss’s men.

Jerome just shakes his head, looking forward again, his whole body tense. “He wouldn’t be doing that if he didn’t know he could get away with it,” he murmurs. “And...soon.”

“Soon?” I ask. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Jerome continues, “that he doesn’t really seem to care if I go back and spill that to Kent. He’s not being careful anymore, which implies that even if Kent wants to retaliate for that kind of insult...”

“...my dad doesn’t think he’ll have time to do anything big enough to hurt him.”

Jerome nods quietly and my head turns towards the windows as I start to notice, out of the corner of my eye, that we’re drawing close to home. As we pull closer I notice that the limousine is waiting in the drive out front, which I know only means trouble. I swallow deeply, wondering what the hell I’m in for.

“Are you going to tell Kent?” I ask in a whisper, my whole body now as tense as Jerome’s.

“Nope,” he says, shaking his head as we pull through the automatic gate. “You are.”

“What!?” I gasp, appalled at the idea.

“Tell him when you’re naked,” Jerome suggests, sending me the start of a smirk that I can tell he can’t quite bring to its full strength. “Kent’s much less likely to smack you for getting close enough for Alden to make the offer.”

“Don’t count on it,” I murmur, my hand unconsciously moving to my ass as my worried mind spins through everything we learned today.

I only realize what I’m doing with my hand when Jerome bursts out laughing and then I blush and smack him, telling him to shut the hell up, though I can’t help laughing myself.

The result, of course, is that by the time we both spill into the house we’re laughing hysterically at our new inside joke. But we both fall silent as we turn the corner towards the main entry of the house, where Kent, Daniel, Natalia, and Alessi are all dressed in formal wear, glaring at us.

Well, Daniel isn’t glaring. He smiles at both of us and gives a little wave.

But Natalia takes the lead in scolding.

“Fay,” she starts, crossing her arms and shaking her head at me. “Can you not learn to read a clock? Honestly. We are so late.”

Usually I’d blush and hurry and apologize to the end of me. But something about it – about the smug way Natalia shakes her head at me, like she expected no less and actually thinks I might not be able to read a clock - makes me go cold.

“So sorry,” I say coolly, finding a coy smile on my face as I wrap my arm around Jerome’s, not letting him get away. “We simply...lost track of time. Jerome,” I say, looking up at him. “Will you help me upstairs? I need to get ready.”

Jerome, anxious, steps forward eagerly but I don’t let him go too fast, holding him back a little. Then, I begin to walk towards the family, and then past them, and up the stairs, at an almost too-leisurely pace. Kent’s face, from what I can see, is totally blank. But Daniel grins, enjoying it.

“We are waiting!” Natalia calls after me, angry at my sluggish steps.

“Oh, go on without me!” I say, waving a hand after her. “I’ll catch up! Jerome can drive me!”

“Why do you keep wrapping me up in this shit,” Jerome hisses between his teeth as we get to the top of the stairs and he’s relatively sure the Italians can’t hear us.

“Because,” I reply, smiling up at him. “You look so good all tied up in the Lippert drama. Besides, you secretly like it.”

And then, as soon as we’re out of sight of those standing below, I dash into my room, pulling him with me so that I have someone to help me get ready in record time.

Chapter 119 – An Intimate Dinner

Chapter 119 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Jerome is actually a big help, prepping the gorgeous green dress and shoes that were left on my bed for me, and then picking out some jewelry to match, as I apply my makeup as fast as I can and quickly unbraid my hair and pin it on top of my head. We manage, somehow, to get me fully ready in under five minutes.

“Wow,” I say, as I push an earring through my lobe and simultaneously slide my foot into the shoe that Jerome, kneeling on the floor, holds steady for me. “If you ever decide to quit being a low-level mafia lackey, you certainly have a career as like, one of those people who helps people get changed fast between scenes in a play –“

“I know,” Jerome says, smirking at me as he stands up. “I grew up helping the ladies at my mom’s strip club make quick changes between their acts.”

“Really?” I ask, my eyes going wide.

