

## Chapter 161 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“What?!” Ivan gasps, his gun falling to his side as he gapes at me, his eyes wide.

Daniel groans and drops the pretense of holding his hands up, burying his face in them instead.

“You’re pregnant!?” Ivan asks, aghast.

“And YOU!” I say, pointing an accusing finger at him. “Are a cop, Ivan! So if we’re trying to compare surprises here – I still think I win!”

“Ohhh my god,” Ivan groans, turning his back to us and scraping his free hand down the length of his face, apparently completely forgetting his job of keeping us at gunpoint. He turns to glare at me over his shoulder. “I can’t believe you let him knock you up, Fay,” he says, like it’s the worst god damn news he’s ever heard. “You’re such an idiot.”

“Um, excuse me,” I say, appalled, “I didn’t let anyone –“

“So,” Daniel interrupts, his face curious as he steps forward and looking carefully at Ivan. “You’re...not the father?”

“Daniel!” I gasp, betrayed, at the same moment in which Ivan remembers he’s a cop and turns to point his gun at Daniel again, scowling and shaking his head.

“No,” Ivan snaps. “I’m not. Now back against the wall.”

Daniel does as he’s told, pressing his back again against the wall and tiredly holding his hands up again.

But as much as Daniel’s willing to play nice, I am livid. “You’re such a fucking dick, Ivan,” I growl, crossing my arms across my chest and glaring at him with all of the hatred I currently feel.

“I’m a dick!?” Ivan snaps, turning his head to look at me again. “Seriously, Fay? After everything you know Lippert did – after everything he confessed to you?! I’m a dick!?”

“Um, ya!” I retort, leaning forward and laying the words out like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. Because it is. “You’re. A. Dick. Ivan.”

“I’m a cop!”

“Precisely! You completely betrayed me, Ivan!”

He bares his teeth at me then, full of rage. “He’s a fucking murderer, Fay. He killed my dad.”

My eyes go wide at this and I stand up straight. “What?”

“Yeah!” Ivan says, still livid and distracted again from keeping his gun trained on Daniel. Not like it matters, though – Daniel is paying just as much rapt attention as I am.

“What?” I ask, completely bewildered.

“Yeah, that cute little confession pillow talk you guys had last night? When he casually mentioned that he’s killed cops and you told him it didn’t matter to you? Yeah, he was talking about my dad.”

And I go pale then for...many reasons.

One of which is that...I feel suddenly so horrible for Ivan, for having lost his father like that. I’m reminded, suddenly, of the tattoo on his arm that I saw at the taco stand – when he told me about losing his dad, about missing him.

And I had had...no idea that Kent was the one who took him away.

But – perhaps horribly – the thing that really shakes me to my core is...

“How...how do you know about that conversation?” I ask, my voice hardly more than a whisper. That conversation was held here...in my bed. Wrapped up in these pretty floral blankets, hardly louder than a whisper.

“Remember my jacket, Fay?” Ivan retorts, spitting the words out like they’re venom meant to sink into my veins. “That night you were so cold, and I put it around your shoulders, and you wore it inside?”

My face drops as I realize...

And then my eyes shift to my headboard.

“Yeah.” Ivan says, cruel. “It was bugged. It’s been bugged for months. We’ve been listening to every conversation that’s happened in this room. If anyone’s the betrayer here, Fay? It’s you. Because you gave us everything we needed to take Kent Lippert down.”

He gives me a nasty little smirk now, rubbing it in. “Without you? None of this could have happened.”

“What’s he talking about, Fay,” Daniel says, his voice cold.

And I turn to him, my eyes filled with tears, and just shake my head.

The guilt rolls in me now.

Because – because I was selfish, and scared –

And I wanted a piece of Ivan to keep, and that Kent wouldn't take away –

But of course Kent would have taken it away, because Ivan was his enemy in more ways than one. But I – I hid it, so I could keep it...

Even though Ivan...was playing me too.

"Fay!" Daniel snaps. "What is he talking about!"

And slowly I push myself away from the wall and stand up straight. Ivan doesn't stop me as I move to my bed, doesn't even point the gun at me as I pull the headboard forward and pull out, from behind it, the formal jacket that Ivan gave me that night when I was cold.

That I slept in, thinking it was going to give me peace.

That I tucked back there and forgot about.

That has...completely ruined all of our lives.

"Everyone at the NYPD has really been enjoying listening to all of your conversations, Fay," Ivan says, nasty, as the tears slip down my face. "You've been very popular," he sneers, "especially every morning, when you come back upstairs and fill Daniel in on how his dad fucked you –"

"Shut the fuck up," Daniel snaps with a snarl.

"You shut the fuck up!" Ivan shouts, losing his temper again and taking a long step towards Daniel now, the gun redirected back at his face.

"Leave her alone! You jealous asshole, you're just bitter that –"

"STOP!" I shout, my whole body shaking, hurling the jacket to the floor in anger and despair. "Everyone just shut the hell up!"

And then, my teeth gritted, I glare at Ivan with as much pride as I can muster. Which is not much.

"If you're going to arrest us, arrest us," I say. "We are done talking."

And then I cross my hands over my chest and turn my face away from him, pressing my eyes shut, determined not to say another word.

Daniel and Jerome apparently follow suit because silence reigns in the room for a long moment. And in that long moment, I realize that the shooting has stopped downstairs. That whatever was done is...done.

After a second I hear Ivan click his radio on again, telling the men downstairs to check the passage that I told him about. Some response comes but, again, I can't hear it well enough to understand.

And then we're all silent for a long, long time before we start to hear the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. I open my eyes when the steps approach the threshold and see Ivan moving towards my door, twisting the lock and pulling it open.

"In here," Ivan murmurs, stepping back so more police can come in the room.

I stand perfectly still as cops move roughly past me, sweeping the room and the bathroom to make sure there are no threats here. But there's no worry about that. When they finish, two cops lift Jerome off the floor, setting him on his feet and leading him from the room in silence. Then, another – an older man who looks less mussed than everyone else – addresses Daniel and I.

"If you'd come down to the station, Mr. Lippert, Miss. Alden," he says, his voice even, "we'd like to ask you some questions."

"I need to call our lawyer," Daniel murmurs, lowering his hands to his side.

"That's fine," the man says, nodding to him as a cop takes Daniel by the elbow and guides him away. Then, the man turns to me.

"Miss. Alden?"

"Fine," I sigh, walking towards my bedroom door with my eyes on the floor. Someone touches my elbow as well, seeking to guide me, and when I look up I'm shocked to see that it's Ivan.

I immediately sneer and pull my arm out of his hand, moving quickly away.

"Miss," The older cop says, his voice low with warning, and I snap my gaze immediately to him.

"Not him," I say, jerking my chin in Ivan's direction. "I'm not going with him."

The cop looks at me evenly for a moment before nodding. "All right," he says, offering his hand. "I'll take you myself."

I lift my chin as high as I can – admittedly, not very high, not after today, and walk towards the cop. When I get close enough, he gently takes my arm, and together we walk down the stairs.

Ivan follows slowly behind.

## Chapter 162 - Capture

# Chapter 162 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

We're at the police station for a long, long time before we get any hint of what's going on.

Since we're not under arrest, I'm allowed to sit with Daniel in an uncomfortable grey chair in the lobby, with lots of cops' eyes on us. We don't say much, even though Daniel takes my hand and holds it tight. His lawyer – our lawyer, I guess – shows up about forty-five minutes later and stands stolidly next to us.

“Say nothing,” he snaps, staring straight ahead. “They want you for questions, but you don't have to say a god damn thing. If you say anything it all, your only answer is ‘I can't recall.’ Got it?”

“Yeah,” Daniel replies, but I just nod my head, too tired and overwhelmed and exhausted to do anything more.

Jerome didn't come in with us. He was taken, with a lot of Kent's other men, to the other part of the station to be booked.

“Why didn't we get arrested?” I ask after a long while of silence.

“Because we didn't do anything, Fay,” Daniel sighs. “They don't have any crimes to arrest us for.”

“Enough,” the lawyer snaps. So we both clam up.

The minutes drip past. And all I can do in that time is...speculate. About what happened. About whether Kent is alive or dead.

Unconsciously, my hand drifts to my stomach and rests there. And when I notice where I put it, I don't pull it away.

We're still sitting in those chairs at what must be one or two in the morning when we finally find out what's taking so long. And, unsurprisingly, it's Ivan that breaks the news.

“Where is he,” Ivan snaps, striding across the room to us, several detectives at his back.

Daniel and I look up at him confused. Ivan, still in his bulletproof NYPD vest and his face as stern as it was before, just glares at us, waiting.

“What are you talking about?” Daniel sighs, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. He’s not even being defiant, I know. He’s just exhausted.

“Kent!” Ivan snaps, glaring at us. “We didn’t see him leave. We didn’t find him in the house. We know that place he built is full of little rat holes to hide in – so where is he?”

My mouth falls open. “You – you didn’t find Kent?”

Ivan just glares at me and shifts his eyes to Daniel as Daniel starts to laugh.

“What?” Ivan snaps.

“He’s not in the house,” he says, smirking.

“How do you know that?”

“Marco DeBrassi,” Daniel says, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, still smirking up at Ivan. “Did you find him in the house?”

“No,” Ivan says, his eyes narrowing as he studies Daniel. “DeBrassi left hours before the raid – he was alone in the car.”

“Which car?” Daniel asks.

“Escalade,” Ivan answers, fast. “Black.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Daniel says, laughing a little, smirking at Ivan as he leans further back in his chair. “Marco is dad’s driver. If you think dad let Marco take the escalade out for a joy ride, alone...” Daniel starts to laugh harder, shaking his head at Ivan like the fool he is. “You had a full perimeter on the house, didn’t you? And you let Marco out, but you didn’t check the back seat...”

