

Chapter 171 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Do you take this woman?” the justice asks, smiling kindly at Daniel, “to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

Daniel beams down at me and I can’t but smile back at him, laughing a little at the joy on his face.

“I do,” Daniel says, and I wrinkle my nose at him. We’re putting on an act, of course, but honestly? Honestly, a lot of it is real. I love my best friend. I’d marry him and live in a sexless marriage of convenience to raise this baby as his child instead of his brother any day.

Of course, I have other plans.

But this? It’s not a bad backup.

“And do you,” the justice turns to me now, looking at me like the fond mother I never had. “Take this man to be your husband?”

“Yup,” I say, laughing a little as I do so, and then I take a step closer to him, squeezing his hands with my own. Daniel rolls his eyes at me and looks at me incredulously, mouthing the word “yup?!” like he can’t believe I just said that and I laugh and correct myself. “Yes!” I say, laughing outright now, “yes, sorry, yes. Yes, I take him, I do.”

“Then I pronounce you man and wife!”

A small cheer goes up from our gathered loved ones as Daniel wraps an arm around my waist and pulling me lightly against him. Then he kisses me, gently, sealing the deal. I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back – just a small, chaste kiss.

Because even though Daniel is my best friend...

Well, I don’t really allow myself to consider what I’m really feeling at this moment. What it does to me to marry Daniel, when what I really want...

He pulls away from me, smiling and turning towards our little crowd, raising our joined hands for everyone to see.

Janeen and my dad, standing with Jerome, whoop and holler with joy, while Natalia and Alessi, sit on the other side of the tiny aisle with my father. All three clap politely, my father and Alessi beaming at us. My father, to my shock, wipes a tear from his eye.

I smile and blow him a kiss, knowing I need him on my side.

Daniel and I complete some quick paperwork and then scurry down the aisle, our family coming happily with us. Outside of City Hall Natalia, Alessi, and my father give us a series of kisses and well-wishes, knowing that it's time for them to go.

"Are you sure, daughter," my father says, looking mournfully down at me. "That you will not come to dinner? Tristan and I will take you somewhere wonderful, truly celebrate the day –"

"No," I say, pitching my eyes down and pretending to regret it. But then – as I've been doing too much lately, though it's so effective that I don't know if I'll ever stop – I slide a hand over my belly. "I – I don't think I can keep any of it down. The morning sickness has gotten really bad..."

It's a lie, of course. I'm thoroughly pregnant – we had a doctor confirm everything a few days ago – but I still haven't felt any different in my body.

"Ah," my father says, leaning forward to kiss me on the forehead. "Your mother was just the same. But, soon, yes? We will celebrate."

"Of course, papa," I say, smiling fondly up at him. His eyes get a little wet as he gazes down at me, but then he pats my cheek and turns away, heading for his car.

"And we," Natalia says, standing on her tiptoes to kiss Daniel on both cheeks. "Will see you tomorrow!"

Alessi sighs a little to have it brought up again – he likes peace in his family, I know, and wishes to avoid awkward subjects like his nephew's paternity test – but Natalia pays no mind.

"Yes, Natalia," Daniel says, laughing and kissing her back. "Tomorrow morning. I'll bring you coffee."

"Please, don't," she sighs. "Your American coffee..." she shudders as if it's the worst thing on earth.

Not missing that Natalia doesn't say a damn word to me, I wrap an arm around Daniel's waist as we wave goodbye to them.

"Well, husband?" I say, grinning up at him. "What's next?"

"Well, I'd say we should do the heteronormative thing and go get you knocked up," he says, sighing, "but you already did that."

I grin up at him, laughing as Jerome, Janeen, and my dad join us.

“They’re some real pieces of work, aren’t they,” my dad murmurs, watching the Italians go.

“You have nooo idea,” Daniel sighs, turning to smile at him.

“Let’s get out of here,” Janeen groans, tugging at my arm. “This is so boring – this is the worst wedding I’ve ever been to, there’s not even any booze!”

“Groom’s hot though,” Jerome says, smiling at Daniel and taking his arm when Janeen pulls me away and down the stairs towards our car.

I laugh, pleased at our bizarre little family. “Where are we going?” I ask, grinning at Janeen. I know she’s got something planned – she’s been too sneaky for days.

“Home,” she says, innocent.

I just laugh, ducking into the car and letting her take the reins. But then, as we hit the highway and actually head back to the beach, I twist in my seat to stare at her.

“Seriously?!” I gasp. “We’re just going home?!”

“Where did you think we were going?” she asks, turning her head curiously.

“I don’t know!” I say, gasping suddenly with sadness. “But it’s my wedding day! I can’t believe you didn’t plan anything!”

“Your fake wedding day!” she insists, laughing. “To your gay ex-boyfriend! Whose actual boyfriend is right there!” she continues, pointing to him in the driver’s seat. Jerome gives us a little thumbs-up as Daniel laughs next to me.

I pout, crossing my arms over my little white wedding dress which only goes to my knees. “First you make me sit in the middle seat, on my wedding day,” I grumble, “and now I don’t even get a reception?”

“Sorry, baby,” Janeen says with a sigh, grinning at me. “I’m saving the good stuff for your next husband.”

The rest of the car ride home is a cheerful one, I think all of us wanting to take a day to ignore the realities of our life and just...have a good time. Dad is laughing hardest of all of us, telling stories about his own two weddings (to Janeen’s mom, and then mine) that have us all rolling as we pull into the driveway.

I’m thoroughly cheerful, if not a little tired, when I climb out of the car and head to the door.

But as I walk to the house, someone grabs my hand.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Daniel asks, pulling me back to him with a smile.

“What?” I ask, confused. “Insi...” but then, as I look at Janeen and Jerome grinning on either side of him, I gasp with delight.

“You did!” I shout, throwing my hands up in the air. “You did plan a surprise reception! You did!”

They all burst out laughing then and I smack each of them on the chest in turn for teasing me like that. And then a taxi pulls up to the driveway, beeping twice as my dad waves from the door of the house.

“You’re not coming?” I call to him, my face falling.

“You know me,” he calls back, waving as he turns into the house. “Two beers and I’m done. I’ll keep the house warm for when ya come back.”

And I grin at him, blowing a kiss as I allow Daniel to take me by the arm and lead me down the driveway.

“Your chariot awaits, my bride,” he murmurs in my ear.

“How gallant of you, groom,” I reply, grinning up at him.

And then we all pack inside the taxi, determined to have a good time and ignore our real lives for one more day.

Because tomorrow? Tomorrow it really begins.

One hundred miles away in a state prison, Kent sits staring at his hands. It’s recreation hour – a forced activity. If it were up to Kent, he’d stay in his cell rather than come to this room with all of its shouting and noise.

Most of the other prisoners like it – it’s some of their only time to socialize, to play cards, to watch TV. He would rather be alone.

He doesn’t really know why, not anymore. It’s not like he does anything in his cell except stew, and think, and go over and over his options that never turn up any real plans. And it’s not like he needs silence to do that.

Still.

He doesn’t want to be...here.

“Hey Lippert,” someone says from over in the TV corner.

Slowly, Kent lifts his head.

“Ain’t that your kid?” The man gestures towards the TV where the image shows a tall dark-haired young man coming out of city hall holding the hand of a red-haired girl. Text rolls across the screen.

Son of disgraced mafia don Kent Lippert gets married in civil ceremony today. His bride, rumored daughter of the famous Alden mafia family, is two months pregnant with...

Kent watches passively for a moment until he sees Daniel take Fay in his arms, leaning close, bringing his face to hers.

And then Kent looks away.

“Hey?” the guy asks again, more forcefully this time. “Ain’t that your kid?”

But Kent doesn’t reply. Instead, he turns his attention back to his hands, shaking his head a little.

“Couldn’t even marry her properly, in a church,” he mutters, clenching his jaw. “At the very least, he could have gotten that right...”

Chapter 172 – Pleas

Chapter 172 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Too early the next morning, the guard bangs his nightstick against the bars of Kent’s cell, making him jump awake.

“Lippert,” the guard says, yawning. “Visitor.”

Kent stands, wondering what the hell could be going on. He doesn’t say a word, though, knowing better than to ask. Instead, he simply stands and walks to the door, waiting for them to open it.

A short, silent walk takes Kent down the hallway with the interrogation rooms, and he raises his eyebrows when he realizes that he’s being walked past them. So, he thinks, curious. An actual visitor this time...

Kent’s eyebrows raise even further when he sees Daniel alone in the large visitation room, meant to accommodate a series of guests visiting inmates all at once. Daniel’s sitting slumped in a chair, his head hanging, his hair mussed.

And he looks like absolute shit.

The guard holds the door open for Kent and nods inside. “Ten minutes,” he says, his voice clipped. “No touching, no gifts. If the kid brought any paperwork, he leaves with it.” Kent nods and walks a few feet into the room, the door closing behind him as he crosses the room to his son.

“What the hell happened to you,” Kent says, kicking the leg of his son’s chair and making Daniel jump.

“No touching, inmate,” a voice says from the room’s loudspeaker. Kent waves to it and steps away from his son, sitting down across the table as Daniel raises his head.

“Hey, dad,” Daniel says, giving Kent a pained little smile and wincing at the bright lights of the room. “I missed you too.”

“Seriously, Daniel?” Kent says, leaning forward and studying him, sniffing at the scent of whiskey which seems to be pouring out of his pores. “Are you – are you hungover?”

“Yeah, that’s an...understatement...” Daniel murmurs, sighing and running a hand through his hair.

Kent is almost shocked at the smile that cracks on his own face as he studies his son, who looks absolutely shattered. “You’re supposed to look like this after your bachelor party,” he murmurs, laughing a little now, “not your wedding.”