“A story for another time, Fay!” Jerome laughs, putting a warm hand on my shoulder and pushing me gently towards the door, grabbing my little purse off the bed and shoving it into my hand. As I move towards the top of the stairs though, Jerome makes to disappear in the other direction down the hall.

“Where –“ I start to ask, but he just shakes his head at me.

“Fay,” he whispers. “You just brought me into your bedroom. And got changed. And only one of those people down there knows that I’m not into this –“ he says, waving a hand up and down in my direction to encapsulate my whole being. “So, yeah. I’m disappearing.”

I go a little pale as I realize what he’s saying and I grimace, realizing that I have to come up with some clever explanations later. But I take a deep breath, steeling myself and trying to be as cool and nonchalant as I can as I start down the steps.

“So sorry,” I call to the group still waiting below. “Shall we go? I would hate to miss the reservation.”

Daniel grins at me again, laughing a little, while Natalia glares. When I reach the bottom of the stairs my fiancé offers me his arm and then, as a group, we set off.

Honestly, I don't know why everyone was all upset. It's not as if the restaurant gave away our table. Instead, the hostess beams at us and sweeps us through the restaurant to a semi-private balcony up a small flight of stairs that overlooks the rest of the restaurant. It's the perfect spot – close enough to participate in the chic, busy ambiance of the place but separate enough from it to not be overheard in private conversation.

Our table is small and round, intimately sized for the five of us so that when Daniel seats himself next to me I find that our knees touch under the table. We're all pressed close, family-style, so that we could whisper across the table if we wanted and all still be included in the conversation.

As we sit I wonder, for the first time actually, what the hell we're all doing here at this fancy dinner dressed in evening gowns and tuxedos. A little knot of anxiety forms in the pit of me as I look around at Daniel on my left, Kent pressed close on my right, and then Natalia, and then Alessi in the final seat between Daniel and Natalia.

Who called this dinner? And what do they have planned?

Unfortunately, no one fills me in, and so I merely go along with it, letting everyone else steer the conversation and listening carefully, hoping to figure it out as we go.

The food, predictably, is delicious. I figure out quickly that this is a French restaurant that hosts one seating a night, suggesting that we'll be having the kind of long, wine-soaked, sumptuous dinner that I'd usually be thrilled to experience.

As our first course is served, I'm interested to see that Natalia steers the conversation towards memories.

"Kent," she says, turning her beautiful face towards him as she spreads pate de foie gras on a piece of baguette, "do you remember that summer that you, and I, and Lenai skipped church and took the train to France, and didn't tell anyone, and were away for days? God, we were such children then – what were we, sixteen?"

I watch Kent carefully as he smiles at the memory and then adds pieces of his own, making Natalia laugh – perhaps a little too hard – when he reminds her that that was the first time he ever had foie gras, and how much he hated it. The conversation passes mostly like this, with Natalia and Kent and Alessi trading fond memories of their youth, sometimes slipping into Italian to better express their meaning.

And as I look around at the table, watching Daniel laugh along with them in the moments when I cannot understand the words, and catching Natalia watching me when she thinks I'm not looking, I realize that...this dinner could very well be about me. About making it quite clear to me precisely how much I do not fit in this family – the little American girl who has never been to

Italy or France, who cannot understand Italian, or cook, and who certainly has never had foie gras.

And who does not like it when I try it tonight.

As I push my little plate away, a single bite taken out of my pate-and-baguette, I lean over to Daniel to whisper in his ear.

“Daniel, who organized this dinner?” I ask, even though I already know the answer.

“Natalia,” he replies, leaning close to tell me in my ear. “A surprise. The chef is an old friend, apparently – she organized it this afternoon.”

Nodding, smiling at him to let him know that all is well, I turn back to the table better prepared to go to war. Because I’m figuring out that that’s precisely what this is.

War.

But Natalia surprises me by ignoring me further, chatting lightly mostly to Kent throughout the next two courses, keeping up such a steady stream of conversation at the small table that the rest of us don’t really have a chance to change the subject. I do note, as well, that our glasses are liberally resupplied with wine, and that Natalia never finishes hers (so I don’t either), though each of the men do.