Daniel’s laughter fills the room now.

Ivan lets out a long string of curses, turning and kicking hard at one of the metal chairs that fill the waiting room. It skitters across the floor, falling on its side.

I stare at Daniel as Ivan and the detectives walk away, apparently needing to go back to the drawing board.

“Is that true?” I whisper to Daniel. “Did he – did he leave the house? How did you know?”

“Because,” Daniel whispers back to me, low enough that not even the lawyer can hear, “do you seriously think dad’s just going to hang around, Fay, sulking, the minute he finds out you’re pregnant and he could be the father?”

My eyes go wide as I figure it out. “No,” I whisper back, shaking my head. “He – he’d want answers.”

“Exactly,” Daniel murmurs.

He went to a doctor, I think, my mind whirring. Or a clinic, to get his sperm tested. But which one?

“Enough of that,” the lawyer scolds, stepping closer to us. “I’m serious, kids. Not another word.”

And so we shut up, both of us sitting waiting, wondering. When will they catch Kent?

Or...will they? At all?

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Kent sits in a chair in the doctor’s main office, his head hanging low, his arms crossed across his chest. Marco dozes in the chair next to him.

For the third time, the doctor peeks his head in through the door. “Are you...sure you wouldn’t like to come into the house, Mr. Lippert?” he asks quietly. “You’ll be more comfortable in here.”

Kent just shakes his head.

It’s not that he’s actually comfortable...he just. There’s no reason to move.

He is not going anywhere until he gets the word back from the lab. And considering that they paid an exorbitant amount of money to convince the lab workers to process his specimen immediately and provide them with the results as soon as possible...

It could be any minute.

The doctor sighs and leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

Kent doesn’t even turn on the light, preferring to just sit in the dark.

Which is how he notices the flashing blue and red lights driving down the road.

Kent’s head instantly snaps up, his body tense as he watches the lights grow brighter, grow closer. No sirens – which means the cops aren’t in any hurry.

Which means...

The lights grow so bright that Kent knows they're just outside of the house now. But they don't dim. They're not passing by.

"Marco," Kent snaps, jumping to his feet. Marco is slow to wake so Kent grabs his arm, hauling him to his feet.

Marco looks around, confused. "What?" he murmurs, but Kent just shakes his head, listening carefully, as hard as he can.

There's movement outside – Kent's eyes flick to the window, where he sees dark figures running across the lawn, keeping low to avoid being seen.

Men in black tactical gear – a SWAT team.

They're surrounding the doctor's house.

"Fuck," Kent breathes, and then his head snaps towards the office door when he hears beyond it, in the house, a pounding on the front door. "Shit."

They are here for him, he knows it. But how the fuck did they know where he went?

Kent hears a door open in the house, and then the pounding of feet rushing towards them.

"On your knees, Marco!" Kent shouts, dropping to his own, throwing his hands in the air above his head. He knows – knows that this is it, that they've got him surrounded. That if he runs, he'll be dead before he even hears the crack of a gun. "Hands UP!"

Just – just as Marco sinks to his knees – as his hands barely reach for the ceiling – the door to the office slams open and they flood in -

It's chaos – instant chaos – all at once –

A body hits Kent, hard, taking him down to the floor, but Kent doesn't respond, doesn't resist.

Don't give them any reason to hurt you, he remembers his father whispering to him the day the other family came to kill him. Just stay still – let them do what they want. If you move, they'll kill you too.

The advice rings as true now as it did then.

A punch hits Kent hard in the face and he groans, flinching away, but he doesn't retaliate, even though every bone in him wants to tear these guys apart. Instead, Kent goes limp until they start barking orders at him, and then he does everything they say. Everything.



Kent rolls over, puts his hands behind his back when he's bid to. He lets himself be cuffed and he watches Marco go through the same process with impassive eyes. It's not like he can do anything to help him anyway.

Kent doesn't do anything more than breathe when they pull him to his feet and march him through the doctor's house, past the doctor's scandalized wife and two high-school age children. The doctor is the last one he sees, standing gaping at the red front door as the police work to escort him through it.

Then, and only then, does Kent resist. He stops dead in his tracks, holding the doctor's eye as the cops holding him work to tug him along. "The results," Kent says, staring hard at the doctor and ignoring the men with guns. "You'll keep them for me?"

"I'm still your doctor, Mr. Lippert," the man says, raising his chin. "I will keep the results for when you are ready."

Kent tries to nod but he doesn't have time – something hits him – hard – across the back –

He hisses in pain and stumbles forward. The cops get a better grip, hauling him along, but Kent doesn't protest anymore. He got the answer he wanted.

Now, he knows, he's in their hands.

Fuck, he thinks, ducking his head as the police force him into the back of the police car. The lab was going to call...any minute. Any god damn minute.

Kent curses the NYPD's timing as the police car begins to pull away with him locked securely in the back seat.

## Chapter 163 – Home Again

# Chapter 163 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I'm startled from my nap on Daniel's shoulder a little while later by a gentle shake at my shoulder. I raise my head, groaning at the crick in my neck and wiping at my mouth where I'm horrified to see there's a little drool. Blinking, confused, I look around. Where...

"Hey, baby," a soft voice murmurs. My eyes focus on the figure crouched down in front of me, on her head of pretty purple hair...

“Janeen!” I gasp, and then I pitch forward into my sister’s arms. She lets out a little surprised gasp as I knock her to the floor, holding her tight to me. Then she laughs a little as I duck my head against her shoulder.

“Okay, kid,” she says, patting my hair. “It’s all right. We came to take you home.”

“We?” I ask, raising my head. And then I look up to see my dad standing there – my real dad, who I haven’t seen in weeks, and I burst into tears.

“Oh, darling,” he says, holding his hands out to me. I reach out for him instantly and my dad pulls me first to my feet and then into a warm hug where he holds me for a long time, rocking me back and forth.

After a few long moments of this, I hear someone awkwardly clear their throat behind me. When I turn, I see Daniel standing up from his seat, looking hesitantly between us. Of course, he’s figured out who these people are – but he’s never been introduced.

“Dad,” I say, stepping away from him and wiping at my eyes. “This is Daniel. My...um, he’s my fiancé.” And then I gesture towards Janeen as well. “Daniel this is Janeen.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both,” Daniel says, all formality, saying precisely what is expected of a fiancé upon meeting the family. “I wish it was...under better circumstances.”

Janeen laughs, a harsh thing, but not without humor. I turn to glare at her a little but she doesn’t see, her eyes on Daniel. “Oh, we all wish it was under better circumstances, Danny.” Then, even though he opens his mouth to reply, Janeen turns to me. “You ready to get out of here, baby?”

Eagerly, I nod, but I fix my eyes on Daniel and the lawyer. “Um, can we go?”

The lawyer, looking exhausted, sighs and nods. “They want to bring you for questioning later in the week, but considering they only just captured Lippert now, they’re distracted –”

I gasp when I hear the news and Daniel reaches out to take my hand. “I’ll tell you all about it,” he promises. “He’s okay.”

I nod, clenching my jaw with something between relief and anxiety as I squeeze Daniel’s hand, agreeing. Then I look at Janeen and my dad, wondering...

“Is he coming with us?” Janeen asks me, raising an eyebrow and nodding towards Daniel.

“Of course he is,” I say, frowning at her, a little pissed that she’d even ask.

“Okay,” she says, raising her hands innocently, though I can see a sarcastic little smirk on her mouth. “Just asking. I just wasn’t sure if you’d want the reason you got shot at tonight to come along home –”

“I didn’t get shot at,” I snap, narrowing my eyes at her. “And none of this is Daniel’s fault.”

“Whatever,” she says breezily as my dad tightens a supportive arm around my shoulders. Then Janeen starts to move towards the door. “Let’s just go. Bring your little mafia boy toy along all you want.”

My jaw drops open, aghast, but Daniel squeezes my hand again. “Let it go,” he murmurs to me. “Her anger is...justified.”

“Damn right it is, son,” my dad says sternly, and I look up at him, surprised again. Dad is usually so mild-mannered. When dad sees my surprise, he just gives me a shrug. “Well, it is, baby.”

“Okay,” I sigh, dropping Daniel’s hand as we start to move towards the door. I lean into my dad, wanting his warmth. “I get it. Let’s just...go home.”

When we climb into the car, I’m surprised that dad drives us not to our little city house – but instead hits the highway and starts to take us towards the shore. It doesn’t take me long to realize that we’re heading for the shore house – my shore house, which I’ve mostly turned over to Janeen.

Janeen sits in the back with me, leaving Daniel to awkwardly take the front seat next to my dad. We’re all silent for a long time before Janeen asks dad to turn on the radio, which he does. But when she turns to me and leans close, I realize that the music is just a cover.

“How are you?” she whispers, unbuckling her belt so she can scoot closer to me. “Are you okay?”

I ignore her questions, instead countering with some pressing ones of my own. “How did you even know we were here, Janeen?”

“That guy,” she says, blinking at me in wide-eyed surprise. When I glance at Daniel, she takes my hand, pulling my attention back to her. “No, the other guy. Ivan. He – he called, he told me that you were going to need a ride from the police station tonight.”

“What?” I gasp, yanking my hand out from hers. “Janeen! You’re talking to Ivan!? He completely betrayed me!”

“Did he?” Janeen asks, her eyebrows going up. “I mean, how –“

“He’s the reason Kent was arrested, Janeen,” I say to her through gritted teeth. I mean – it’s not really her fault, how would she know this? But still, I’m frustrated. “He set it all up! Ivan is behind all of this –“

“Really,” Janeen says sarcastically, crossing her arms and giving me a dubious look. “Seriously? It’s all Ivan’s fault? Kent did nothing to deserve to be arrested. He’s completely clean.”

I hesitate then, realizing that...well, yes, Kent broke several national and international laws, but...