“So, you heard about that?” Daniel asks, looking up at him with a little bit of surprise.

Kent doesn’t answer, just waits.

“Yeah well,” Daniel sighs, a corner of his mouth lifting in amusement. But even that small gesture makes him wince. “Most wedding receptions aren’t planned by Janeen Thompson.”

Kent’s smile grows now as he starts to figure it out. “Did she take you to the strip club?”

Daniel frowns at him and then laughs lightly. “How the hell did you know that?”

Kent shrugs, shaking his head a little. “I’ve met her. She’s...vivid. Did she take you to the one she works at in the city?”

Daniel shakes his head. “She doesn’t work there anymore. She started at a new one, down by the beach.” He grimaces. “It is...seedy, to say the least. But drinks were...” he stretches his hands above his head and sighs, clearly exhausted, “very affordable.”

“I left you and Fay enough money in your accounts to afford a nice restaurant on the night of your wedding,” Kent says, frowning now in disapproval. “You couldn’t give her a nice dinner, like she deserves?”

Daniel pauses and then raises an eyebrow at his father. “Really dad? You’re going to lecture me now on what Fay deserves?”

Kent, his temper flaring, opens his mouth to say something sharp but Daniel waves a hand between them, clearly not having the energy for this fight. “Let’s just forget it,” he murmurs. “Please, dad. It’s not worth it.”

Slowly, Kent closes his mouth and studies his son. They’re silent for a long moment. “How is she?” Kent asks.

Daniel takes a deep breath and answers on the exhale. “She’s...,” but then he stops, shaking his head. “It’s been a lot, dad. It’s hard on her. And it’s not like you two left things on the best terms.”

Jaw clenched, Kent looks to the side, frustrated and ashamed. But old habits die hard, and he works to keep his emotions off his face.

But Daniel has been able to read his dad for a long time. He sees all of it.

“Anyway, that’s not why I’m here,” Daniel says, sitting up with a groan and pulling two envelopes out of his pocket.

Kent freezes and glances up at the loudspeaker. Daniel again waves a dismissive hand.

“It’s fine,” he murmurs, yawning. “They cleared it. Just paperwork.” He tosses it on the table between them.

“What is it,” Kent asks, reaching for them. But he freezes when he sees the sealed envelope with his urologist’s address on top.

“Go ahead,” Daniel says, unable to keep his voice from being so bitter. “I already know what it says. Your doctor was a little too easy to bribe to break doctor-patient confidentiality – you should probably get a new one. But you should know too – they’re your results.”

“I don’t need to see them,” Kent sighs, pushing the envelope away.

Daniel just rolls his eyes at him. “Seriously, dad?” he asks, leaning forward and apparently forgetting his hangover in his anger. “You punched the shit out of Jerome – nearly broke his jaw – because you were so convinced that you couldn’t be the dad and that Fay was lying to you. And now you don’t even want the results of the test you rushed out of the house to get?”

Kent glares at his son. “I said I don’t need it.”

“Your sample showed evidence of viable sperm,” Daniel snaps, grabbing the envelope off the table and shoving it back into his pocket. “Another reason to fire that doctor. So, unless you have other concerns about Fay, you should stop treating her like shit and believe her when she says she’s only sleeping with you.”

“I said,” Kent growls again, “I didn’t need it.”

“Well, you’ve got it now. So would you fucking call her?”

Kent clenches his jaw and turns his face away. “I don’t have phone privileges,” he sighs.

“Oh,” Daniel says, a little awkward now. He had assumed...

They’re quiet for a long moment, but Kent glances at the clock and realizes that time is running short. “What’s that,” he asks, nodding towards the other envelope.

“Draft of a plea deal,” Daniel says, looking up again and burping a little, turning a bit green as he does.

“Jesus,” Kent mutters under his breath, glaring both at the envelope and at his hungover son. Then he pushes the document away from him. “I don’t want this either.”

“All of your lawyers agree, dad,” Daniel says, leaning forward to glare at him. “You’re going away for life – you could even get the death penalty if you don’t agree to what they’re offering –”

“I didn’t do half these crimes, Daniel,” Kent growls, meeting his son’s eyes. “The only way I have a chance of getting out of this is if I can convince a jury to listen –”

“This isn’t Twelve Angry Men, dad!” Daniel snaps, banging a hand on the table. “You are not getting out of this on reasonable doubt! Even if you didn’t commit half those crimes, you still did the other half! What the fuck do you think half of a life sentence is, forty years? Is that seriously what you want, to get out of here when you’re eighty, to meet your fucking kid when they’re middle aged?”

Shocked, Kent sits back in his seat, staring at his son.

“Just...” Daniel sighs, frustrated as hell and feeling like he might barf at any second. “Would you please just take the deal, dad?”

“Is it any better?” Kent snaps, glaring at his kid and then looking down at the envelope. “Are they seriously offering less than forty years?”

“If you’re willing to...talk,” Daniel says, squeezing the bridge of his nose between his fingers, “about the Russians. They’re willing to give you twenty.”

Kent blanches at the number, but then he shakes his head.

“It’s still too much. I need to walk.”

“You are not listening –“

“YOU,” Kent snaps, pounding his hand flat on the table. “Are not listening!”

Daniel, to Kent’s surprise, just groans and covers his face with his hands, leaning so far back in his chair that it tilts onto its two back legs.

“God, dad, why are you so stubborn? Would you...would you please just at least open the envelope? Consider it?”

Confused, but slightly persuaded at this strange request, Kent grabs the envelope off the table and tears it open. He pulls out the paper inside, looking through what his lawyers think is the best they can offer.

“I can’t take this,” he murmurs, shaking his head, still believing that a full acquittal is the only way to go.

“Read the last page,” Daniel sighs, still leaning back and covering his face with his hands.

Confused, Kent does so, frowning at the legal language that doesn’t seem to spell out anything special...

But then, there at the bottom, a few words are written in Fay’s slightly chaotic cursive script.

Take the deal, Kent.

He stares at them, shocked. And then, almost before he can stop himself, he runs a finger over the ink, tracing the letters she wrote.

Slowly, he lowers the paperwork to the paper and looks up at his son. Daniel, having leaned forward again without Kent noticing, stares right back at him.

“What’s going on,” Kent asks, stern. Because...why does Fay have anything to say about this? Why is she involved?

“Honestly, dad,” Daniel says, “she’s keeping me in the dark too. But you either trust her, or you don’t.”

Kent takes a long minute to sit back in his chair and think.

“One minute left,” the voice announces. “Say your goodbyes.”

“Dad...” Daniel says, spreading his hands wide, pleading.

“Fine,” Kent snaps. “I’ll do it.”

And then, on some impulse that neither of them could describe – because they’ve never done it before in their lives – father and son suddenly stand and throw their arms around each other, hard.

“I love you, dad,” Daniel murmurs into Kent’s shoulder.

“Hands off!” the loudspeaker blares. “No touching!”

“I love you too, kid,” Kent whispers back. “Tell her, too.”

“We said hands OFF!”

“Nah,” Daniel says, pulling back a little now to smile at his dad. “I’ll leave that to you.”

Then, as the guards burst through the door to separate them physically, Kent feels a sharp pain at the back of his head and gasps, pulling away from Daniel and staring at him in shock.

As the guards grab him by the arms and pull him forcibly away from his son, Kent watches in confusion as Daniel takes the tuft of hair held between his fingers – pulled out from the roots – and tucks it into the pocket of his pants.

Chapter 173 – The Test

Chapter 173 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

My smile is very, very genuine when Daniel finally bursts into the examination room, because it has been absolute torture waiting here with Alessi and Natalia without him.

“Ah,” Alessi says, giving Daniel a big smile and taking a minute to wrap his arms around his nephew and kiss him on either cheek. Daniel goes a bit pale when Alessi holds him tight, pressing his eyes closed, and I laugh a little to myself knowing that Daniel’s hangover this morning was...fierce.

It had taken everything Janeen, Jerome, and I could do to haul him out of bed and get him dressed, but eventually Daniel welled up the strength to do it because he knew he had to. It’s a big day, after all.

Daniel gives Alessi a pained smile and then his eyes find me.

I raise my eyebrows to him in a silent question and he gives me the tiniest of nods, letting me know it's done. I lay my head back against the padded seat behind me, relieved.

Good. At least this one thing went right.

"My Daniel," Natalia coos, moving forward to him next, taking his face in her hands and tsking in disapproval. "What did they do to you last night – you look terrible, my little groom."

"I did it to myself, Natalia," Daniel says, giving her a soft smile. Natalia mumbles something about how she can't possibly believe that, lifting her fingers to his hair to push it into order, but before she can get very far the doctor comes into the room.

"Ah," he says, smiling at Daniel. "So, the father has finally arrived."

"Apologies, Dr. Banks," Daniel says, tucking away his suffering and reaching out a hand to shake the doctor's. "I had to visit my father this morning and the traffic on the way back from the prison was heavier than expected."

"Sorry to hear that," the doctor says, his eyebrows going up. Of course, he knows who Daniel's father is – everyone does. Kent's arrest has been national news, and our wedding – to my surprise – made the media as well, making the connection between Kent and Daniel more apparent than it's ever been.

"Now," the doctor says, clapping his hands together and smiling between Daniel and I. "I understand that we're here for a paternity test!"

Daniel comes to my side now, taking my hand and beaming down at me. "It's not that we have any actual hesitations here, doctor," Daniel says, looking at me and not at him. "But, this baby has two families who crave...assurances. Still," he looks up and turns that charming Lippert smile on the doctor again. "We can all rest assured that the results will not be a surprise."

