

Chapter 181 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Ivan stays...late. Way too late.

I see my dad's expression when he comes home with the groceries, as he spies me out here with my sort-of-ex-boyfriend, and then glances at my husband, who is sitting on the couch with his boyfriend. I can't hear him, but I see him groan in confusion.

Ivan laughs a little. "Should I go in and say hi?"

"Nope," I say, wrapping my arms around my knees, starting to get a little cold as night falls. "I think that nobody in that house is very happy to see you here. Except maybe Janeen. But she just thinks you're hot."

"Really," Ivan says, perking up and looking around for her.

"Don't," I say, laughing and swatting his arm. "She'll just rope you into being one of her regulars at the club. She'll drain your bank account and leave you sobbing."

"Yeah," Ivan says, turning back to me and raising his eyebrows provocatively. "But don't you already know, Fay? Complicated, hard-to-get girls are kind of my type."

I roll my eyes at him, but I can't help laughing anyway. "Why do you even like me, Ivan?" I ask, shaking my head and genuinely wanting to know. "I mean, is it just the hard-to-get thing? Do you just like a challenge?"

"Are you a challenge?" he asks, turning his head and looking me up and down.

"Well, I am married," I point out, laying out the facts like they're obvious. "And I hate you, and you've already got a bruise on your face from the guy who got me pregnant, so," I shrug, "yeah, I think that qualifies as challenging."

"Yeah," Ivan says slowly, nodding a little and considering my points. "But your marriage is a sham to make your baby legitimate, and your baby daddy is locked up forever, and, above all," he takes a moment to really look into my face now, making me hear him, "you don't hate me, Fay. Not really. Not in your heart."

"Don't I?" I ask, letting my eyes fall to his mouth.

“Maybe for now,” he murmurs. “But...you have a heart. You know what’s right. And I did what I did because it was right.”

“Right for you,” I sigh, closing my eyes and letting my head hang back a little.

“And for you,” he replies, but I almost feel him lean back in his chair, giving me my space. Because if this is real for him – like actually real? Then he knows that he’s playing the long game. And he’s not going to be getting much more from me tonight.

I open my eyes when I hear the door slide open. My brow furrows when I see Janeen coming out with two beers in hand, shutting the door behind her. “Hey,” she says, plopping down in the chair next to Ivan and setting the beer in front of him. “I thought I’d bring you your last drink before Mafia Jr. in there rips you to shreds.”

“Who, Danny boy?” Ivan asks, grinning and peering into the house where Daniel is still glaring at us, his arms crossed. Jerome, still casual, continues to read contentedly beside him. My dad sits on Daniel’s other side, watching a game on the TV. Ivan laughs a little. “I can take him.”

“I don’t know,” Janeen murmurs, smirking and likewise looking in at Daniel. “He’s got a couple inches on you.”

“Yeah, but I’m scrappy,” Ivan says, over-confident and optimistic in his usual charming way.

“Don’t underestimate Daniel,” I sigh, leaning back. “He boxes. And I’m pretty sure his dad taught him how to hit.” I let my eyes drift to the green spot on Ivan’s jaw and he turns to me, laughing, as Janeen sees the direction of my gaze.

“No way!” she says, laughing and hitting Ivan on the arm. “You told me you fell at work!”

“I did fall at work,” he murmurs, rubbing his jaw again and laughing at himself. “I just didn’t tell you whose fist I ran into that made me fall at work.”

“‘Ran into,’ my ass,” I murmur, shaking my head and making them both laugh harder.

Janeen and I quietly watch Ian drive away down our street a little bit later.

“Did you ever get the story behind the car?” she asks, curious.

“Nope,” I say, shaking my head. “You should get him to come to the strip club sometime. See if you can get him to give it to you as a tip.”

“Tempting,” she says, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. Then she gives me a bright, happy grin. “You know, Fay, if I’m being honest, I like that one. He’s my favorite of your three weird boyfriends.”