“Precisely.” Janeen says, smug.

I turn and give my sister a nasty look. “You don’t know the whole story, Janeen,” I snap. “You weren’t there.”

“Damn right I wasn’t there,” Janeen says, shaking her head at me. “Because you have pushed me and dad further and further out of your life, getting completely wrapped up in this Lippert bullshit! So much so that you were in a police raid tonight – you could have been killed!” Her face pales then, and she raises an anxious hand to her cheek, clearly picturing it in her mind. I hesitate then, leaning forward, seeing her point.

“Okay,” I sigh. “You’re right. I get it. But Janeen,” I shake my head again. “He’s...it’s...”

“Whatever it is,” Janeen says, her voice tense as she glances at dad – clearly implying that maybe what I’m going to say next is not something dad wants to hear – “all I know is that I got a really nice phone call from a good-looking blonde who has a lot of sexy tattoos and clearly cares about you, Fay. And from my perspective? It looks like he put a lot of effort into getting you out of a very bad situation.”

I glance at Daniel, who has his head turned towards us just slightly, clearly listening but pretending he’s not.

“The Lipperts are my family, Janeen,” I say, looking at my best friend and then back to my sister. “And yours now,” I continue, putting a hand on my stomach. “Whether you like it or not.”

Janeen frowns at me for a second, but then looks down at my hand and goes white. Her eyes are wider than I’ve ever seen them when she looks back up at me. She glances quickly at dad – who is, thank god, oblivious – and then mouths some words to me: are you fucking serious?

I shrug then, tears springing to my eyes.

Janeen leans back in her chair, giving an agonized groan and covering her face with her hands. I watch her for a few long moments as she stays precisely like that, clearly processing the news that I’ve barely had time to work through myself. Then, slowly, she drags her hands away from her face and looks at me again.

Slowly, she cocks her head to the side and points at the back of Daniel’s head, clearly asking if he’s the father. I shake my head no, scrunching my face in distaste, and she groans again before heaving with a long sigh. Then she turns to me and mouths another single word:

Kent?

Slowly, I nod.

Janeen's eyebrows go up, almost as if she's impressed. And, seeing the tears starting to drip down my face, Janeen clicks her tongue and goes into big sister mode. She scoots across the back seat to wrap her arms around me, drawing me tight against her and making soft shushing noises to me as we drive down the long empty highway to the coast, letting me silently cry myself out into her shirt.

"It's okay, baby," she murmurs against my hair, just once. "We'll get it all sorted out. Though I have to admit, if you had made me lay a bet on which one of us was going to get knocked up by a mafia guy who was in jail..."

I can feel her shake her head and I laugh, just a little. At that, Daniel looks over his shoulder at both of us, his face clearly worried and pained.

"You okay?" he asks, looking only at me – probably not yet ready to face Janeen's wrath.

"Nope," I reply, giving him a tight little smile. "Are you?"

"No way," he says with a sigh, sinking back in his chair. "Not at all."

"Well at least we're on the same page," I sigh. And then we all ride in silence the final few miles to our house, listening to the oldies station dad picked out.

I close my eyes and rest my head against my sister's shoulder, seeking sleep – oblivion –

But it evades me.

Instead, I just think, and scheme, and plan.

Just as Kent taught me to do.

Chapter 164 – Big Decisions

## Chapter 164 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

When I walk out of my bedroom the next morning Janeen comes over to me with a glass of orange juice – what I always started my day with as a kid – but I barely notice as she places it in my hand because I am too busy gawking at the incredible view from the second-story living room of my house.

My house.

“Oh my god,” I murmur, walking over to sliding open the glass door that leads to an expansive back deck. Janeen comes with me, smirking a little, as we both look over the silent ocean that seems to stretch for miles in front of us. “Is this...is this a private beach?” I breathe.

“It’s supposed to be,” Janeen says with a little sigh. “But you can’t really stop people from walking up and down it. Nor would I want to – the beach belongs to everyone, not just Mr. Lippert.”

I give Janeen a little glare before I continue to turn and stare around the gigantic, far too beautiful house with its incredibly high ceilings and walls covered in windows...

“This place,” I murmur, shaking my head and taking a sip of my orange juice.  
“It’s...unbelievable...”

“I know, right?” Janeen says, grinning at me a little wickedly. “What did you do to Mr. Lippert that made him this happy –“

“Ew, Janeen,” I say, glaring at her again before walking over to the empty kitchen. We’re both up before dad and Daniel, which I guess is good – because I know Janeen and I have some stuff to talk about that I’d prefer dad not year. Not yet.

“What!?” she says, chasing after me and laughing a little as I move to the coffee machine and pour myself a cup of the pot Janeen already made. “Seriously, Fay, I’m impressed with your work. Mr. Lippert must be–“

“Stop calling him that,” I mutter, starting to get mad. I know my sister is teasing me, and that I’ve got a lot to answer for, but honestly.

“Fine,” she says, leaning against the counter with a smirk, “Mr. Baby Daddy.”

“Janeen!” I gasp, swatting at her with my free hand, which she easily evades, laughing at me.

“What, that’s also no good?”

But when she sees me take a deep breath, and my face go red – which it usually does when I’m holding back tears – Janeen rolls her eyes and sighs.

“Fine, Fay, I’m sorry,” she says, not meaning it. But I accept it nonetheless. “But honestly, what were you thinking, getting knocked up? Didn’t you –“

“He had a vasectomy, Janeen,” I explain with a sigh. And then, as fast as I can – my eyes always on the door that I know dad is right behind - I tell her the whole story.

“Wow,” she says, genuinely shocked at the end of it. “That is some...soap-opera level drama, Fay. Who knew you had it in you.”

“I knew,” Daniel says, coming up the stairs now, his hands in the pockets of his pajamas that dad loaned him. I smile to see him and then laugh when I notice that the pajamas are somehow simultaneously too short and too baggy around the waist. We both turn to him as he comes into the kitchen. “Fay has been nothing but a delightful source of drama since the moment we met her. Kept us on our toes.”

“Excuse you,” I say, giving Daniel his own little glare as I turn towards the coffee machine to get him a cup. “But I did not ask to be carried out of a strip club on your dad’s shoulder –“

“Is that what happened?” Janeen gasps, grinning at me and shoving my shoulder playfully. “Fay Thompson! Naughty girl!”

We all laugh a little, and I admit – it does my heart good to be laughing with my sister and my best friend and not concentrating on the...much bigger questions at hand. At least, not yet.

“So,” Janeen says, turning her wicked grin on Daniel now as she looks up at him. “You’re the gay one, right? Where’s your boyfriend?”

Daniel blinks to hear Janeen say it so blatantly, but then he smirks, glancing at me. I grimace a little, realizing that I never told him...well, just how much I filled Janeen in, over the weeks.

“He got arrested,” Daniel says, deciding not to deny it and taking a sip from his coffee. “As part of the raid.”

“So you’re both nerds who are into mafia bad boys,” Janeen says with a wide, delighted grin, laughing and looking between us as she crosses her arms. “Makes sense why you’re engaged to each other.”

“She’s just jealous,” I say to Daniel, smiling at him over my coffee cup. “She wishes she could land a Kent or a Jerome.”

“Accurate,” Janeen says with a shrug. “If you know anyone...”

“Pickings are slim,” Daniel says, grinning at her. “All in jail for the moment. Though if you’re into girls, I know some Russians...”

Janeen raises her eyebrows, clearly intrigued, but I interrupt.

“Enough of this –“ I say, stepping between them. “We need...” and then I sigh, deciding how to phrase this. I turn to my sister. “Janeen, Daniel and I need to make plans. And you’re welcome to be in on them, but if you do...I need you to either be in or out. You’re either a part of this, or you should – for your own safety – stay out of it completely.”

Janeen goes quiet for a moment, studying me, and then flicks her eyes to Daniel. “Did you do this to her?” she asks quietly. “Turn my geeky little sister into a mafia boss?”

“Nah,” I hear Daniel answer, and I don’t look at him. “That’s all dad.”

“Well,” Janeen says, returning her gaze to me. “I kind of like it.”

“So, are you in?” I ask, needing an answer and wanting it now.

“Of course I’m in,” she says, giving me a frown. “You know you can count on me, Fay. Always.”

I turn to Daniel then, because – no matter what – we’re in this together. “You good with that?”

“I am if you are,” he says, looking down at me with his steady green eyes. My heart twists a little as I look up at him. He just looks...so much like Kent.

I quickly look away, needing...well, needing not to go there right now. There’s too much to do. Briskly, I nod. “Okay then. Let’s get started.”

Daniel and I set up camp on the second-story back deck, which is almost too luxurious and comfortable to serve as the base of our command. But we make do, curled up at the circular wooden table with the blue umbrella open above us. Dad, when he wakes, makes us breakfast and brings it to us while the three of us chat. He doesn’t interfere or join in, though – clearly deciding to give us our space.

I thank him and hope he knows how grateful I am that he’s here, but I don’t ask him to get involved – both because I know he doesn’t want to, and because...well, because I can’t stand to put him in that kind of danger. My father is a gentle soul.

Janeen, however, is a terrier. I have much less worry about her – and frankly, she’s even better than Daniel about getting organized and bringing all of our pieces together.

Daniel contacts our lawyers, getting all the information he can about Kent and Jerome’s incarceration as well as our finances. It’s not long before we have a pile of mixed news to sort through.

“So, the bad news,” Daniel says, ending his call and sitting back down at the table with us, “is that all of dad’s property and bank accounts are locked down because he’s under investigation.”

“Oh,” I say, sitting forward, disturbed by this. “So, um. How are we going to pay lawyers and stuff?”

“They’ll do a certain amount essentially on credit,” Daniel sighs, running a hand through his messy hair, “under the assumption that they’ll get paid when dad goes free, or when his accounts and stuff get unlocked. But until then...”