Natalia and Alessi say nothing as they stand quietly at the side of the room, Alessi beaming as if he has no hesitations at all and Natalia looking like she doesn't believe a damn word Daniel's saying.

The doctor, picking up on some of Natalia's tension, clears his throat. "Well," he says, "motives aside, the procedure is simple enough. Mr. Lippert," he says, nodding to Daniel, "we'll take a DNA sample from the inside of your cheek. And Mrs. Lippert," he says –

I grin and laugh a little to hear my new name for the first time –

"We'll take a blood sample from you."

"Please, doctor," Alessi says, stepping forward now, his face curious. "Could you please explain to us how it works? I am...well, I do not understand how a sample of Fay's blood will demonstrate the paternity. Do we not have to wait until the child is born?"

“You used to have to wait,” the doctor says, turning to Alessi. “But technology has improved so that we now know that the mother’s blood carries the unborn baby’s DNA. We will use the blood sample to compare the baby’s DNA to the potential father’s,” he says, gesturing towards Daniel.

“Amazing,” Alessi says, his face breaking into a wide smile as he looks between Daniel and the doctor. “It is amazing what you can do now, with the medical technology.” Daniel smiles back, but I shift my eyes to Natalia, who does not look nearly as impressed.

The doctor murmurs his agreement with Alessi but then moves around the room, preparing the tests and then calling a nurse into the room to prep my bloodwork. Daniel obligingly opens his mouth, letting the doctor swipe around the inside of his cheeks with a cotton swab, while the nurse ties a rubber band around my upper arm and begins to locate a vein.

After the doctor has put Daniel’s testing materials away, he comes and draws a vial of blood from me himself. That finished, he cleans the very tiny needle puncture on my arm and puts a Band-Aid over it.

“All set,” the doctor says, giving us a smile all around.

“Doctor,” I say, sitting up and smiling at him. “Would it be all right to add Mr. Bianci’s email address to the account, so that they can receive results of the pregnancy test directly from your office?”

The doctor looks at me in surprise and glances towards Natalia and Alessi. “If you...consent to that,” he says, turning back to me, “then sure, we can send the results to you as well as Mr. Bianci.”

“Yes, why not,” I say, turning to give Natalia and Alessi a big smile. “I want you to have all of your assurances in place. And, as Daniel said,” I continue, reaching a hand out towards my husband, who immediately takes it, “we’ve got nothing to hide.”

Natalia gives me a tight smile while Alessi presses his hands together towards me in thanks and then goes with the doctor to the computer to provide him with his contact information. When they’ve finished that, we all stand up and head for the door, murmuring our thanks to the doctor.

But, just before we can reach it, I stumble and catch my breath.

“Fay?” Daniel asks, shifting his hold on me and catching me at the elbow, helping me stand back up. “Are you – are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I murmur, looking up at him. “Um, I just got a little dizzy? Maybe from taking the blood?”

Natalia and Alessi stop in the hall before us, turning to see, and the doctor comes up behind. “That’s not uncommon,” the doctor says, gesturing back into the room. “Would you like to stay

for a moment, Mrs. Lippert? We can have one of the nurses bring you a snack – bring that blood sugar right back up.”

“Thank you,” I murmur, and then I grimace at Natalia and Alessi, guilt on my face.

“You two go on,” Daniel says, glancing at the Italians before turning his concerned face back to me and helping me back into the room. “She just needs to sit down for a moment –“

“Are you sure?” Alessi says, taking a worried step towards me, his eyes moving over me.

“I’ll be just fine,” I say, giving an embarrassed little laugh. “I’m just – you know, weaker than I thought I’d be, pregnant.” I give a humble little shrug and a blush.

“Yes, come on, Alessi,” Natalia says, placing her fingers on her forearm and stepping away. “We have things to do.”

Daniel calls his goodbyes to them and helps me back into the room, where I sink into a chair and immediately clear my throat.

“You okay?” the doctor asks.

“Yup,” I say, smiling up at him. “I wouldn’t say no to that snack, though,” I continue, turning my head to the side. I am hungrier these days than I usually am.

Daniel laughs and steps away from me. “Nicely done, Fay,” he says, giving me a smirk as he folds his arms and leaning against the wall. “You even had me for a moment – I thought you were really going to fall.”

“Drama camp, fourth grade,” I say loftily, leaning back in my chair and grinning up at him. “We practiced prat falls for hours.”

“So,” Dr. Banks says, standing between us and looking at Daniel with a grin. “Were you able to get the hair sample this morning?”

Chapter 174 – Midnight Meetings

Chapter 174 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“I was indeed,” Daniel says, pulling a messy clump of hair from his pocket. “Sorry that it’s...all in a heap,” he murmurs, awkwardly handing the lump of Kent’s hair to the doctor. I feel very odd, watching it change hands, fighting a ridiculous urge that rises in me to jump up and touch it myself.

Don't be so creepy, I chide myself. Or desperate.

So, I force myself to relax back in my chair, watching the doctor take the sample and seal it into a little clear bag. Then, he takes the tube with Daniel's cheek sample and tosses it in the trash.

"Will that be enough?" Daniel asks, anxious. The doctor holds the bag up to eye-level to take a better look.

"Should be," the doctor says, looking closely. "I'm seeing some roots there, so, it should be good."

"Two days?" I ask, standing up for real now and coming to Daniel's side.

"Two days," the doctor says, nodding to us with a smile. "And no reason to suspect anything will go awry. Leave it with me, and we'll get you the results you're looking for."

"Thanks," I say, wrapping my arms around Daniel's arm and resting my head on his shoulder. "We owe you one. Big time."

"Your generous payment is enough," the doctor says, giving us a wink and boxing Kent's hair sample up with my blood sample, ready to be sent off to the lab. "But also," he says, hesitating before looking up at us with hope in his eyes. "If you wouldn't mind...putting in a good word with Janeen..."

"She'll be keeping an eye out for you at the club," I say, giving him a little wink. "You have our assurances on that." Janeen was in on it, of course – Dr. Banks has been her customer at the club for months now. She's the one who introduced us.

"A chance with a girl like that?" Dr. Banks says, sighing and sinking his hands into his pockets. "That's the real reward."

I grin at him, pleased he sees what I see in my sister.

And then, saying our grateful goodbyes, Daniel and I head out the door.

By the time we get to the parking lot, Natalia and Alessi are already gone. I look up at Daniel, who is already looking down at me.

"What next?" I ask, curious.

"You tell me, mastermind," he says, giving me a little nudge with his elbow.

I smile at him, knowing that he's asking me for more information about what I have planned – about why I wanted Natalia and Alessi here, and why I want them to believe, vehemently, that this is a Bianci baby.

But...those plans? They're just not fully in place yet. So, I answer his question in another way.

"Do you want to go to McDonalds?" I ask, hopeful. "I didn't get my snack in there, as promised."

Daniel laughs and we head off to the car together. "I think I like pregnant Fay," he murmurs, cheerful. "She's got her priorities in the right place."

We spend a pleasant evening at home that night. Papa Thompson makes a lasagna from scratch and we spend hours sitting at the table outside, eating piles of garlic bread and talking cheerfully about nothing in that way that family does.

The entire evening, I feel Daniel's eyes on me. But I ignore it, needing to not face him right now, to not...not talk about it.

Because while Daniel and I are on good terms – great terms, even, now that we're husband and wife – I know he wants me to ask about his morning at the jail with Kent.

And I just...can't go there right now.

And I haven't really figured out why.

So, I ignore all of the opportunities he makes for me to step aside with him for a private word. He started it first in the car after the clinic, and then when we had lunch – just opening little conversational opportunities for me to ask.

And at each one, I not-so-skillfully passed.

He let me, at first – probably thinking I just wanted to be comfortably at home before digging into it. And maybe I thought so too.

But now that I'm home?

God, the bare idea of even...talking about Kent. It raises an almost physical pain in my chest – all of the fear, and the anxiety, and the grief of these past few weeks just comes roaring back.

I do my best to pat those emotions down in me as I nurse the non-alcoholic beer my dad brought me – bless him, always so considerate and wanting me to be part of the group. But Daniel's looking at me again, not-so-subtly nodding towards the edge of the deck, where we know Janeen and Jerome will leave us alone.

But I just pretend I don't see his nod, turning to laugh at Janeen and Jerome's conversation about whatever sports team is playing right now. I don't know which one – I haven't been listening.

But it doesn't matter – I just allow myself to be carried away in the empty bliss of a pleasant conversation.

Because the alternative? Of having to address my reality, to really think about what the hell I'm going to do next?

It's so overwhelming that I fear I'll drown in it.

God, how did Kent do this every day, year after year? He's so much stronger than me.

I successfully evade Daniel all evening, but at night? When it's just me, retiring to my bed alone?

He knows he has me trapped.

I kind of expect the tapping on my door when it comes. And in response, very immaturely, I quickly shut off my book light and close my eyes, pretending that I'm asleep.

I hear a sigh outside my bedroom door before it creaks open. Inwardly, I curse the loss of the little lock that Kent put on my bedroom door at his house. Why do I keep getting bedrooms without locks on the doors?

I keep my eyes closed so I can't see what Daniel's doing, even though the light from the hallway spills in and changes the darkness on the inside of my eyelids to a light orange-red.

"Fay," Daniel sighs, and I sigh too, knowing I'm trapped. "I know you're not asleep. I saw your light go out."

I open my eyes and stare at my wall, still unwilling to face him.

"Why won't you ask, Fay?" Daniel says quietly, closing the door behind him and coming to sit on the edge of my bed. "I mean – I won't tell you anything if you don't want to hear. But...why don't you want to know?"