I watch Natalia quite, quite closely as she pretends to ignore me, so I notice the precise moment when she makes her move. It happens just after the meat course is served – a gorgeous roasted game hen for each of us – and each of us are provided with our fifth glass of wine, which I’m curious to see Kent lift to his lips, having fallen under her nostalgic spell more than I thought him capable of doing.

“Kent,” Natalia says, a fond smile on her face, her eyes sparkling curiously, “when do you think it is that you will take a second wife? It is long past time, no?”

Kent goes still for a second, just a second, and I feel Daniel perk up next to me curiously. But I watch, fascinated, realizing that Natalia has bided her time so precisely that neither Kent nor Daniel bristle at her, which I know they usually would at anyone who dared ask Kent about his romantic intentions at any other time.

Masterful, I think, leaning my elbow on the table and resting my chin on my hand, flicking my eyes to Kent, curious to see what will happen next.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Natalia,” he laughs – laughs, I think, well done Natalia. “That can’t possibly be on my mind now. I’m too busy.”

“Ohhh,” she replies, and I feel my spine stiffen a little as I watch Natalia lean closer to Kent, reaching her hand up to tuck a stray strand of hair behind his ear. “But that is precisely what a

wife can do for you, no? Take some of the pressure off so that you can concentrate on what really matters?”

And I’m glad I have my chin in my hand at that moment because, honestly, if it weren’t, I’d be at deep risk of my mouth falling open. Because I realize quite suddenly that I was wrong: this dinner isn’t about Natalia making a move against me.

She’s making a move for Kent.

Chapter 120 – Bitter Desert

Chapter 120 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

As subtly as I can, I sit back in my chair, lifting my glass of wine to my lips and pretending to take another sip as I slip my gaze towards Daniel, who is already looking at me with his eyebrows slightly raised. I flick my eyes away quickly, not wanting to give anything away, but grateful that he, too, sees what is happening.

Slowly, Kent turns his head towards Natalia. “I seem to be doing fine as a bachelor, no?” he asks, and I’m surprised to hear a little bit of an Italian accent come into his voice, perhaps harkening back to his younger years when he spoke Italian with her every day. Those days when he fell in love with her, and told her about it, and asked her to marry him, all in that language.

But I smirk a little, inwardly, to think that they’re all speaking in English at this dinner for my sake. I still have a little power here, even if she’s trying to take it all.

“You are doing all right,” Natalia replies, leaning even closer to Kent and letting her eyelids drift down so that she’s looking up at him through her lashes. “But with the right woman, Kent? You could do so much better. Be so much more relaxed.”

And I feel the inner urge to bare my teeth at her as Natalia slips a hand onto Kent’s shoulder and then lets it drift, ever so casually, down his back – the fond kind of gesture that could be friendly but which we all know in this moment is so, so much more.

Kent, going a little stiff at her touch, turns his attention back to his meal and picks up his knife and fork as he takes a deep breath. His voice is different now – harsh, controlled, as he begins to cut at his chicken. “I’ve decided never again to marry, Natalia,” he informs her, and then looks around the table at Daniel and Alessi, as if remembering suddenly that they’re here. But I’m very, very interested to see that he does not, in fact, look at me.

Natalia shifts herself subtly, pulling her hand away from him and reaching for her own fork. “Ah, Kent,” she breathes, a subtle smile on her lips. “You will change your mind. You just need to...pick the right woman.”

Kent doesn't say anything, just continues to cut his chicken and lift bites of it to his mouth as the table goes silent. Daniel chimes in after a moment, breaking the awkwardness in his own particularly skillful way that makes the change of conversation seem natural as he asks Alessi about some of his own memories of childhood.

I don't say anything at all, instead sitting in my seat, stewing silently at Natalia's gall. Clearly, clearly, she thinks that she is the “right woman.” And god damn it, as I stare down into my glass of wine, my stomach twists with jealousy and hate for her.

And I act...maybe a little impulsively.

Maybe a little stupidly.