“Are we broke?” I ask, a little afraid. I mean – I’m no stranger to being poor, but this situation gets a lot more complicated if we don’t have resources.



“That’s part of the good news,” Daniel says, looking at me and leaning back in his chair. “You and I still have access to our accounts and property.”

“We have accounts and property?” I ask, tilting my head to the side.

“How do you not know this, Fay?” Janeen scoffs.

“I was busy, Janeen,” I growl, glaring at her.

“Getting knocked up,” she murmurs, which makes Daniel laugh. I lean over and shove her hard enough that her shoulder knocks into Daniel’s, and they both stop laughing, seeing that I’m mad.

“Can we be serious, please?” I say before I turn my attention back to Daniel.

“My property is in Europe,” Daniel says casually – as if it’s a normal thing – “and you have this house, which is paid for outright.” A little thrill of security goes through me at that – at least we have somewhere to stay. “And as for accounts, apparently dad gave the lawyers a list of our assets in case something like this happened. I’ll access them now.”

But while Daniel types on the computer, pulling up our bank accounts, the doorbell rings.

I frown at Janeen. “Were you expecting anyone?”

Slowly, she shakes her head. So, I stand up, heading for the stairs down to the front door.

## Chapter 165 – Consorting with the Enemy

# Chapter 165 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

When I open the front door to my shore house, I’m a little appalled – but somehow, not surprised - to see Ivan standing there.

“Are you serious,” I growl, moving to slam the door shut.

But he throws out an arm, stopping me. “I just want to talk, Fay.”

I stare up at him, hatred all over my face. “Where was all the talking, Ivan, in the past few days before you destroyed my life?”

“I didn’t destroy anything,” he snaps back, his temper rising as he leans forward to glare down at me. “Kent did that. But somehow, I’m the bad guy?”

“Yeah, Ivan,” I hiss, staring up at him. “People who lie to me for months about their entire identity are the bad guy –“

“I was undercover!” he shouts, starting to lose his cool. “It was my job!”

I open my mouth to throw something back at him, but my dad’s cool voice cuts me off.

“Can I help you, young man?” he asks, and I turn to see my dad with his arms crossed, looking Ivan up and down unhappily.

“Sir,” Ivan says, standing up straight and looking a little chagrined to have been caught yelling at this man’s daughter. “Apologies sir. I’m Detective Kaminski. I’ve been...involved in the Lippert case for several years now. I’m...acquainted with your daughter.”

“He means he’s in love with her!” Janeen’s voice calls down from upstairs

My cheeks instantly burn with embarrassment and when I look back at Ivan I see that his are too.

“Well then,” my dad says, his eyebrows nearly to his hairline as he moves back to clear the path to the stairs. “Guess you should come inside, my boy.”

I scowl at Ivan as he passes me, but shut the door behind him.

“How did you even know where I live,” I murmur to him as I we climb the stairs after my dad.

“I know everything, Fay,” he sighs back. “Besides, it’s public record – you own this house.”

“Jackass,” I murmur, but I don’t say anything else as we reach the second floor, where Janeen and Daniel are waiting for us in the living room – Janeen grinning eagerly and Daniel looking stoically at Ivan even though he’s still dressed in my dad’s pajamas.

The five of us stand awkwardly together before my dad clears his throat and breaks the silence. “Quite a selection of young men you’ve gathered, Fay,” he says, a little smirk on his face as he looks between the two incredibly good-looking guys standing in the living room, one dark and one fair.

Janeen bursts into a stuttering little laugh. “Oh dad,” she says, putting a hand on his shoulder and grinning around at us, enjoying every moment of this. “You don’t even know the half of it –“

“Janeen,” I growl, swatting at her, but she evades me and loops her arm in dad’s. “Come on,” she says, tugging him towards the kitchen. “Let’s get our guest some iced tea.”

Daniel takes a step closer to us, closing the circle.

“Do you mind,” Ivan says to him through clenched teeth, “if I have a moment alone with Fay?”

“Hell yes I mind,” Daniel snaps, crossing his arms over his chest. I do the same, likewise glaring at Ivan and wanting Daniel there.

“Why are you being so ridiculous, Fay?” Ivan says, losing his temper again almost immediately. I consider him, realizing that I’ve never seen him this worked up – not even that day in the stable. “I did this for you – for –“ he glances at Daniel, “for us –“

“What!?” I exclaim, shocked. “Ivan, you did this for you – for your fucking job, for your father –“

“That was the start of it,” he agrees, staring intensely down at me, not looking at anyone else anymore. “But the end of it – moving now, getting him out now? I was setting you free –“

I take a step closer to Ivan, glaring up into his face and speaking between clenched teeth. “I did not ask you to set me free – I am not some ridiculous caged bird! I wanted to be there –“

“He had you locked up!” Ivan exclaims, getting heated now, “tied into that ridiculous contract!”

“Contract?” I hear Daniel ask, but I ignore him.

“That’s all bullshit, Ivan,” I say, placing a hand on his chest and shoving, hard. “I made my choice – weeks ago. I picked him.”

Ivan stumbles back then, staring at me – and it’s not just my shove that pushed him away. It’s also his disbelief that...even with Kent out of the picture. I still pick him.

He glances down at my stomach. “Is this because you’re...”

“No!” I shout, advancing on him again and going pale as I glance towards my dad in the kitchen, who I still haven’t told.

“Because he’s never getting out Fay,” Ivan says all in a rush, his eyes wide now, almost as if he’s trying to explain my freedom to me – as if I think I’m still wrapped up under Kent’s control.

“You’ve got some kind of Stockholm Syndrome bullshit – but Lippert is so wrapped up in all of this that he’s never getting out – he’s going down –“ Ivan steps forward and takes me by the shoulders, staring closely into my face to make sure I hear him. “There’s no bail – the judge refused it. And he’s – they’re going to ask for the death penalty, Fay. The best he can hope for – ever, even with a plea, is several life terms in prison. He’s not getting out.”

Ivan studies my face as I go pale – as he waits for me to realize that I am free –

But he’s going to be waiting a damn long time for that, because no one was forcing me to stay in the Lippert house. I wanted to be there –I tied my life to Kent and to Daniel because I want them. Because they’re my family.

“I will help you raise this baby,” Ivan murmurs, stepping closer to me now.

“That’s fucking enough,” Daniel growls, stepping forward to intercede, but I put up a hand to stop him.

“How did you do it,” I say, my voice hard, as I stare up into Ivan’s face. “Because we both know you don’t have enough on Kent to get him six life sentences.”

Kent confessed to me some horrible crimes that night in my bed and Ivan has a recording of that – but I’m well aware that kind of pillow talk isn’t going to hold up in court. So, there’s got to be something else.

Ivan sighs and glances at Daniel, not wanting to say. But I stare up at him, waiting.

“Other testimony,” Ivan sighs, looking away – I think, somehow, a little ashamed. “Other bosses are coming forward, testifying against Kent in exchange for immunity. They’re...they’re loading him up, Fay. That was the deal: Kent takes the blame for some other boss’ crimes and the city gets a huge part of their organized crime wiped out – the entire Lippert enterprise, liquidated.”

“Who,” I whisper. “Who else, besides you.”

Ivan just shakes his head at me.

“Who!” I demand.

“You already know, Fay,” he says, gritting his teeth.

“My father,” I whisper, staring up at him, needing the confirmation.

Slowly, Ivan nods.

And then he takes a step closer to me, as if to take me in his arms –

But I step back and I turn away, wrapping my arms around myself and moving slowly towards the back deck, where I stare at the sea.

“Fay,” he calls after me, but I just shake my head.

“You should go, Detective Kaminski,” I say quietly, the name feeling odd on my tongue. But he’s not Ivan anymore – not the one I knew.

He says my name again, pleading this time. But I don’t reply.

I hear footsteps, a little protest, maybe even a light scuffle. But then a single set of footsteps echoes behind me. “I’ll give you time,” Ivan says, “to realize that this is right. I’ll be back, Fay.”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t,” I murmur, heaving a little sigh. But I don’t look back at him, and he doesn’t touch me. Instead, the footsteps just fade away behind me. And when they’re gone, I just rest my head against the door frame and close my eyes.

And then I spend the next half hour wondering how the hell I’m going to deal with the fact that I’m probably never going to see Kent ever again.

## Chapter 166 – Fight or Flight

# Chapter 166 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Hey, kid.”

I open my eyes when I hear Daniel’s soft voice behind me. Slowly I turn and look at him.

“You all right?”

I don’t answer his question. Instead, I keep my face impassive, forcing myself to move on, wanting desperately to do something. So, I act. “Call the lawyer,” I say, pulling myself up straight with an effort and uncrossing my arms.

“What?” he asks, confused.

“Ivan said Kent’s bail – or lack thereof - has been determined,” I explain, looking at him seriously. “Maybe Jerome’s has too. We can at least do that.”

“Fay,” Daniel says, turning his head the side, his face dropping with sorrow. “We don’t need to do that now – we can –”

“We need to do something now, Daniel,” I snap, looking at him a little desperately. “Or else I’m going to go insane. Okay? So – can you please just go call the lawyers?”

Slowly, Daniel nods to me, agreeing. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to get changed,” I murmur, looking down at the pink pajamas Janeen brought me from our old house. I just feel too...silly, and sweet, and girly in them. I need to feel...

Well, if I’m going to take charge, and do something? I need to feel like a boss.

Without another word, I walk away to my room and close the door behind me, wanting to be alone.

About half an hour later, Janeen, Daniel and I are again gathered on the back deck. I'm showered and dressed more somberly now – though by no means formally – in jeans and a black top. I make a mental note to order some serious clothes online and get them rushed to the house.