"Because," I murmur, and a sudden hitch comes to my throat. Daniel inhales sharply and moves upward on the bed, sitting behind me and putting a hand on my shoulder as I work to get ahold of myself.

"Because," I say again, forcing myself to turn to steel, to be tough. Because – in all of this, I have to be tough, or it will all collapse. "The point was that you got the hair, and you got him to agree to the plea deal. Any other information...doesn't matter right now, Daniel."

"Doesn't it?" he murmurs, laying down behind me and starting to stroke my back in a comforting way. I close my eyes again. "Doesn't it matter, if hearing that he's okay will make you feel better?"

“But what if he’s not okay?” I whisper, terrified.

“Well then I won’t tell you.”

“Well then your not telling me will tell me that he’s not okay!” I protest, and Daniel laughs. Then he stops stroking my back and tugs on my shoulder, asking me to turn.

I do ask my husband asks, turning towards him in bed so that he can see the tears slipping down my cheeks. Daniel makes soft, comforting, chiding noises – telling me that it will all be okay as he wipes the tears from my cheeks. But I just shake my head.

Because...I mean, it’s probably not. I have this insane plan – and it’s probably not going to work – and it’s probably going to get us all arrested –

And I just have so many doubts about all of it – about me, and whether or not I can pull this off, and – and whether it makes me a bad person –

And a bad mother – to want to do all of this –

“Fay,” Daniel says, stern, making my eyes flash up to him. He places a soft hand on my cheek. “You’ve got to stop second-guessing it.”

“I can’t,” I cry, shaking my head.

“What would Kent say?” he asks softly, stroking my cheek with his thumb.

“He’d tell me to let him do it,” I reply, laughing a little hystirically and wiping my running nose with the back of my hand.

“Well, yeah,” Daniel replies, laughing too. “But in this alternate universe – where Kent is in jail, and has agreed to take the plea deal and let you do whatever the hell it is you’re planning. What would he say?”

“He’d say stop wasting time crying,” I sigh. “And get to work.”

“Yup,” Daniel says, nodding a little. “He’s a jerk that way.”

I laugh again, shaking my head. Because in saying that to me, Kent wouldn’t be being mean – he would just be telling me what I need to hear.

“Kent has never been big on hesitation,” Daniel continues. “If you have a plan, and it’s a good plan? You don’t get it done by constantly rethinking it. So...” he shrugs. “Let’s do this thing. All right? We’re all on board.”

“Okay,” I whisper, closing my eyes again and nodding, letting myself trust Daniel’s trust in me.

“Kent didn’t want to do it,” Daniel whispers, and I open my eyes, biting my lip and looking up at him. “He didn’t want to take the plea bargain,” he says, and then his lips quirk into a smile, “was real pissed off about it, in fact.” I laugh, imagining it, because of course he was.

“He only agreed when he saw your handwriting,” Daniel continues. “He trusts you, Fay.”

I take a deep breath, letting Kent’s faith bolster me as well.

Because if Kent and Daniel think I can do this?

Well...maybe I really can.

Chapter 175 – Happy Results

Chapter 175 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Everything changes the moment we get the test results. Alessi calls Daniel and we all hear his loud, enthusiastic approval coming through the phone that Daniel, wincing, has to hold away from his ear. I smirk, digging into my pancakes and watching Daniel’s face as he speaks in Italian to his uncle, accepting his congratulations and saying a bunch of stuff I don’t understand.

“Sexy,” Janeen says, sitting down next to me and with a yawn, her eyes on Daniel. “Does your other one do that? With the speaking Italian?”

“He sure does,” I reply, smirking, stabbing at my pancakes.

“Please refrain from drooling over my boyfriend,” Jerome says next to me, pointing his fork at Janeen. “I’m not sure he’s gay enough to resist your wiles.”

I laugh and point my own fork at Jerome. “He’s my husband, interloper,” I point out, grinning. “If any of us are encroaching on someone’s territory, it’s you.”

Jerome laughs, shaking his head at me and accepting his own plate of pancakes from Papa Thompson, who smiles but pretends he’s not listening. I grin and take a sip from my coffee as Daniel hangs up his phone.

“Well,” he says, looking around at all of us with a tight grin. “Looks like they’re coming for a visit.”

“What!?” I gasp, dropping my fork. “Here!?”

He gives a shrug, grimacing at me. “I can’t stop them. They know where we’re living.”

I groan, tilting my head back and staring up at the ceiling. Above all, this little beach house has been a haven away from the world where we can all be ourselves and don't have to pretend.

So Alessi and Natalia? Here? It's the absolute last thing I want.

"Um, I did not invite them to my beach house," Janeen snaps, stabbing at her breakfast. "They are not welcome here."

"Still Fay's house," Daniel says, giving her a cheeky wink and turning to me. "Unless..." he says, hesitating. "This goes against your plans?"

"No," I sigh, pushing my food away, my appetite suddenly gone as my brain begins to scheme. "It's good," I continue, putting a hand on my stomach and looking down at it. "We want them very much on Team Baby Bianci, after all."

And my lips twist ironically as I consider my little baby, who is not a Bianci at all.

But, Alessi and Natalia don't need to know that, do they?

Natalia wraps me in a big warm hug the moment she gets out of the car, rocking me back and forth in her arms and stroking my hair with her hand. "Oh Fay, the little mother – what a blessing you have," she murmurs as I do my best not to cringe.

Seriously though, I wonder, a little frantic, how long can this hug last?

But Natalia holds me tight until Daniel comes to release me, giving her a hug and accepting her four kisses – two for each cheek.

"I am so happy for you both," Natalia says, looking between us. "A blessing – a little baby – we will hope for a boy, yes?" With that, she grabs the bags of gifts she brought with her and happily starts up the steps into the beach house. "Daniel! There are more in the car, go and get them!"

When we both start out the door, she calls after us in a chiding voice. "Do not lift a finger, Fay! You are a sacred vessel – let the men do it!"

I laugh a little, looking up at Daniel in shock. "I guess she likes me more than you now," I say, grinning.

"I know," he murmurs, his hands on his hips as he stares after the woman who has done nothing but worship him his whole life. Then he looks back at me. "I kind of hate it."

"Don't be jealous," I say, reaching up to pinch his cheek. "I'm a sacred vessel, after all," I sigh, walking towards the stairs and starting up them with not a single thing in my hands. Daniel grumbles as he follows after, carrying several more bags filled with presents.

In the house, Natalia and Alessi are greeting my family more cheerfully than they ever have before, which I can tell unsettles my dad and Janeen. Jerome made himself scarce about half an hour ago. After all, while it makes sense that we hired him to be our body guard while he's out on bail, it doesn't really make sense that he'd be lounging around my house in his pajamas, does it?

Especially with the way that he and Daniel look at each other these days. I don't even think they realize it.

"Fay, come and see," Natalia says, patting the sofa next to her and beginning to open the packages, which all contain baby clothes and baby supplies. "I know that you don't know what you're doing with this – so I got you everything you need, and all the best."

I do my very best to not roll my eyes at Natalia, who – I refrain from pointing out – never did this herself. But luckily, Janeen rolls her eyes for both of us as she passes me onto the way into the kitchen, her expression a mix of confusion and disgust.

The next two hours pass cheerfully, with Natalia and Alessi being genuinely nice to everyone for the first time. And, despite my criticism of her, Natalia's gifts are all really beautiful and will probably be helpful once the baby comes. I bite my lip a little, considering that...well, that I should probably pay more attention to preparing for this child, to ensuring that I know what the hell to do once I have an infant to care for.

But with everything on my plate?

Well, frankly, I've got seven months to prep for my baby, and quite a bit to do before that.

It's nearly nighttime when we're all gathered out on the back deck, lounging around the table with a set of cocktails that Alessi mixed up for us. Natalia sits next to me in the same way that she has stuck by my side all day, which has been annoying and baffling. But I shrug it off, considering that she really just wants the baby's company, not mine.

I smile as I watch Daniel chatting with Alessi, the two of them clearly happy and united in their excitement about the baby. I'm pleased by this, knowing that peace-loving Daniel was unhappy about the rift between himself and his uncle. As much as he knows that we lied to the Bianci family to make this happy reunion possible, I can see that he's still pleased with the result.

My happiness, of course, is tempered a little by my jealousy as I look around the table at everyone's drinks. I sigh, pouting at my own glass of soda and then glaring around at everyone else's espresso martini's. They just look so frosty and delicious –

Honestly, I'm not even that big of a drinker, but nothing makes me want to steal Daniel's cocktail away from him like being told that I can't –

But before I can get too jealous, Natalia distracts me by giving me the shock of my life.

“Do you know, Fay, I owe you an apology,” she says, leaning closer to me so that her words are for us alone.

I turn to her in surprise, completely without words. What on earth is this?

“I admit,” she says, giving me a little smile as she rests her chin on her fist and looks me over, “I thought that you and Daniel did not have a real relationship.”

“Oh,” I reply, my eyebrows going up. And then I laugh a little, shaking my head. “Well, yes,” I say, sighing, “you made that pretty clear when you tried to set him up with about a hundred other girls.”

She shrugs along with me. “Honestly, I didn’t think that would work either, but I had to try.”

Curious, I tilt my head at her words.

She leans in towards me, giving a wink. “Do you know, I always thought Daniel was a little...well, that he liked men,” she says, laughing.

My blood runs cold to hear her say it, and it takes every bit of me to ensure that my fear doesn’t show on my face.

Chapter 176 – An Important Phone Call

Chapter 176 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

But somehow, I manage to simply laugh at Natalia’s suspicion that Daniel might like men – as if it’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard?