“That’s not fair,” I say, frowning at her. “You don’t know Kent very well –“

She laughs at me, shaking her head. “Seriously? Your first instinct is to defend Kent, when I live with Daniel?”

“Well, I was getting to that!”

“Seriously though,” she says, dropping her voice now. “Ivan is a nice guy, and he cares about you.”

“So does my husband, Janeen,” I say, frowning at her. “And Kent.”

“I know,” she says, nodding to me, fully serious now. “But your husband...he’s eventually going to leave you for that stone-cold cutie up there,” she says, nodding up the stairs to where Jerome is. “That’s inevitable. And this guy...” she looks down the street after Ivan’s car. “He likes you, Fay. And he’s not incarcerated. And he’s funny.”

“He is funny, isn’t he,” I murmur, cocking my head to the side.

“Yah,” she says, nodding. “And hot.”

“Janeen,” I sigh, ducking out from under her arm. “If you’re trying to convince me to date Ivan, it does not help to hear that you think he is hot. Maybe you should date him –“

“Fay!” Janeen objects, walking after me through the front door to the house. “It’s not that I think he’s hot – he’s just objectively hot!”

“Talking about me?” Daniel asks, making us both jump when we realize that he’s sitting on the stairs, waiting for us.

“Of course, gorgeous,” Janeen says smoothly, coming forward and leaning over to give him a kiss on the cheek. “Who else would we have been talking about?”

“Oh, you know,” Daniel says, looking directly at me now. “Just the guy who, you know, ruined our lives.”

“Not my life!” Janeen says, stepping past Daniel and working her way up the stairs. “Mine just keeps getting better and better! Got my sister back, got hotties dropping by on the daily – I like this new post-Kent world!”

I sigh, crossing my arms and waiting until she disappears onto the second floor. Then I look back at Daniel. “Well?” I ask.

“Well, what?” he says, leaning back against the stair behind him.

“Well, you obviously came down here to wait for me once I came in.” I point out. “Did you want to say something?”

“Yeah, Fay,” Daniel snaps, starting to release the anger he’s clearly holding back. “I wanted to say that you’re being really fucking dumb by letting him into our house –“

“Oh shut up,” I growl, pushing past him and starting up the stairs myself.

“You are!” he insists, quickly standing up and pounding up the stairs after me. “I can’t believe you even talked to him, after what he did! That you even –“

“One,” I snap, spinning at the landing of the second floor and lifting a finger right into his face, “don’t you ever call me stupid, Daniel. I won’t let you condescend to me, not now, not ever. If you have a critique to make, fine. But don’t you dare pretend that I did something because I’m dumb.”

Daniel’s angry face twists but he purses his lips, listening to me. I hold my finger steady, staring up at him until he nods once and looks away. “Fine,” he says in a rush. “You’re right. I won’t do that again, and I didn’t mean it. But Fay, you’ve always had a soft spot for him, and he manipulates you.”

He looks back at me now, shaking his head and putting his hands on my shoulders as I drop my finger. “You chose a life, Fay. Didn’t you? A life with my dad, and with me? Ivan destroyed that life that you picked. I...I don’t want you to forget that. He’s charming, but he’s bitter, and he’s jealous.” Daniel shakes his head slowly.

And I resent it – every damn second of it.

Because Daniel? He’s doubting me.

And above all – I cannot have my team doubting me.

But as I consider how much I actually laughed with Ivan this afternoon...

I don’t know. Does Daniel have a point?

Chapter 182 - A Steady Rhythm

Chapter 182 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Okay,” I say, taking a step closer and nodding, looking up at Daniel. “I – I hear you about my soft spot, all right? I’ll be careful. But Daniel,” I say slowly, shaking my head, making him

listen. “You either trust me or you don’t. I told you last night – I’m doing this because I love your dad. I’m not doing anything for Ivan, okay? And I’m going to need you to remember that in the upcoming weeks.”

Daniel sighs in relief but then he thinks about my words and snaps his gaze back to me, narrowing his eyes. “Wait, what are you saying?”

“What do you think I’m saying?”