My dad watches us anxiously from the kitchen, but he again lets us have our space. Janeen stares down at the table now, worried, and I wonder if she's starting to take this seriously. But I don't have time to wonder too much before Daniel walks over to us, hanging up his phone and tossing it onto the table.

"Well?" Janeen asks, looking up at him. "What's the deal with your boy, Jeremy?"

"Jerome," Daniel corrects passively. "He's got a bail of 25k."

"Ohhh, that's a lot," Janeen says, one of her classic grins starting to stretch over her face as she works – pretty hard – to lighten the mood. "He must be big time."

Daniel flashes her a look and shakes his head a little.

"Jerome's low level," I inform her as Daniel sits down at the table with us, pulling Janeen's laptop over to him and beginning to type.

"Oh," Janeen says, surprised. "Then he must be hot."

I look up then, wanting to see how Daniel reacts, but he keeps his face totally impassive, ignoring her. Janeen turns to me and I can't help smiling and giving a little shrug, confirming her suspicions. And I honestly do feel a little lighter as Janeen throws her head back, laughing at her suspicions proved correct.

I shake my head at her, grateful again for her sense of humor.

Daniel smirks as well but doesn't say a word. Then he blinks at the screen, sitting back in his chair with a surprised look on his face.

"What are you doing?" I ask, leaning forward towards him.

"I'm checking our bank accounts," Daniel says, still staring at the screen and clicking around, "which is what I was doing before someone interrupted. I want to see if we have enough money to get Jerome out at least."

I nod, understanding and intrigued.

"And?" Janeen asks, leaning eagerly forward. "Do you?"

"Well," Daniel replies, still staring at the screen but scratching his head. "I've got about a million," Daniel says, at which Janeen lifts her hands in the air and whoops for joy. My eyes go

wide at the sum – I mean, I know I’ve been living in the house of a multi-millionaire for months, but we didn’t have much to spare growing up, so that number just sounds exorbitant to me.

“But Fay here,” Daniel continues, pitching his voice loud to carry over Janeen’s celebration. She goes eagerly quiet as his eyes lock on mine. “Has about four times that much.”

My face goes pale as Janeen gasps and spins eagerly to me. “Fay!” she shouts, shoving me on the shoulder. “You’re like, rich rich! What did you do?”

“Seriously, Fay,” Daniel says, smirking and leaning back in his chair, draping an arm over the back of it. “What did you do.”

I hold his gaze for a minute, shaking my head slowly back and forth. “Seriously, Daniel?” I say, pitching my voice lower so he understands precisely what I mean. “Do you really want to know?”

Daniel sticks his tongue out then, pretending to gag, and Janeen throws her head back, laughing even harder now, which makes me smile.

However, my joy is short lived.

Because we have just...so much to do. And so much to decide.

“Well, Fay? Daniel?” Janeen asks, stretching her arms above her head. “What do you want to do now?”

“The million-dollar question,” Daniel sighs, slumping back and staring down at the table. “Or, the five-million dollar one, really.”

Janeen ignores him, turning her eyes to me. Somehow, she’s intuiting that this decision is in my hands, not his. I’m a little annoyed by it – it’s Daniel’s dad, after all, who we’re talking about here. How has this fallen into my lap?

But then, as I look down at my lap, I remember the baby. And I grimace, realizing that this is...as much my problem as his, now. If I want it to be.

“Daniel,” I say quietly. “What do you want to do?”

“Honestly, Fay?” he responds, looking up at me with sad eyes. “I think we should run.”

My mouth drops open a bit, and so does Janeen’s. It is...the last thing that I expected to hear from him.

“I mean, wasn’t that always the plan?” Daniel asks, leaning forward with a beseeching expression. “Before things...started, between you and my dad - we were always planning to run to Europe, to get away from all of this mess.”

I cross my arms then, frowning at him, because he knows – he knows things have changed for me now.

Daniel sighs, seeing that I disagree, but he doesn't give up just yet. "It's what he'd want, Fay," he says softly, leaning back in his chair and holding my gaze seriously.

"Is it?" I ask, truly curious.

"If he knew that he was totally screwed? That if, as Ivan suggests, he's just never getting out of there – that the city, and the state, and probably the nation is determined to make a martyr of him in the name of a strike against organized crime?" Slowly, Daniel swings his head back and forth. "He wouldn't want us caught up in it. He would take the hit for us – for me, for you, for..." he sighs, and looks down at my stomach.

And then I look down at my stomach too, wondering...

God, wondering what the hell is actually best for my kid.

My kid.

I grit my teeth, closing my eyes and fighting the insane string of emotions that run through me in the moment as I consider, for the first time, that this pregnancy that is scaring the hell out of me is going to potentially result in a child, which is going to have needs, and that I have to think about the baby as well now –

But. I work hard to slam the brakes on the string of fear, and horror, and anxiety, and...and maybe excitement? That starts to flood my veins.

Because I have things to do – things to put into motion before I let myself have a nice long breakdown over this.

"What do you want to do, Fay?" Janeen asks quietly, and I open my eyes and look at her, solemn.

But even though I know that I shouldn't know, that I should – like Daniel – be considering what is practical and logical...

I've already decided.

I decided hours ago – I don't know precisely when. But for me? There's only one real option.

"Call the lawyers, Daniel," I say, sighing and looking over the table at him. "Have them process the bail for Jerome. Go and get your boy."

Daniel's mouth drops open at this as I lean back against the cushion of my chair. "Seriously, Fay? That's your priority right now?"



“I need my team,” I say, giving a little shrug. “And we both know that Jerome is...scrappier than we are. He has a set of knowledge that we’re going to need.”

“Need?” Janeen asks, curious.

“Yes,” I say, looking between the two of them. “Daniel and I are smart, and we can study and talk to the lawyers. But Jerome is useful in other ways – you’ll see, Janeen,” I say, smiling at her. “You’ll like him. But yes, we’re going to need him if we’re going to get Kent out.”

Both stare at me for a long moment and I look softly down at the table.

But for once, I am not shy or demure.

I am just determined, to the ends of me, to fight for him. As he would for me.

“You’re either with me or you’re not,” I say quietly.

And when I look up again, both Janeen and Daniel each nod their agreement.

And I nod back, grateful for their help, because we’ve got a long road.

Without another word, Daniel gets up from his chair to call the lawyer and have them post Jerome’s bail.

## Chapter 167 – Family Ties

# Chapter 167 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

The police process the bail faster than I thought they would – though, as I consider it, I realize that I have no idea how long it usually takes. Daniel gathers the car keys off the table, nodding to us after he hangs up with the police, letting us know that he’s going to go get Jerome.

“Fill ‘er up when you’re on the way back, son,” my father says to Daniel, clapping him on the shoulder on his way out. Daniel smiles and promises him that he will.

I smirk as I see it, watching Daniel interact for the first time with the warm and indulgent fatherly figure he never had. But I don’t have much time to think about it before Janeen tugs on my sleeve.

“Hey,” she says, her voice quiet for once. “Let’s go for a walk, hmm? Maybe get something to eat?”

I take a deep breath and then I nod, knowing that I need it. Janeen and I grab sweatshirts from her bedroom and call goodbyes to dad as we walk down the stairs and out the back door, heading for the beach. It's gorgeous out now, just as the sun is going down, the sky all pink and purple and golden. I sigh as I look at it, admiring its beauty but struggling to match the joy it gives me with all of the dread building up in my body.

"Sooo, Fayyyy," Janeen says, knocking her shoulder into mine in a familiar, sisterly way. "How's it feel to be the sister who got knocked up out of wedlock even though you're not the slutty one?"

I laugh, needing it, relishing it. "Who says I'm not slutty, Janeen? After all, I've got a baby daddy, a fiancé, and a cop who showed up this afternoon offering to help me raise this child –"

"Seriously!" she interrupts, looking at me with wide eyes. Then she laughs, shaking her head at me. "Well done, sis! We raised you right!"

"How's it feel to be the good one for a change?" I ask, smiling a little as I look down at my feet, scuffing along in the sand.

"Meh," she says, giving a shrug. "It's kind of boring. I want my 'slutty sister' title back."

We laugh together and then we just keep walking, enjoying the breeze and the companionship. A warmth builds in me again as I look at my sister, thinking how much I love her. Everyone should have a Janeen in their life to tease them, support them endlessly, and make them laugh.

She turns and smiles at me too, like she's just as grateful for me – even though I know I haven't always been the same for her.

But, well. I did give her a beach house.

"So," she says with a sigh, more serious now. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," I say honestly, my voice starting to shake with my emotions already. Because I have been packing all of my emotions away for hours, and they're starting to bubble to the top now.

Janeen just nods, walking beside me, letting me have my emotions. After a while, she starts again. "You know that Ivan kid is right, in some ways."

I snap my head to her, frowning, but she holds up a hand to stop me.

"Give me a minute before you bite my head off, baby," she says, so I keep my mouth shut. "But," she continues, "you are free. Kent gave you this house, he gave you that money. He is away in jail and apparently in a shitload of trouble. You don't...owe him anything, Fay. Unless you want to. You understand that, right?"

I take a minute to really think about what she's saying before I answer.

"I do understand," I say quietly as I look up at her. "But..." I hesitate.

"You want him," she finishes for me, her mouth quirking a little in a sad sort of understanding.

"Yeah," I say, looking out over the ocean, perhaps realizing it as I say it. "I want him."

"So, are you guys like...together?" she asks, wanting clarity. "Like is he your...mafia boss boyfriend or something?"

"We never really talked about it," I sigh, frowning a little as we continue along the beach. "But it's definitely...something."

"Are you in love with him?" she asks quietly, and I look at her, very serious.

"Yeah," I reply simply, admitting it for the first time. "Yes, I am."

"Is he in love with you?"

And I look away from her then, not really knowing what to say. Because while I think I know...it's not really my question to answer, is it?

But I think she can tell from my expression what I mean.