“Really, Natalia?” I ask, scoffing pleasantly. “I mean, I know we’re not a very handsy couple or anything, but I didn’t think we’d pushed you that far along into the realm of the ridiculous.”

“Ah well,” she says, wrinkling her nose at me a little bit. “I suppose that it is just that you are Americans. In Italy, when the young are in love, they cannot keep their hands off of each other. You know?”

I laugh and nod along with her, giving a little shrug as if I can believe it.

“Well of course you do,” she says, chuckling a little as she fingers her martini glass, “you saw it with Kent and I, at the house.”

Again, I tuck my true emotions deep, deep inside myself. “Yes,” I say, smiling at her. “I could tell that you two...really had something.”

She nods, looking out at the ocean wistfully. “Perhaps, in another life...” she sighs.

I murmur something in assent, wanting nothing more than to grab her damn drink and splash it all over her face.

“But family and children are so important to us,” she says, blinking out of her thoughts and turning back to me. She gives me a warm smile, apparently dismissing the thought of Kent and reaching out a hand to stroke a tendril of my hair.

I force myself not to tense up under Natalia’s hand, to not clench my jaw or swat her away, instead smiling pleasantly. “Anyway,” she continues, “you will forgive me for trying to get Daniel to meet some other girls, yes? I had to try to find him a girl he might like, so that he could start a family. But!” she laughs now, drawing her hand away. “I was wrong – he found the girl he wanted, without my help! As so many do.”

“Yes,” I say, glancing over at Daniel with what I hope looks like hero-worship in my eyes. “I understand that others don’t always see what we have. But Daniel and I love each other very much.”

“I can see it now,” Natalia sighs, pleased. “And soon the world will have evidence of it, when your little baby is born.”

I turn back to her and grin, pretending a motherly pleasure that’s absolutely fake. Because Natalia wants me to be a very specific type of mom, and I have a strong suspicion that I want to be precisely the opposite type.

“Well,” Natalia says, sitting back and smiling at me peacefully. “I hope you will accept my apology -I was trying to do my best by my boy. But I was wrong. And now, forever, we will be friends. And I will try to do my best by your boy – for Lenai’s sake.”

I smile at Natalia, and nod, but a rush of feelings flood me as I come to understand that Natalia basically understands herself as this child’s grandmother. And that Lenai...well, that she probably would have very mixed feelings about this baby, if she ever knew about it.

Luckily, before I start to feel even weirder about this, Daniel’s phone rings.

Distracted by his conversation with Alessi, Daniel glances at the phone’s screen, but then his face falls when he looks at it. One by one, we all go silent as we watch Daniel stare at his phone.

“What is it?” Alessi asks, sensing that something is wrong.

“Um,” Daniel says, glancing at his uncle and then at me. “It’s...well, it’s the prison.”

My muscles tense, but I force them – one by one – to relax.

“Well then,” Alessi says, leaning back in his chair with a sad and empathetic expression. “I suppose you should answer it.”

Daniel’s face is tight as he lifts the phone to his ear and says “hello?” But the rest of us don’t hear any more as he gets to his feet and walks to the deck’s rail, leaning against it. He turns about thirty seconds into the phone call to give us all a thumb’s up, letting us know that all is well, but then he turns away again.

Hoping, quite desperately, that Natalia can’t hear how hard my heart is beating, I turn back to everyone at the table and give them a bright smile. “Dad?” I say, turning to him. “Weren’t we saving a peach pie for a beautiful night like this?”

Dad hesitates for a second, staring at me, but I force my smile to deepen, to will him not to giving anything away. “You remember dad, right? Unless Janeen ate it,” and then I turn, laughing, to smile at my sister.

A huge grin breaks out on Janeen’s face, not a moment of it looking fake. “You know me too well, sis,” she says, giving me a wink. “But I used self-restraint!” she continues, laughing and putting up her hands. “It’s still there!”

Dad gets up then, heading into the kitchen to get the pie, and Janeen leans forward across the table, asking Natalia something about Italian fall fashions this year that I know she doesn’t care a damn about. Still, Natalia leans in as well, speaking eagerly.

Gratitude for Janeen sweeps through me then, because she picked up her role seamlessly. So much of her job at the club depends on her ability to read the room and act appropriately, after all. I lean back in my chair, thinking she’s a fabulous sister to have when you’re pregnant with a baby whose mafia daddy is a secret, and in jail.

And currently on the phone with your husband.

I resist the urge to look over at Daniel for the length of the phone call. When he comes back to his seat ten minutes later, I tilt my head at him in inquiry, hoping Natalia and Alessi read it as the worry of a wife for her husband. Daniel gives me a soft smile and a nod, letting me know he’s okay. So, I move on, dismissing the event, and burying my burning desire to know what the hell just happened on the phone call.

Eventually – after far too long – Natalia and Alessi leave. Both kiss me warmly as we walk them down to their car, welcoming me again to the family, though perhaps this welcome is the first true one since only now are they actually convinced that I’m carrying a Bianci baby. Then, shouting their goodbyes, Natalia and Alessi pull away.

I exhale a tired sigh once Daniel and I get back into the house and I close the door behind us, leaning back against the wall.

“You all right, baby mama?” Daniel asks, smiling at my exhaustion.

“You know,” I say, shaking my head with my eyes closed, “it’s weirdly more exhausting now that she likes me. She’s so...attentive.”

Daniel laughs and puts an arm around my shoulders, leading me upstairs. “Welcome to my world.”

“Awww, poor adored baby,” I say sarcastically, reaching up to pinch his cheek the way Natalia does. “Always spoiled! Fawned over since the day he was born!”

“It’s nice,” he sighs, pretending to be chagrined, “but you’re right, it is exhausting.”

“Hey, I’m doing another batch of these!” Janeen calls as we enter the kitchen, holding a shaker of espresso martinis above her head. “Alessi left all the supplies!”

“Count me in!” Daniel calls, leading me out to the patio. “Make one for Jerome too!”

“You got it!” she replies. Dad’s out on the patio, clearing away dishes, and I move to help but he waves me off, bidding me to sit.

“I don’t like all this fussing,” I grumble, sitting down hard in my chair. “Just because I have like, this tiny little ball of cells in my belly,” I say, looking down at myself again, “doesn’t mean I can’t do anything.”

“The baby’s actually as big as a kidney bean now,” Daniel says, sitting down next to me and grabbing a handful of cashews from a bowl on the table. He looks curiously down at them, picking one up. “Or, like, just as big as this.” He laughs, grinning before popping it into his mouth.

“Don’t eat the baby,” I murmur, lifting my legs up to curl beneath me. But then I frown at him, cocking my head to the side. “Wait, how do you know that?”

“I’ve been doing research,” he says, shrugging. “I’m going to be a dad, after all. The paperwork says so.”

“So weird,” I murmur. “Two weeks ago I’d have murdered for any documentation that the baby was Kent’s —“

“Jerome’s jaw would have thanked you for that,” Daniel murmurs, making me laugh.

“Certainly,” I agree, continuing, “but now, today, we paid a great deal of money for paperwork proving precisely the opposite,” I sigh. “What a strange world.”

“Please do not discount my role in this shady deal,” Janeen says, coming out the door with a tray of espresso martinis in her hands. “I expect recognition and gratitude.”

“You got it, sis,” I say, giving her a grin. As she winks back at me, I see movement in the kitchen and wave to Jerome, who is coming up the stairs.

“The doctor was cute, Janeen,” Daniel says, casually taking my hand and holding it in his, I think needing the touch as much as I do at this moment. He’s stressed, I can tell, and so am I. “And clearly he likes you. What’s stopping you from dating this one?”

“If you date them,” Janeen says, giving Daniel a little glare, “they stop paying you.”

“Not my experience,” I say, leaning forward and grabbing my half-drunk glass of coke.

“Yes well,” Janeen says, turning her glare on me as Jerome comes out the door and heads for a vacant seat between her and Daniel, “not all of us get multi-million-dollar contracts after they’ve just kissed someone a couple of times.”

Daniel and Jerome turn their heads to me, their eyes wide. “What’s – what’s this?” Daniel asks, but then he stops. “Actually – keep your secrets. I don’t want to know.”

“Well I do,” Jerome says, stopping down to give Daniel a kiss on the cheek before sitting down.

“Enough!” Janeen says, picking up a fork and clinking it against her martini glass, drawing all our attention to her. “Because I know what you two are doing,” she says, pointing the fork at me and Daniel now. “You’re doing your clever conversation thing – where you bring up all sorts of interesting things to distract everyone from what’s important.”

Daniel and I shut our mouths, smirking, because we know we’ve been rightly accused.

“Oh,” Jerome says, turning to look at both of us now. “Yeah, I hate it when you do that. But what’s she talking about? What happened?”

“Go ahead, Daniel,” Janeen invites, not unkind. “What the hell happened on that phone call?”

Chapter 177 – Zero Doubts

Chapter 177 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Daniel sighs and glances at Jerome, willing to explain. “We got a phone call from the prison during cocktails,” he says, pitching his voice low as if he’s still worried about being overheard. Probably the result of growing up in a house filled with secrets, I consider, thinking about the little kidney bean in my own belly. Would my baby be the same, being raised in a Lippert house?

“Oh?” Jerome asks, his eyes going wide. “Is everything...okay?”

“Yeah, it was...” Daniel glances at me now, “it was actually just dad calling. He got his phone privileges so that he can call people who are not his lawyers.”

A thousand emotions flood me at this news but I keep my body perfectly still, blinking softly and not letting a single one of my feelings cross my face. Instead, I take a deep breath and sip at my soda.