“Are you...is he going to be coming around more?” Daniel asks. “Is that why I have to trust you?”

“He’s going to be coming around a lot more, Danny,” I say, patting his cheek with my hand and giving him a pained little smile. “And you’re going to have to hang out with him. And pretending you’re mad. And that you’re not into him, like everyone else is.”

“Oh my godddd,” Daniel groans, putting his hands over his face. “Why are you doing this to me, Fay?!”

“I have my reasons, Daniel!” I sing over my shoulder, giving my dad a wink as I head into the living room, “you either trust me or you don’t!”

Daniel murmurs something discontentedly as I sit on the couch with Jerome and Janeen. As I settle in the spot next to Jerome, he wraps an arm around my shoulder without even turning his head to acknowledge me, his attention firmly on some show on TV.

“Wait,” Daniel says from the kitchen. “What did you just say? Pretend I’m not into him?”

“Yup,” I call back.

“I am not into Ivan,” Daniel growls, making me smirk. Jerome laughs a little too, glancing at me. I wrinkle my nose at him.

“Wait,” Daniel says, storming into the living room and glaring around at all of us. “Are...are the rest of you into Ivan?”

“I am,” Janeen says freely, raising her hand. Jerome looks at his boyfriend stone-faced, not giving anything away. Daniel takes a step forward to interrogate further, but before he can my dad interrupts by clearing his throat.

As one, we all look into the kitchen to see my dad leaning against the counter. “Well,” he says, raising a beer to his lips, “I’m not, but I have to say – if I was one of the gays? I wouldn’t kick him out of bed.”

Janeen and I howl with laughter as Daniel's jaw drops. My dad gives Daniel a wink and then takes a long sip of his beer. "Good looking kid," dad murmurs, chuckling and coming into the living room, giving Daniel a pat on the shoulder as he goes.

"I'm going to sleep," Daniel murmurs, turning away from all of us. "I need to...rethink my entire life. And my values. And particularly, the people with whom I associate."

"Night, baby," Jerome calls casually over his shoulder. Daniel mumbles something back as I snuggle closer to Jerome's side.

"He totally thinks Ivan's hot," I murmur.

"Nah, Daniel's faithful," Jerome says, giving me another little wink. "Just like you. Like I said – you and Daniel are two peas in a fucked-up pod. Once you settle on someone? It's for the long haul. You can't even see anyone else. Which is all very much to my benefit."

And I grin up at my friend, glad that someone sees the truth in me.

But also wishing, very much, that I could lay eyes on Kent. Just for a little bit, to remind me of everything that I'm fighting for.

I sigh and look down at my belly, at where my little kidney bean is growing into...a grape? I don't know. Whatever tiny food comes next. "Guess I'll just have to fight for you," I whisper to baby, too soft for even Jerome to hear, "while daddy's locked up."

The next weeks pass quickly as we fall into a weird little routine. Daniel kisses me goodbye in the morning while I savor my single cup of coffee for the day, his own triple-espresso drink packed away in a to-go container. And then he drives himself – himself – to work with my father in the fancy new Tesla provided by the Alden corporation.

Daniel doesn't work every day with my father; instead, my father has Daniel moving around to a variety of the city's shipping ports. There, he learns from my father's best men to figure out the ins and outs of his international shipping businesses – both the legitimate ones, and the illegitimate ones that import and export all kinds of illegal goods between the United States and ports unknown.

When Daniel goes, Jerome stays home with me. We all agreed on this, deciding that Jerome can function as my driver and my bodyguard on the rare occasions when I leave the house. I rolled my eyes at this suggestion at first, but Daniel's whispered "Kent would want it that way" had me convinced.

Because he's right. Kent would want it that way. And he'd probably smack the crap out of Daniel if he ever found out that he took Jerome, leaving a pregnant me at home unprotected.