Janeen slips an arm around my shoulder. "He never had a chance, baby," she murmurs, leaning in to give me a kiss on the temple. "Who wouldn't fall in love with you."

I laugh at this, not really believing her flattery but accepting the compliment nonetheless.

"So, you're keeping that?" Janeen asks, pointing to my belly.

I laugh, shaking my head a little. Because honestly – I've been thinking about it. A lot. I've always been pro-choice and really support a woman's right to make choices about her own pregnancies, but I've never thought – really – about having to...end a pregnancy myself. I've always either been a virgin or with a guy who told me – vehemently – that he couldn't get me pregnant. So, it's never been a reality for me.

But now that it is?

"Yeah," I say quietly, my voice breaking a little as tears sting my eyes. "Yup, I'm going to keep it."

Janeen takes a soft minute with me, turning me so that I look at her, making soft shushing noises and wiping my cheeks free of my tears as they fall down my face. "Hey, hey!" she says, "what's all this! No, this is a happy day! A little baby – a real cutie, probably, considering its parents!"

This just makes me cry harder, and Janeen wraps me in her arms. “What’s wrong?” she murmurs, comforting me as I wrap my arms around her waist and hold her close. “What could be bad about this? This baby’s got a great mom, an amazing auntie, like two guys offering to step in as dad even though its actual dad is locked up, a gay uncle, a grandpop – plus you are like, stupid rich – what could be bad??”

“Kent’s going to be so pissed,” I murmur into her shoulder – and then I start to laugh, hard, as I realize that that’s what’s really bothering me, beyond everything. “Kent got a vasectomy because he didn’t want any more kids – he’s going to hate being a dad in his 40’s –“

“Oh well,” Janeen says, pulling away from me and frowning at me, “then fuck Kent.”

And something about this – probably combined with my stress, and my fear, and the insanity of these two days – has me crackling with laughter, throwing my head back and shaking with it.

“Screw him, Fay!” Janeen says, laughing too, leaning into the joke because she knows it’s making me feel better. “Honestly, if he’s jerk enough to knock you up and then be mad at you for being knocked up, then he doesn’t deserve to have this baby! Which we’re going to make super cool, by the way! I’m going to dye its hair pink as soon as it gets some.”

And I nod, brushing at my cheeks with the palms of my hands, letting her put an arm around me as we turn around and start to walk back.

“It’s all going to work out, Fay,” she says quietly to me. “Forget about Kent’s feelings for a minute. Let’s worry about you. Because,” she smirks at me now, “we’ve still got to tell dad he’s going to be a grandpa.”

And I groan, closing my eyes and slumping against her.

“No, it will be fun!” she says, laughing and picking up the pace, excited. “We can give him three guesses to figure out who the dad is. He’ll never get it.”

“Fun for the whole family,” I mutter.

Hungry, Janeen and I decide to grab a bite to eat on the way home. It’s dark by the time we get back to the house and we’re both surprised to see the headlights of the car pulling into the driveway.

“How long were we gone?” I ask, surprised. I didn’t think it could be long enough for them to get back so soon.

“Whoa,” Janeen says, looking at her watch. “Like, four hours. You cried a lot more than I thought you did.”

I glare and give her a shove, but she just grins at me as we walk up to the car.

“Hey, you,” I say, making Jerome jump a little bit as he steps out of the driver’s seat. But his face bursts into a big smile when he sees me.

“Oh hi, money bags,” he says, wrapping me in a big hug as Daniel comes around the front of the car to both of us. “Thanks for the bail money.”

“What!” I say, glaring at Daniel. “You took it out of my account?”

“It was your call,” he says, smirking at me. “I was going to let him rot in there.”

I look up at Jerome, deadpan. “See? Now you have proof of who truly loves you.”

“Oh, I always knew that,” he says, planting a kiss on the top of my head before turning to his boyfriend.

But Janeen’s already at Daniel’s side, smirking up at him. “Nice of you to make your boyfriend drive the moment he gets out of jail, passenger princess.”

Daniel blushes and opens his mouth to protest, but Jerome cuts in. “Oh come,” he says, smirking at her. “I wasn’t safe on the road with him behind the wheel. Or this one,” he says, nodding down at me. “Spoiled rotten, both.”

“I like you,” Janeen says instantly, breaking into a sudden grin as she looks Jerome up and down. “You’re mean.”

He just smirks and gives her a wink, making her laugh.

“Come on,” I say, rolling my eyes at all three of them and starting towards the house. “Let’s go see dad – he’s probably wondering where we all are.”

As we come upstairs we find dad sitting in the kitchen, waiting for us, a frosty beer at his side. “Oh hey, team,” he says, grinning around at all of us. But as Daniel and Jerome come into view, dad’s eyes immediately go to their clasped hands.

“Oh,” dad says, sitting up straight and then looking Daniel right in the eye.

Realizing his mistake, Daniel blushes furiously and drops Jerome’s hand. But it’s too late.

Dad narrows his eyes at Daniel for a moment, putting the pieces together before he speaks. We all wait in silence.

“Well if you’re with him” dad says, pointing at Jerome, “then who the hell did that?”

And to all of our shock, my dad points a single finger right at my stomach.

## Chapter 168 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Jail is...just as bad as Kent remembers it being. Except this time, he knows he's not getting out anytime soon. Whatever it is these guys have on him, it's bad – it has to be. They wouldn't have hunted him down at his damn urologist's office if it wasn't.

Whatever it is, they have him now and they're not letting go. He is going down for something big.

"Lippert," the guard says, coming to his cell and giving him a smirk through the bars. "Visitor."

"I haven't even gotten my damn phone call yet," Kent snarls, frustrated. He's been asking for hours.

"After the visit," the guard says, uncaring. "You'll get your turn."

Kent gets to his feet as the guard opens the door. He follows all of the guard's instructions, not bothering to give him any grief – though he could cause him one hell of a lot of trouble with very little effort.

Still. It won't get him anywhere.

Kent sighs subtly through his nose as he walks towards the interrogation cell instead of the visitation center.

So. It's that kind of visit, eh?

He clenches his jaw as he turns into the room and sees two surprising figures there. But he does his best to give no more reaction as he turns into the room and sits in the indicated chair, looking across the table at the Warden and at Ivan.

"That's it?" Ivan says, smirking as Kent stares blankly across the table at the man he thought was dead and the boy he thought was playing mob boss. "I was hoping for more of a reaction from that." Ivan's smirk deepens as he tilts his head to the side, looking Kent up and down in his orange uniform. "I guess I'll just have to settle for the reaction from your son and your girl. They, at least, were properly surprised."

Kent says nothing. He has nothing to say that's going to make any of this any better. But he certainly doesn't miss the fact that Ivan is dressed completely differently than he's ever been, in khaki pants and a blue button-down with his hair combed neatly to the side.

So. The kid's a cop. Damn it, how did he miss that?

"Aren't pleased to see me?" The warden growls.

Kent is a stone. The warden sighs and stands up.

"Well, then I'll leave it to you, kid," he says, clapping Ivan on the shoulder. "No point in entertaining this any further if we're not going to get anything out of him."

"See you later, man," Ivan says as the Warden leaves the cell, not taking his eyes off of Kent.

When they're alone, Ivan leans forward further. "Seriously, nothing to say to me? Nothing to ask?"

Kent just blinks at him, bored.

"Not even going to ask me how the baby's doing?" Ivan whispers, leaning forward to grin, knowing just where to twist his knife.

Kent flinches at this, unable to help it. How the hell did this kid know about that? Kent narrows his eyes. Is it...is it because Ivan's the father? Is that how he fucking knows? Was Fay lying?

"There we go," Ivan murmurs, smiling truly now, pleased to have gotten a reaction.

Kent does his best to wipe his face clear of emotions, looking over towards the door. Frustrated at giving Ivan anything, Kent ignores him completely as Ivan peppers him with questions for the next few minutes, working hard to break in again. But Kent doesn't have a damn word to say; instead, his mind slowly turns over the thousand questions and possibilities in his mind, trying to find some way through, some kind of plan...

"Fine," Ivan snaps, and Kent turns his level gaze back to the kid.

Ivan's leaning back in his chair now, frustrated and tapping a pen on the desk, glaring at Kent who honestly hasn't heard a word he's said until now. "You're going to die in here, Lippert – that's the final line of it. We've got you on a slew of crimes – racketeering, international transport of weapons, extortion, and – most importantly – six murders."

"Six?" Kent asks, raising an eyebrow. He's by no means innocent on this charge, but even for him, that number's high.

Ivan smiles now, pleased to have gotten a word out of him. "Six."

Slowly, Kent leans forward, staring at the boy. "Whose jobs are you pinning on me, Ivan? Your own?"

“Me?” Ivan says, pressing a hand to his chest innocently. “I’ve never killed anyone, Kent. I’m one of the good guys.”

Kent just laughs and sits back in his chair, shaking his head. Whatever.

At least he knows, now, what’s going on. The city’s taking him down as an example – pinning some other boss’s dirty work on him in an exchange for information. Damn it. He was going down for more than what he actually did, and someone else was getting wiped clean. Who the hell was it?

The kid’s continuing to talk now, but Kent’s mostly ignoring him, keeping half an ear open for anything interesting but focusing on turning over the possibilities in his head. The Russian connection, potentially, but the most obvious candidate here is – ironically – Alden. Shit, he’s going to have to get in touch with the Bianci’s if he can, let them know what –

But Kent’s train of thought is interrupted, instantly, at the mention of her name.

He snaps his gaze back to Ivan.

“Thought that would work,” Ivan says slowly, twisting the pen in his hands. “She’s always been your soft spot.”

Kent leans forward, letting Ivan know that he has his attention.

“I saw her, you know,” Ivan says quietly. “Went to that little beach house you set her up in. She didn’t seem too broken up about you.”