“That’s so creepy, Fay,” Janeen whispers, and I flash my eyes to her, confused and surprised.

“What?”

“I once saw you have a meltdown because you dropped your coloring book in the bathtub,” she says, leaning forward to peer at me. “You’ve always been like, the most emotional person I’ve ever met.”

“So?” I ask, confused.

“So?” she replies, her face twisting with displeasure. “Your husband just told you that your baby daddy, his father, just called from prison – and that he can call from prison, even though you haven’t talked to him since he told you he thought you were cheating on him. And you just sit passively? You, of all people, show no emotion?”

I sigh, resting my drink in my lap and looking down at it for a second, clenching my teeth. “What do you want me to do, Janeen?” I ask, frustrated. “Break into tears? Fall on the floor in hysterics?”

“Kinda!” she says, and I whip up my head to glare at her as she throws her hands in the air. “Because that’s what my sister would do! I don’t know how I feel about this,” she says, bringing her arms down and using her pointer finger to squiggle a line in the air between us, “this new Fay who is so placid. Were you body snatched? Are you a robot?”

“If I was,” I snap, leaning forward to glare at her a little, “would I remember the time that you passed out drunk, and naked from the bottom down, in the kiddie pool? And that the neighbor’s dog found you there, and stole the hotdog you were holding – all night – right out of your hand?”

Janeen gasps, clasping a hand to her chest. “That was a secret, Fay!” she hisses, leaning forward to glare at me more as Daniel and Jerome burst into laughter.

“Well at least I’m still your sister, Janeen!” I snap back, leaning further forward.

“My sister would never tell strangers –“ she insists, but Daniel interrupts.

“She’s doing it again, Janeen,” he says, smirking at me. “Distracting you. Doing the word thing.”

Janeen gasps again, her hand going back to her chest. “Fay!” she shouts, and then she takes a stray cashew off the table and throws at me. “Stop that!”

“Stop falling for it,” I mutter, crossing my arms and sitting back in my chair. Then I glare at Daniel for betraying me, but he just shrugs.

“Seriously though,” Jerome says, looking at Daniel now. “What did he say?”

My shoulders go rigid as I steel myself again, not sure I want to hear it. Daniel, sensing that this is harder for me than for them, puts a hand on my arm. “Do you want to know?”

“Of course she wants to know!” Janeen growls, but I take a deep breath, considering.

“Yes,” I sigh, because I really do. And it’s not doing any good to put it off.

“Okay,” Daniel says softly. And then he takes a sip of his drink, I think wanting to steel himself in turn. “Well, there’s not a ton to report. He’s okay, he’s...bored, and anxious. He feels really helpless and he’s never been very good at feeling that way, if he ever has before.”

“He said all of that?” Jerome asks, a little disbelieving.

“Well, no,” Daniel sighs, twisting the stem of his martini glass. “Some of this is my interpretation. He said that jail is jail. And then he asked a lot of questions about...here. About us.”

My eyes flick up to his now, and find Daniel’s eyes already on me.

“He asked about you,” Daniel says softly. “I told him you’re okay.”

“You didn’t tell him I was planning anything, did you?” I ask, abrupt.

“No,” Daniel says, flinching back a little bit. “I just said that you’re okay. That you’re feeling good in your,” he hesitates now, feeling a little awkward, “...first trimester. You’re not sick or anything.”

I look down again, pursing my lips. Because...I can’t think very hard, right now, about Kent asking about the baby. I can’t let myself think about how his voice might have sounded when he asked, or whether he actually asked if I had morning sickness, or Daniel just told him...it’s too much. It’s all just way too much.

So I move on. Because if I don’t, I’m going to have that meltdown Janeen is looking for.

“Don’t tell him anything,” I say quietly, looking down into my lap.

“Why not?” Daniel asks, curious.

“Because,” I reply, flicking my eyes up to his. “I don’t trust those phones. I know that they’re supposed to be confidential because prisoners have rights, or whatever,” I say, rolling my eyes, “but after everything Ivan pulled, I don’t believe in rights at all anymore.”

I clench my teeth again, frustrated and determined, and my three comrades sit quietly, watching me.

“Kent can’t know anything either,” I say quietly, looking around at all of them, finally deciding to let them in on the plan, just a little bit. “Because what I have planned...he has to be in ignorance of it. Complete ignorance, all right? Until I say so.”

They all just stare at me, silent.

“Okay?” I ask sharply, making Janeen flinch a bit.

“Okay,” Daniel replies, and my sister and Jerome just nod.

“And I don’t want to take any calls from him,” I say, making the decision suddenly and turning to Daniel so he sees that I mean it. “Tell him not to call me on my phone. And if he calls you on yours, I don’t want to speak to him.”

“Why?” Daniel asks, completely confused and looking so terribly sad for me.

“Because,” I say, biting out the words, ignoring his pity so that I can be bitter and determined. “As far as the world is concerned right now, Kent means nothing to me. Nothing. He’s my husband’s disgraced father, who embarrassed us and is going to be in jail for decades and never meet his grandchild. As far as everyone else is concerned, he never meant anything to me, and I never expect to see him again in my life.”

Daniel swallows hard over a lump in his throat, but nods. Jerome doesn’t say or do anything, just sits still, staring at me.

But Janeen leans forward. “Fay,” she says, shaking her head. “Not even like...if Kent called now? If we were alone – and Natalia and Alessi weren’t here – you...you wouldn’t want to talk to him.”

“No,” I reply, my voice harsh, though I look down into my lap, suddenly too exhausted to hold my head up. “Because I don’t trust the phones and I don’t...I don’t trust...”

Myself, I think, looking down into my lap.

Because that’s the truth of it.

I know that if I hear Kent’s voice, I’m going to fall to pieces. And I cannot – cannot fall to pieces right now. I need every bit of strength I have, and if I talk to him, even for a moment, I’m going to want to lean on him – and tell him everything – and let him sort it all out for me, and tell me what to do, and how to do it –

But he – he can’t do that. He just can’t - not from his place in jail – not without getting caught.

So, I have to do it for him. And it's all so precarious right now that I just can't slip.

"Fay," Janeen says, her voice too soft. With effort, I lift my head and meet her eyes. "Is it...are you moving on?" she asks, her voice squeaking a little with emotion that she doesn't usually show. "Are you...do you not love him anymore?"

I fall back in my chair, my mouth falling open in shock.

Because...

But then anger overtakes me.

"God damn it, Janeen," I snap, standing up and glaring at her over the table. "If I were giving up, do you think I'd be working this hard? If I was moving on, don't you think I'd have just taken Daniel's offer to go live peacefully in Europe and raise the baby there?" I pause, looking around at the three of them, letting my words sink in.

"I'm doing this," I continue, pressing a single finger against the table, "because I love him. All right? And that's the last time you'll hear me say it because it's too dangerous a statement to utter in this new world we're building. But don't any of you," I hiss, glaring around at all of them, "even begin to doubt it. Not for a second."

And then, too angry and overwhelmed to say anything else, I push away from the table and storm through the door into my house.

As I head to the open door of my room, I hear Janeen's question echo behind me.

"Guys...what the hell does she have planned?"

And Daniel's baffled answer.

"Honestly...I have no idea."

Chapter 178 – Meeting Daddy

Chapter 178 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

The next morning I wake up alone, blinking in the sunlight, and the grief and loneliness hits me like a truck.

I stare at my window, looking at the patch of blue sky visible through it and listening to the sound of the gulls cawing outside, thinking that it's beautiful here by the sea. Thinking that Kent

gave me this refuge away from everything so that I could have it no matter what happened to him.

And I realize that he was clever enough to get me a house filled with rooms, because he knew I'd fill it with the people I love. The people we love.

And then I cover my face with my hands, unwilling to look at any of it, sick with the grief of knowing that I'm waking up here on this gorgeous morning, listening to the sounds of birds and the crashing of surf –

And he's, what? Sitting in a cinder block cell about three feet from his toilet?

Kent gave me everything.

And I...I have given him nothing.

My eyes still closed, I reach out my hand to stretch across the bed, to the place he should be sleeping.

And then I smirk, thinking that if Kent were here we wouldn't be sleeping in this little room. Janeen has the master, and while she offered it to me the night I got here, I waved her off. It would be ridiculous for her to give up the bedroom she's been sleeping in for months just because I technically own the house.

But if Kent had been there with me?

Yeah. Janeen would be out. I laugh a little to think on it.

Then I open my eyes, looking over at the empty expanse of my bed, and I smile a little to remember the last night when Kent came through the wardrobe and slept with me in my too-small bed, wrapped up in my floral comforter.

If I had known that was going to be our last night, I wouldn't have let him go so easily that morning. I would have...

But I groan, and cover my face with my hands, and force my mind away from it. Because it doesn't matter what I would have done.

What matters now...

...is what I'm going to do.

I exhale a deep breath, moving my hands down from my face and down my body so that they settle low on my stomach. And then I bend my head a little to look down at myself – though I of course can't see anything, since I'm covered in layers of blankets and pajamas.

Still, even though I can't see...I know it's there.

"How are you doing, little kidney bean," I whisper. And then, ridiculously, I wait for a response.

My head falls back on my pillow as I sigh a moment later, realizing how stupid I'm being. But really, sometimes I wonder...when the hell am I going to feel like a mom? Or even feel pregnant? Because honestly, so far, I've got nothing, and it makes me feel – sometimes – like this is all some kind of hoax.

Honestly, I never believed those TV shows before where the women are eight months pregnant before they realize it, but right now?

When I'm more than halfway through my first trimester and I feel nothing? I kind of get it.

But I know deep down that the baby is real. And that eventually my belly is going to look like I swallowed a basketball, and then I'm going to give birth and there's going to be a little person here. I wonder, passively, what they will be like.