But I don't let myself think about it too much as I drain my glass of wine and then, careful to be discreet, I slide my hand off of my lap and move it across the few inches that separate me from Kent. Hardly daring to breathe lest it attract someone's attention, I slip my hand across the fabric of Kent's pants and dip between his legs so that my fingers come to press against the soft flesh of his inner thigh.

Kent immediately goes tense as I squeeze his leg, letting him know, not so subtly, that he's mine, not hers.

And that he'd damn well better remember it.

Kent is only still for a moment, though, before taking a deep breath and continuing to eat as if nothing has changed. I watch the others around the table and am grateful to see Natalia laughing with Alessi and Daniel, concentrating on something in his story.

Satisfied that no one has noticed, I give Kent a final squeeze and then, letting my nails rake a bit against the fabric of his pants, I slowly move my hand back to my own lap.

As I do, Kent turns to glare at me, for just a moment, his expression clearly communicating you're going to pay for that.

I just blink up at him for a second, my fierce eyes saying I'd better.

And then I turn back to Daniel, smiling at him and joining in on the laughter even though I have no idea what was just said.

When desert comes, we're all stuffed. Too stuffed, really, to do justice to the incredible apple tart that's placed in front of us and served family-style with cinnamon ice cream. We each take a few bites but concentrate, instead, on the cups of espresso that are served with the final part of the meal, each of us needing a little perk after so much wine and food.

"That was delicious," Daniel says, leaning back against his chair and groaning, holding his little espresso cup in his large palm.

"It was," I agree, smiling at him and then turning my smile politely to Natalia, who hasn't said a word to me all night. "Thank you so much for organizing this," I say. "It really was special."

"Yes," she says, sighing contentedly and holding my gaze. "I thought you deserved a final treat."

I go still and feel Daniel and Kent sit up on either side of me, turning their attention to her. Neither say anything though, leaving it to me.

"Pardon?" I ask, cocking my head to the side just an inch and forcing myself to raise my espresso to my mouth, taking a little sip and not letting my hand shudder, not a bit.

Apparently, I think to myself, my first instinct was right. This dinner is about me. Natalia's just trying to kill two birds with one stone.

"Fay," Natalia says, glancing at Alessi for support, and I'm shocked to see him sigh as if in resignation. "It has been so wonderful to have a chance to get to know you, my dear. But unfortunately, we as a family have some bad news."

"What are you talking about, Natalia?" Kent says, doing his best to keep his voice even but failing at keeping the anger and anxiety out of it. I glance at him and see the surprise and suspicion on his face, gratified to see that he, at least, was not in on this.

"Alessi and I have been consulting," she says, looking at Alessi again, "with each other, as with the family in Italy." She turns back to Kent then, speaking only to him, as if this is not about me at all. "We have come to a decision," she says, definitely, "that it is time for the Lippert family to end their association with the Aldens."

Alessi breaks in here, his voice just as sorry as Natalia's. "Kent, Fay, Daniel – we are sorry to say it, but we have assessed the atmosphere here, and Alden is the weak link. If you wish to continue receiving the support of the Bianci family," he continues, looking to Kent now, "then we would oblige you to..."

He sighs here, glancing at me a little guilty, as if he's finally realizing that he's talking about my father, not some stranger, "we will require that you take Alden out," he finishes.

My mouth really does drop open now as I realize that Alessi – Daniel's uncle, this man who has really been kind to me – has just casually ordered that my father be murdered.

Continuing, Alessi breathing out sharply through his nose. “We believe that the best move for the Lippert family is to take over Alden’s industries for yourself. We believe that if you do so, you will re-establish yourself as the power in the Americas, and that the other families will fall in line beneath us.”

“Beneath you, you mean,” Kent growls, and I look up at him, wide-eyed, to see rage on his face.

“Beneath. Us.” Natalia says, quite clear about the inflection. And then she reaches out to place her hand on Kent’s, subtly implying, I think, that she is part of the deal.

And I snap my mouth shut as I realize precisely what just happened.

I’m out.

Natalia’s in.

And this dinner is my final farewell.