A mix of emotions runs through Kent at the news – disgust at the idea of Ivan in the house that he bought Fay – relief that she’s safe, away from the police (but of course she is – they’ve got nothing to hold her on, he made damn sure of that) – and then on top of it an incredible grief at the idea of her alone, pregnant, fucking furious at him for getting arrested now of all times –

“Actually, you know what, Kent?” Ivan says, his tone considering now, a change that makes Kent refocus on him. “That’s a lie.”

Kent frowns, not understanding.

Ivan smiles slowly, knowing he’s got Kent’s attention now. “I’m going to tell you the truth – which is that she was broken up about you.”

Kent’s heart wrenches at the thought.

“She flipped at me – called me a traitor, told me she’d never trust me again in her life. But do you know why I can tell you this truth?”



Pride surges through Kent at the idea of Fay biting back at Ivan's, not collapsing to him, but rage starts to build in him. Because he knows where this is going.

"Because you're stuck in here," Ivan says, grinning victoriously, "for the rest of your fucking life. And she's twenty-two, and she might stick by your side for a little bit, but she's going to get lonely after a while. And guess who's going to be there to help her through it?"

Kent's fist clenches at his side as his jaw tightens.

"That's right," Ivan whispers, standing to lean across the table, taunting him. "When you're stuck in here, Lippert? I'm going to be out there, living with her in the beach house you bought her. And your kid is going to call me dad."

Ivan's been ahead on Kent on a lot of things, but one thing he underestimated?

The speed of Kent's left hook.

Kent's out of his chair before Ivan can anticipate it, his fist flying before the kid can blink, connecting solidly with his jaw in a blow that rattles Ivan's teeth.

Ivan stumbles back, moaning, his hand flying to his face –

But before Kent can take another step, the door slams open and the guards are on him, wrapping his arms behind his back.

Kent bares his teeth at the kid, who looks up at him in shock and rage, but he lets the guards do their work and doesn't fight them. Though he could have them flat on their asses in about ten seconds, if he wanted to.

"Nice," Ivan says, giving him a bloody smile that's more bravado than pleasure. "Assault of a police officer. We'll add it to your list."

Kent forces his body to relax into a possession and cool he absolutely doesn't feel, turning away from the kid as if he doesn't matter.

But – as his reaction proved – Ivan got to him.

Because he's right, Kent thinks, hanging his head a little as the guards hold him tight, escorting him carefully back to his cell. He's got nothing but time to get her on his side. I've lost her for good.

Chapter 169 – Family Ties

## Chapter 169 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Janeen, Jerome, and Daniel all watch through the glass of the back door as Fay and her dad sit on the couch, having a long chat during which she explains a lot of stuff that...he probably doesn't want to know. They've been watching the myriad of emotions cross his face, but Janeen is finally relieved to see him smiling, clearly excited about his first grandchild.

Janeen smiles herself, finally feeling a little bit at ease now. Because as far as she's concerned, even though Kent is out of the picture her dad is very much in. It's good to finally see the final member of Team Baby on the page.

"What do you think," Daniel murmurs to her, anxiously biting the nail of his thumb as he stares through the door. "Is he gonna...kill me? Kill her? Break into prison and kill Kent?"

"Nah," Janeen says with a sigh, turning away from the window and towards the beer that's waiting for her on the table. "Papa Thompson is a big softie. Why would he be mad at you, anyway?"

"Because I got her into this," Daniel sighs, taking Janeen's cue and likewise sitting down at the table, joined by Jerome.

"Yeah," Janeen says, giving him a weird look as she raises her beer to her lips. "You guys are like...weirdly close for ex's. What even is she to you now? Your fake fiancée slash new mom?"

Daniel grimaces.

"Nah these two are besties," Jerome sighs, looking at Janeen with a small smile. "Daniel and Fay are two peas in a fucked-up pod – they talk the same, think the same. Even have the same boring-ass hobbies. Books, puzzles. It's the worst."

Janeen laughs at this, turning bright eyes on Daniel. "So, are you a horse girl too?"

"Absolutely not," Daniel says, shuddering. "Horrible animals."

They all laugh then, taking a much-needed mutual sip of their beers. Things go quiet then, each of them thinking their own independent thoughts on the same subject.

"So, tell me the truth," Janeen says quietly, and Daniel looks up to see her eyes fixed on him. "Your dad. Does he love her?"

Daniel's lips press to a thin line as he studies Janeen, deciding what to say. But then he just gives it up and huffs an ironic little laugh before letting his head hang a little.

"Yeah, Janeen," he sighs, pressing his fingers tight against the bridge of his nose – a motion that makes Jerome smirk because it's something he's seen Kent do a thousand times. "Yeah, he loves the crap out of her. He...he hasn't said it, not to her. But dad's..."

“Closed off? Fucked up? Emotionally stunted and withholding?”

“Yes, yes, and yes?” Daniel says, lifting his head to look her in the eye. “But she’s his kryptonite. I’ve never seen someone break down dad’s walls like she does. I can’t explain it.”

“I can,” she returns instantly, turning to look through the window at her little sister. Daniel smiles to see the very real loyalty and dedication on Janeen’s face.

“Me too,” Jerome says, and then he leans forward and smacks Daniel on the shoulder. “What are you, blind, you idiot?”

Daniel laughs and shrugs. “It was a turn of phrase! Hyperbole!”

“Oh gross, are you and Fay going to use big words all the time?” Janeen asks, turning to sneer at him. Jerome laughs again and Daniel just narrows his eyes at her, but he can’t help his smile.

“All of that aside,” Jerome says, his voice oddly serious enough for the other two to look his way. “Our whole job now is that girl in there,” he says, nodding towards her. “I don’t know if you two have figured it out yet,” he says softly, quietly, “but she’s head of the family now.”

He looks to Daniel then, with a little bit of apology on his face. Because, obviously, Daniel should be the one inheriting that title in Kent’s absence. But they’re all aware – and Jerome’s just the first to say it.

“To the boss,” Daniel says, sighing and lifting his beer towards the center of the table. The other two raise theirs, clinking them all together and repeating his words. “May she be a benevolent dictator,” Daniel murmurs after taking a long swig.

“Seriously,” Janeen says, surprising him so that he snaps his eyes up to hers. “Cut it with the word shit, okay?”

They’re all still laughing when the glass door slides open.

“Hey,” Fay says, stepping outside and pushing it closed behind her. “What’s so funny?”

“We’re deciding what to name the baby,” Janeen says, patting the chair next to her and smoothly changing the subject. “Come help.”

“Um,” Fay says, frowning at her, “don’t I get the majority say in this decision?”

“We’re thinking Jerome the Second,” Jerome says, ignoring her and making Daniel laugh. “Very royal, very elegant.”

Fay wrinkles her nose at him and laughs, sitting back against the cushions, clearly enjoying the ease of the group. Janeen still sees a tension in Fay’s shoulders but...she smiles, knowing that Fay is doing far, far better than she was yesterday. With all of her family around her now – even

in the absence of the man she loves, who apparently loves her back – she’s finally starting to feel safe.

Which, really, is all Janeen wants for her little sister right now.

Fay sighs and looks askance at the three beers sitting mostly-empty on the table. “I’d kill for one of those right now,” she murmurs, rubbing a hand absently across her belly.

Smirking, Jerome pushes his beer bottle towards her, and she glares at him. “What?” he says, grinning. “It’s not like you didn’t pickle the baby in tequila for the first month of your pregnancy.”

With a little growl, Fay leans forward and smacks him on the arm, glaring. “I didn’t know, Jerome!”

“Eh, a little more won’t hurt,” he replies, laughing and nudging the bottle closer, but Fay just closes her eyes and tilts her head back, resting it against the cushion on the back of her chair, relaxing and catching up on her thoughts.

They all sit quietly for a long moment, doing the same as Fay and sorting through their thoughts, their priorities, their suddenly-changed lives. Because as much as they all know they’re dedicated to the same cause, they’re also aware that they have very different roles within it.

After a long moment of staring out at the dark night settling over the sea, searching for the place where the sky meets the waves, Daniel turns his attention back to Fay.

“So, Donna Lippert,” he says with a sigh. “What’s next?”

Fay sits silently for a moment longer before lifting her head back up and opening her eyes, looking straight at him. “Well,” she says slowly, and then she sighs. “I think it’s time you called your uncle,”

Daniel blinks rapidly in surprise while Jerome’s eyes go wide. “What?”

“And Natalia too,” she says, sighing again, harder this time, “much as I am loathe to bring her back.”

“That fucking vocab again,” Janeen mutters, shaking her head. Fay ignores her.

“Wha – why on earth do you want them back?” Daniel asks, shocked. “Plus, I don’t even know if they will – dad’s been all tied up in the justice system now, they will not want to get their hands dirty trying to get him out.”

“I don’t want them to try to help your dad,” Fay says, frowning at him. She waves a dismissive hand. “That’s – I mean, don’t we think that’s a lost cause? Isn’t that what the lawyers say – that Kent’s probably going away for life, with all they’ve got him on now?”

Daniel nods slowly. “Yeah,” he says, his eyebrows going up. “So...why are you looking to get Natalia and Alessi back?”

“For the wedding,” she says simply, her eyes wide as if she doesn’t understand why he doesn’t get it. Her hand – still wearing its engagement ring – still continues to rub back and forth across her lower stomach. “After all, Alessi will want to be one of the first to know about his great-nephew. And I’m sure Don Bianci will be interested to hear about what I assume is his first great-grandchild?”

Daniel’s jaw drops open – and so does Jerome’s – as they figure out what she’s saying.

“Plus,” Fay says with a little sigh, looking down at the table. “My father will be interested to discuss the new family ties and their implications for future business.”