And I smile, a little, when I realize that I hope...

Well, that I hope the baby has red hair. Like me.

And I start to laugh lightly as I realize that I want the baby to have red hair at least a little bit because...well, because I think it will piss off Kent.

And suddenly I start to laugh harder - and then I burst into tears, because I don't know how I know that it would piss off Kent to have a little redheaded baby, but I know for sure it would – that he would be jealous, and want the baby to have black hair like him.

And then I realize that I'm also crying because...because I just had my first hope for my new baby. I actually hoped something, for the baby, and also for me.

And maybe...maybe that's the start of being a mom: making your first wish for your kid, even when they haven't been born yet.

I start to cry harder now, because maybe this is the start of it. Maybe I just started being a mom, all alone in this lonely bed in the house that Kent bought me.

But he should be here for this. For all of it.

"Well, there she is," I hear Janeen say, and I sit up, sniffing and wiping at my tears. I didn't even hear the door open.

"What?" I ask.

“My little crybaby sister,” Janeen says, smiling at me and leaning against my doorframe, wrapped in her ratty old robe. “Finally, she’s back. Come on, spill,” she says, grinning now. “What broke the dam?”

I sniff again and start laughing, shaking my head because I know it’s ridiculous. “I hoped the baby has red hair.”

Janeen bursts into laughter too, throwing her head back with it. “Seriously?” she asks, looking at me again. “And that made you cry?”

I shrug and nod as Janeen crosses the room to me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders and giving me a big hug. “Good,” she says, kissing the side of my head. “And for what it’s worth, I hope so too. We need more redheaded psychopaths in this family.”

“Just because they’re redheaded doesn’t mean they’re going to be a psycho,” I mutter, leaning against my sister.

“Oh, baby,” she sighs, petting my messy hair, “yes it does.”

“Am I interrupting something?”

I look up to see Daniel in the doorframe, leaning against it the way Janeen just was.

“No,” I say taking a deep breath as Janeen pulls away from me. “Just...sister stuff.”

“We were just saying we hope the baby looks nothing like you,” Janeen says, giving him a wide grin.

I shove her, a little bit. “That’s not what we said, Janeen.”

“Your baby would be blessed to look like me,” Daniel says, flashing us a gorgeous smile. “My little brother could only hope to be so lucky.”

“Oh?” I say, laughing again, “is it a boy now?”

“That’s his bet,” Jerome says, coming to stand behind Daniel and raising a cup of coffee towards me in a toast. “I’m team girl, though.”

“Atta boy,” Janeen says, tossing him a wink.

Daniel opens his mouth to counter, but I put up a hand. “As fascinating as all of this is,” I say, looking around at them all but letting my eyes settle on Daniel at last. “There is no time for it. Because we,” I say, giving my husband a significant look, “have to get ready.”

“Really?” he asks, surprised and suddenly suspicious. “Why?”

“Because,” I sigh. “We’re having lunch with my father.”

“Why do you have to get ready for that?” Janeen asks, confused. “He’s just going to make ham and cheese in the kitchen like he always does -”

“No, sis,” I say, lifting a hand to pat her cheek. “My other father.”

“Oh no,” Daniel moans, sinking further against the doorframe. “Can’t I get out of this? Can I have morning sickness instead of you?”

“Sorry, dear husband,” I say, giving him a sad little shrug. “We’re going to go get you a job.”

My father was more than happy to throw me a little last-minute luncheon when I sent him a message yesterday. He’s incredibly excited about being a grandfather, especially when this baby comes with wealthy Italian connections in tow. Natalia and Alessi, when I sent them a message this morning, were only too happy to shift around their plans and join in.

We’re all one big happy family now, after all. With this little Bianci/Alden baby at the center, holding us together.

“You’d better be cute, kidney bean,” I murmur down to my belly. “We’ve got a lot riding on you.”

“What?” Daniel asks, turning to me, thinking that I’m talking to him.

“Nothing,” I say, beaming up at him, letting everyone at the table – mostly my close Alden family, along with Natalia and Alessi – see how in love we are. Daniel, understanding his role, smiles and takes my chin in his hand, planting a slow kiss on my lips before turning back to my cousin on his other side.

He was a good sport about coming today, though he was sort of the last to be told. But he didn’t have any other plans, I knew. I smirk, thinking that if I didn’t bring him to lunch with me Daniel would have spent all day laying on the beach with Jerome. And while I don’t begrudge them a happy day, I have need of my husband.

Because, unfortunately for him, he has an even more important role to play in the upcoming weeks.

I sit and look down at my plate, playing with my food instead of eating it, listening quietly to the conversation around me, letting a very subtle pallor of sadness and worry settle around me.

As soon as I feel a meaty hand settle on my shoulder, I know that it worked.

I look up at my father with wide, anxious eyes.

“Come along, little daughter,” he says softly to me, putting out a hand to help me to my feet. “Let us go and have a chat.”

Chapter 179 – A Job for my Husband

Chapter 179 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

My father leads me to a little sitting room just off the dining room, built for little chats like this. We settle on a sofa where we can still see most of the action at the party, and where, indeed, I have a direct view of Tristin, who glares daggers at me while she holds my baby sister on her lap. Romulus leans across her, stealing a piece of chocolate from her plate, about which she doesn't notice or doesn't care.

She's too busy hating me.

I grimace a little, but turn my attention to my father, who focuses on me.

“What is wrong, daughter,” he says, raising a hand to my cheek and cupping my face softly in his palm. “I can see that you are worried.”

“It's nothing,” I say, laughing a little and raising my hand to cover my father's, pretending a fondness and affection that belies the rage that burns in me whenever I look at this man.

Because I have not forgotten, not for a moment, what Ivan told us: that my father was the one who, alongside him, sold Kent out. That in exchange for his information, my father was also able to pass a significant number of his crimes onto Kent's shoulders, adding them to the Lippert rap sheet and wiping them off his own.

And that, though Ivan's sudden departure from the city's drug scene devastated it and has resulted in a great deal less heroin on the streets of our fair city – which was, in retrospect, probably part of his plan – that my father has absolutely benefitted from this lack, as well as the vacuum in businesses that was left when Kent was arrested.

My father is now, hands-down, the Mafia King now that Kent has been dethroned.

And yet here he is, looking down at me like the kindest, gentlest man who has ever lived - so concerned for his daughter's happiness he'll do anything in the world to help her.

And suddenly, quite suddenly, as I look up at him I want nothing more than to bare my teeth and to use them to rip out his throat for taking my world from me, from Daniel, from Kent.

But I have work to do before I can savor that particular pleasure.

“Please, daughter,” my father says, taking his hand from my face and wrapping it around my shoulder. “I want to make you happy. I know that the rug has been pulled out from under you – that your wedding was hastily done, to account for the miracle growing in your belly. It makes sense that you are worried – please, let me help you, as a wedding gift.”

I look down at my hands, demure, twisting my fingers together and pretending to hesitate.

Even though there’s no hesitation in me at all. This is precisely what I was waiting for.

“Well,” I say, looking up at him, shy. “I – I admit that...well, father,” I say now, all in a gush, “you know I love Daniel – I don’t want you to think that I don’t –“

“Of course, of course,” he says, placating, “anyone who looks at the two of you couldn’t help but see it, plain as day.”

Yeah, I think. Anyone who hasn’t seen him with Jerome. Inwardly I roll my eyes, but outwardly I press on with my act.

“Well, he’s so good to me father, and so kind, and thoughtful, but...” I take a deep breath and look fully up into my father’s face, “I don’t think he’s very good with money.”

My father nods slowly, making soft understanding noises and encouraging me to tell him more.

“Kent left us some,” I say, speaking of him as if he’s dead – which is how I want my father to think of him as well. “But – you know it’s all tied up in legal issues. We have plenty to get by,” I continue hurriedly, “but...it’s not enough. Not for forever. Especially...” I look down at my stomach now, letting him fill in the blanks.

“Not enough for the child’s future,” he says, understanding.

I nod, agreeing even though inwardly I laugh. Daniel and I still have the greater part of four million dollars in cash, alongside my beach property and whatever it is that Daniel has in Europe. If a single baby can’t be raised on this?

Well. Let’s just say that I’m glad Tristin is a bit of a high-maintenance wife, at this point. I make a mental note to thank her at some later date.

“So what would you have me do, Fay,” my father asks, his voice friendly and kind, pleased at the prospect of being able to do something for me, for his grandchild.

“I wondered,” I say, turning my head and looking up at him like he’s my saving grace, “if you could...teach him? Just a little bit? His father – Mr. Lippert,” I say, laughing inwardly at my use of the name, “didn’t teach Daniel very much about the ways of...business.”

I heavily emphasize the last word of my sentence, making it impossible for my father to not hear “business” as “mafia.”

My father lifts his chin and hums, arching a brow as if he thinks Kent a great fool.

I press on.

“Do you think you could teach him?” I ask, as if I just came up with the idea now, a bright new thing. “Just a...just a little bit?” I say eagerly, pressing my hands to his arm. “Just to get him started?”

My father hesitates, perhaps not wanting to take a Lippert into his business, but then his eyebrows raise as he perhaps considers the closer ties he’d have to the Bianci family if he takes Daniel under his wing. “Well, perhaps,” my father murmurs. “In some small way...”

But I snatch my hands away, suddenly hesitating, and my father turns to me, asking me what’s wrong.

“I don’t...” I whisper now, glancing over my shoulder as if afraid Daniel will hear me. “I don’t want Daniel to go to...jail. Not like...his father. So...is there a part of your business? That would be...safer?”