“What?” Janeen asks, her face twisted with confusion. “Dad wants to –“

“Not dad,” Fay snaps, flicking her eyes to Janeen and holding her gaze. “My father.”

“Oh,” Janeen says, understanding, her own eyes going wide now to match the boys.

“Fay,” Daniel breathes, his shoulders suddenly tense. “Are you...are you serious? We’re...going forward with this?”

“Would you like to back out of the engagement, Daniel?” Fay asks, her voice cold. “Abandon me when I’m pregnant?”

“I mean...no,” he says, hesitating. “If that’s...if that’s what you want, I’ll marry you, Fay. I’ll marry you tomorrow, if you want.”

“Probably next week is better,” she murmurs, looking out over the sea, making Janeen’s mouth drop open and Jerome laugh a dry little laugh.

Daniel turns to stare at his boyfriend, wondering what the hell is so funny about this. “Nothing,” Jerome replies to the unasked question, just shrugging. “Donna Lippert just doesn’t take long to act, does she?”

“There’s no time to waste,” Fay murmurs, still not looking at them. “There’s...way too much to do. We’ve got to get started right now.”

“Fay,” Daniel whispers, staring at his beautiful redhaired fiancé, who in turn is staring into the night as if she could take on the darkness itself. “What the hell do you have planned?”

But Fay doesn’t answer.

She, like Kent, has learned to keep her secrets to herself.

She'll tell them what they need to know when they need to know it.

## Chapter 170 – Visitors

# Chapter 170 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

The luncheon we have a week later is...awkward, to say the least. I say a little prayer of thanks about every ten seconds that Daniel hasn't left my side for a moment, charmingly fending off questions and making small talk with both the Biancis and the Aldens while I stay quiet, smiling prettily.

I look up at my handsome fiancé and I shake my head a little at the laugh that bubbles out of his throat at something my father just said – something decidedly unfunny. But the way Daniel reacts? You'd think my father was a damn comedian.

Daniel glances down at me and sends me a little wink that makes me burst into a smile.

See? I think. He's got me charmed too. These damn Lippert men.

I look around the room, taking it all in. Janeen, of course, stayed home with dad – no one here wants to acknowledge my adoptive family as anything but a footnote in my life – but everyone else of note is here. Even Jerome stands by the door in a black suit and sunglasses, playing the role of our personal body guard.

My eyes flick to Natalia and Alessi, who did indeed fly in from Italy the moment Daniel called them and asked them to come back. Alessi was characteristically thrilled when we told him about my pregnancy. He kissed me four times – twice on both cheeks – and told me I was a wonder and a Madonna. Natalia, also characteristically, had been more reserved, offering her congratulations with narrowed eyes.

As I watch them now, delicately selecting their lunch from the buffet table my father generously provided, I can see in the stern set of her features that this is not a celebration lunch for her. No, she's got something up her sleeve. And I, particularly, would like to know what it is.

“Isn't that right, Fay?” Daniel asks, and I turn my face up to him. And then I do my best to blush and pretend to be embarrassed for being distracted.

“What?” I ask, turning to one of his Bianci cousins and smiling even though I honestly don't care what he said.

“Anthony was just asking if we have plans to honeymoon,” Daniel says smoothly. “But I told him...probably not until the baby comes. Right?”

“Yeah,” I say, grimacing and leaning into Daniel’s side as if I’m the most infatuated girl on earth. “As much as I’d love to run away to Paris with this guy tomorrow, I think it’s probably better to go when I can enjoy the wine and the unpasteurized cheese, right?”

Daniel and his cousin laugh politely, but they’re cut a little short as Natalia’s voice cuts smoothly in, a barb on her tongue as usual.

“That’s our Fay,” she says, smiling around at us as she joins the conversation. “Always worried about where the next drink is coming from.” She gives me a simpering little wink and I work hard – really hard – to keep the smile on my face. “There is more to life than that, girl! But,” she shrugs, “you will see.”

“Yes,” I sigh, placing my hand low on my stomach. “I’m sure motherhood will open many doors for me. Do you ever regret it, Natalia? Not having children?”

Daniel subtly elbows me but I don’t feel any guilt as I see the smile fall from her face.

Screw her, I think, hoping she reads it in my eyes.

She’s going down anyway. It’s just a matter of time.

I turn and look up at Daniel, ignoring her. “Can we get something to eat?”

“Of course,” he murmurs, gently running his knuckles down the length of my cheek and smiling at me fondly. Then, together, we move off to the buffet. Luckily, no one else is filling their plate just now, so we’re alone.

“What the hell was that,” he murmurs. “We’re supposed to be courting their friendship, Fay.”

“We’re supposed to be courting Alessi’s friendship,” I reply, putting my head on his shoulder as he fills a plate for me, playing the ever-considerate fiancé and dad-to-be. “Natalia can kick rocks for all I care.”

Daniel sighs and shakes his head, but he doesn’t fight me on it. He’s falling into the old patterns his dad established: trusting the one in charge, not asking any questions.

We both turn towards the center of the room as we hear my father tapping a fork against his wine glass to get everyone’s attention. I lean harder against Daniel as my father starts talking, sighing and nibbling on a strawberry as we settle in for a long speech.

My father drones on and on about the new ties between the Bianci and the Alden family, about which he is, predictably, thrilled. As he speaks I notice that no one – not a single person – mentions Daniel’s actual last name, and that none of the Lippert relatives have been invited to the party. Instead, it’s as if Kent has been wiped from the books entirely and Daniel has been swept up into the Bianci family.

Which, frankly, is precisely what I wanted.

But still. It makes me clench my jaw to see how easily Kent is dismissed. Kent made of these people he made filthy rich, and now they're picking at the corpse of his empire and raising their glasses to me.

My father's speech wraps up a waiter comes to take my plate and deliver a glass of champagne to Daniel and sparkling cider to me.

"To my daughter, the beautiful Fay," my father says, looking at me adoringly as he raises his glass in my direction –

Fucking snake, is all I can think. Because I know, now, precisely what he did to Kent.

"And to Daniel, her perfect match!" Around the room, everyone raises their glasses into the air. Daniel and I, smiling, follow suit. "Together they unite two old Sicilian families in a new era of commerce and joy! To the bride and groom!"

Everyone echoes his last five words and then we all raise our glasses to our lips, sipping at the expensive drinks probably taken from Kent's own cellars as the spoils of war.

You damn hypocrites, I think as I sip my fizzy apple juice and force a thrilled smile onto my face. I'm going to gut you all, one by one.

The crowd turns to us then as Daniel wraps an arm around my waist. I look up at him and realize that he's leaning close and then I laugh, remembering that – of course – I'm a bride today, not a mafia donna planning everyone's destruction.

Daniel smiles down at me and even bends me backwards a little bit as he kisses me soundly, the picture of the perfect romantic fiancé and the girl he adores.

I smile and kiss him back, truly loving him, grateful for Daniel by my side in every moment of this.

He pulls away while the gathered group applauds, and then I blush and laugh, looking down at my feet, shy Fay making her return.

We spend the next hour or so accepting the well-wishes of people I barely know who call us their family and friends. This is, in many ways, the reception for our wedding instead of the rehearsal dinner. Our families wanted to invite everyone to the wedding, of course, but Daniel and I insisted that we only want our very closest family to be there and no reception at all.

They nodded and murmured their understanding – Daniel father was just imprisoned, after all, throwing a pall over this happy event – but they insisted on throwing this party instead.

Still, it's almost done, I think as my cheeks start to ache with so many fake smiles.



As our guests filter out, Natalia and Alessi slowly make their way over to us, Alessi beaming at us while Natalia frowns at his side.

“Daniel, Fay,” Alessi says, giving us a wide grin. “You know we are so happy for you. And so excited for tomorrow. Your grandfather – he wishes he could be here –”

“Please,” Daniel says, waving a hand and dismissing it. “We know travel is hard for him – but as soon as the baby is born, we will come to Italy so that they can meet.”

“That would be...so special, Daniel,” Alessi says quietly, putting a fond hand on his nephew’s arm. As I watch him, I realize that in all likelihood Alessi really means it – after all, Daniel is his nephew and his childhood best friend’s son. I think he genuinely wants this to be real.

But as I turn to Natalia, I see the reality of it: that they both, indeed, have their suspicions.

“Of course,” she says carefully, turning her head to the side. “The family...would like to know. To have certain...assurances that these new ties between the Bianci’s and the Aldens are...”

Daniel’s face drops the moment he realizes what she’s asking and Alessi inhales an awkward breath, lifting his hand from Daniel’s arm.

“Seriously?” Daniel asks, suddenly furious. “You’re asking me for a paternity test?”

“Daniel,” Natalia says appeasingly, spreading her hands as if it’s the easiest thing in the world. “Surely you must –

“Surely I what?” he snarls and I blink at him, considering that he’s learned a trick or two from Kent’s book.

“It is the sort of thing we want to be assured of with all of our family ties,” Alessi says with a casual shrug.

“Oh?” Daniel snaps, turning on him now. “And has anyone asked you for a paternity test for your own children?”

Alessi purses his lips and narrows his eyes, but he doesn’t say anything – taking Daniel’s point. Natalia opens her mouth to offer her own rebuttal, but I slide in before she can say a word.

“It’s fine,” I say, smiling easily and placing a supplicating hand on Daniel’s arm. “We understand. In this modern world?” I shrug, mimicking their very Italian gesture, “it makes sense.”

Daniel says nothing, just looking away and glowering as he leaves it to me. So I turn to Natalia and smile. “Would you like us to have the test performed tomorrow? Before the wedding?” I say, giving her a too-kind smile and pushing her to make me ruin my wedding day by going to a clinic to have my blood drawn.

“No, of course not,” Natalia says smoothly, crossing her arms. “Tomorrow is a day for joy. The next day,” she continues with a smile that shows all her teeth, “would be just fine.”