My father nods, considering, perhaps running through the rolodex of industries that he has under his name. The greatest share of his profits come from running in the drug trade, I know – but I want Daniel nowhere near that.

“I could...perhaps put him somewhere in waste management,” my father says, considering, but I screw up my face in distaste, making my father laugh. “Ah, the little bride does not want her husband coming home smelling of trash?”

“I don’t think he’d like it very much either,” I say, shaking my head. “Daniel is picky, and I don’t want him to hate it. Do you have anything...nicer?”

“Well, you would not have him in the clubs, would you,” my father sighs, speaking of the dozens of bars and strip joints that he owns around the city. Again, I shake my head. That’s not it. Come on, dad...

“Or,” he says, his eyebrows suddenly going up. “We do have the investments in shipping...”

I gasp a little in pretend inspiration and my father looks at me, a smile starting.

“Daniel really likes boats,” I say, nodding eagerly, pretending as much as I can to be a stupid little girl. My father laughs and wraps his arm around me, pleased.

“So, the boy likes boats does he? Well, they aren’t sailing ships – they’re shipping vessels, the kind with big metal containers and lots of goods.”

“What kind of goods?” I ask, curious, and my father begins to rattle them off. I listen with half an ear, my mind already moving on to the next parts of my plan.

Because with Daniel as a shipping magnate? Or, at least with his fingers in the game?

Well. From there, I can get started.

“Do you think that would please you, Fay?” My father asks, giving my shoulders a little squeeze.

And I look up at him with a big, beaming smile. “Yes, father,” I say, giving him a kiss on the cheek. “More than you know.”

“Than it shall be done,” he says, heaving himself up from the couch and then offering a hand to me, which I take. “Come, let’s go offer your new husband a job.”

Chapter 180 – Surprise Surprise

Chapter 180 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“I can’t believe you got me a job,” Daniel grumbles from the passenger seat, his arms crossed over his chest as he stares out the window.

“Bout time,” Jerome murmurs as he drives, smirking as he keeps his eyes on the road.

Daniel makes a squeak of protest as he turns to glare at his boyfriend, but Jerome just laughs. “Seriously, Danny,” he says, shaking his head, “you’ve never had a job in your life. Pay your dues! Especially as it doesn’t sound like Donna Lippert back there,” he says, pointing at me with a thumb over his shoulder, “intends for you to do it forever.”

“Just for a little bit, Daniel,” I say, looking up from my phone for just a second to see him glaring at me, “until we get the information we need.”

“And what information,” Daniel snaps, “do we need? So I can get it and get out of there as fast as possible.”

“I don’t know yet,” I sigh, content. “I’ll know it when I hear it.”

Daniel grumbles more and Jerome laughs at him.

“You know this is your fault, Jerome,” I call to him, tucking my phone back into my purse and smiling as I stir the pot.

“What!?” he gasps, glaring at me in the rearview mirror. “What the hell did I do?”

“You pamper Daniel,” I say, grinning and settling back against the leather of my own seat. “You take him to the beach all day, and carry his bag, and make it so he never wants to do a day of work in his whole life, because he just wants to hang out with you –“

“Um, I did not start this pattern, Fay,” Jerome corrects, “it’s your baby daddy that let him go to college for eternity, majoring in end-of-the-road degrees like English and Philosophy and Archaeology.”

“True,” I say with a sigh. “Though I’d like to see you accuse Kent of it to his face.”

“I would,” Jerome says, assured. “As long as he was...still behind bars.”

We all laugh at that, Daniel shaking his head and not really denying that he’s been a bit of a spoiled rich boy his whole life. But neither Jerome nor I really hold it against him – though we are willing to tease him about it. We like Daniel just the way he is, and I know Jerome in particular likes to dote on him. It’s part of why they work.

Daniel, I suspect, pays Jerome back in his own way.

But before I can decide whether I even want to consider what those methods of payback are – he is my husband, after all – I sit up straight when we turn the corner onto our street and I see a familiar car in the driveway.

“No way,” Jerome murmurs, slowing down and shaking his head.

“They let him keep the Ferrari?” Daniel whispers, completely shocked.

My heart begins to pound as I realize that, while I thought today’s work was over and I could just relax...

Apparently, it’s just begun. Because Ivan has come for a visit. And I have to be very, very careful with how I handle this.

“Did you know about this?” Daniel snaps, turning to me suddenly.

“I did not,” I answer, firm, my voice low with my instant anger at the accusation behind his question.

“Well you didn’t tell me about lunch today –“

“This is different,” I snap. “And you know it.”

Daniel takes a deep breath, staring at me, and then he nods, understanding.

“All right, boys,” I say, leaning forward to look out the windshield, trying to see if Ivan is anywhere in sight. But I don’t see him yet. “Follow my lead.”

“Hey, Fay!” Janeen calls to me from the kitchen in the sing-song way she always used to do when we were kids. Then her head peeks around the corner of the second-floor landing, an eager grin on her face. “Your cop friend came to visit.”

I roll my eyes at her as I make my way up the stairs, Daniel and Jerome coming along behind me.

“Thanks, Janeen,” I murmur. “But we kind of figured it out, considering the flashy car in the driveway.”

“You know me,” Ivan says as we come into the kitchen. I immediately turn to face him. “I always like to make an impression.”

I look Ivan up and down, considering that his look has completely changed since he’s come out from being under-cover. Whereas he was always bad-boy chic before, now he’s...well, he’s clean cut in black pants and a button-up shirt. But somehow he’s still got that air of bad boy around him. The tattoos, after all, are all real.

Ivan smiles as he sees me taking him in, slowly lifting a glass of lemonade to his lips and taking a sip.

“Seriously?” I ask, turning to Janeen and frowning at her. “You gave him refreshments?”

“Well, I will not be rude, Fay,” Janeen says, giving me a mock frown that secretly tells me how delighted she is at all the drama occurring in the house right now. “Not in my own home.”

“My home,” I correct, walking to the fridge and pulling it open, grabbing a water bottle and then walking past Ivan, heading for the back deck. “Come on,” I say, waving to him.

“Fay,” Daniel snaps, making me look over my shoulder at him, but I don’t stop. “Are you actually going to talk to him?”

“Don’t be jealous,” Ivan says, walking backwards to grin at Daniel as he follows me towards the deck. “I’m only chatting with your wife. Not your boyfriend.”

Daniel growls and lunges forward but Jerome easily catches his arm, holding him back and laughing a little. “Come on, Danny,” Jerome murmurs. “Don’t rise to the bait that easy.”

Ivan’s still smiling as he turns to me where I stand at the back slider, my eyebrows raised. “Do you have to?” I ask, gesturing him outside.

“I do not,” he replies with a sigh and a shrug. “Though I find it very hard to resist.”

I shake my head at Ivan as I slide the door shut behind him, making eye contact with Daniel and nodding so that he knows that I've got this handled. Daniel just settles on the couch, his arms crossed, staring out at us – apparently content to watch everything we do.

Jerome, to his credit, settles beside Daniel and picks up a magazine from the table, starting to flick through it. Janeen does the same.

“So,” Ivan says, settling back in his chair and giving me his patented satisfied smile. “How are you enjoying married life?”

“It's great,” I snap, and then I nod my chin towards him. “What happened to your face?”

“Oh this?” Ivan asks, running a hand over the right side of his jaw, where a large bruise is fading from purple to green, just barely visible on his pale skin. He grins. “What do you think happened?”

“No way,” I say, leaning forward, my eyes going wide. “Kent punched you?”

“Punched the shit out of me,” he confirms, sighing and smirking at me. “He's fast, for an old guy.”

I laugh a little and shake my head, a little pleased that Ivan underestimated Kent's physicality and paid the price for it.

But after a moment, I look up at Ivan and cock my head to the side. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?” he asks, taking another sip of his lemonade.

“Disarm me like that?” I ask, genuinely curious. “I came into his house ready to hate you, and what, sixty seconds later? You have me laughing.”

“It's still me, Fay,” Ivan says, leaning forward a little, holding my gaze. “I know that...that there's been a lot of lies, and misinformation. But...” he shakes his head, “you still know me. The connection we made over these past couple of months – it was real.”

I sit back in my chair, looking away from him, still determined to hate him but...well, kind of believing what he says. That as much as Ivan is a cop now, instead of a mafia boss, he's still also the guy I formed such an intense connection with when I really needed support.

It's complicated. It may always be complicated.

The fact that it's complicated doesn't change anything at all but...well. It does make everything just a little bit more difficult, which is not at all what I need.

“What are you even thinking about, Fay?” Ivan asks, interrupting my thoughts and making me blink and look at him.

“What?” I ask.

“You just spaced out for a solid minute and a half,” he says. “What are you thinking?”

“I was thinking about how you ruined my life,” I say bluntly, cocking my head to the side, curious to see how he takes my words. “And how to get you out of here as fast as possible.”

“Lie,” he says, giving me a little wink.

I sigh, looking down into my lap for a second. “You always could tell when I was lying, Ivan,” I murmur.

“Because I know you, Fay,” he says, leaning forward, eager.

I look up into his eyes again. “Why are you here, Ivan?”

“Because I want to help you,” Ivan replies, honesty all over his face, as if it’s the simplest thing in the world. “And I want you to forgive me. And trust me.”

“Why on earth do you want that?” I ask, my voice soft because...I’m not sure I’m ready for his answer.

“Because,” he says, his voice equally soft, as if he’s not sure he’s ready to say it. “Even though you’re married? And knocked up with my enemy’s kid?” he shakes his head. “I...can’t stop thinking about you, Fay.”

My lips curl up into a very small, very hesitant smile.

And I let him see it.