Janeen does whatever she wants, as usual. She doesn't really need the money anymore – none of us do – but she still takes up shifts at Crabby Dicks, the crappy beach strip club where we had our wedding reception, whenever she wants some extra cash, or needs to dance, or just desires some male attention. Sometimes she stays out all night, sometimes she's home, but she's always here when I need her.

Dad is a more constant, quiet presence. He's been retired for years, though, so he knows how to entertain himself. Sometimes he goes back to the city to hang out with his old buddies, but most of the time he's here with me as I hunch over the kitchen table, reading through legal paperwork, and histories of mafia families, and chess manuals.

"You getting anywhere with this, Fay?" he asks, a couple of weeks into the process when I'm weirdly studying Machiavelli's *The Prince* alongside some of the international shipping maps that Daniel brought home from work.

I sigh and sit back, looking up at him. "I'm honestly not sure, dad," I say, running anxious hands through my hair and piling it messily on top of my head.

"Can I do anything to help?" he asks and I take a deep breath and smile up at him.

"Maybe order a pizza?" I say, hopeful. Dad he laughs and goes to make the call. I dig eagerly into the greasy hot pizza about an hour later, absolutely starving. Because that's how I am these days – just constantly hungry and constantly snacking to keep the nausea away.

Because the moment that I stepped into my second trimester...

Let's just say that the easy nature of my first trimester? When I wondered whether I was pregnant, because I couldn't feel – at all – that I was pregnant?

Well. That went the hell out the window.

I woke up in the middle of the night one night, green to the gills, and rushed to my bathroom to barf up absolutely everything in my stomach. And it honestly feels like I have been nauseous every single second since that first night.

The only thing that keeps the nausea at bay is constantly eating. And my solution to this – to which no one has yet protested – is to keep snacks in every corner of the house so that I can wander from room to room and there's always something waiting for me.

"What is this," Janeen murmurs one afternoon as she sits in my bathroom with me, watching me lean over my sink to put a little mascara on my eyelashes. I turn to look at her and see that she's pulled a bag of popcorn out from the bathroom closet, stashed in with the towels.

"That's my...bathroom snack..." I murmur, suddenly blushing as I realize how weird it is. But my sister just laughs at me and puts it back.

“Whatever you need, Fay,” she sighs, coming to put an arm around me and to run her hand over my belly, which is just barely starting to swell.

“How is little Princess Baby doing in there, anyway?”

“She’s good,” I murmur, though I can’t help being a little chagrined. “Wish she’d lay off the nausea trigger a little bit, though. What does she even get from it?”

“We’ll make her pay it back to us on her twenty-first birthday,” Janeen says, grinning and giving me a big kiss on the cheek. “Make her barf so much she needs bathroom snacks to recover.”

I laugh and then turn, shaking my head at her. “You need to stop calling the baby a she, Janeen,” I say, grinning. “We still don’t know, and you’re going to confuse both me and yourself – and potentially the baby, if it ends up being a boy.”

“I remain convinced,” Janeen says, waving her hand at me as she leaves me alone in the bathroom. “She until proven otherwise! Besides,” she shrugs, calling over her shoulder, “gender is a spectrum!”

I nod, conceding the point, and I turn to the mirror and grimace a little, and then look down at my belly. “What do you think, little baby,” I murmur, running a hand over my little pot belly. “You’re she until proven otherwise, while your dad, today...”

I sigh again and look at myself in the mirror, unable to muster a smile. Because even though I’m staying in the house, Jerome and Daniel are at court today, at Kent’s public hearing for his plea deal.

And even if in our justice system all those accused of crimes are innocent until proven guilty?

Today, Kent is pleading guilty.

Because I told him to.

“Well baby,” I say, not really knowing if I’m speaking to myself or to the little lemon-sized human growing inside me, “let’s just hope that this all goes well. And that I didn’t just ruin all of our lives.”

Chapter 183 – Kent and the Law

Chapter 183 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Predictably, the courtroom is packed with journalists and other members of the press. Kent has known for a long time that he's been a person of public interest – that damn Mafia King nickname had done some real damage when it was first applied to him – and whispers start around the room as he walks in wearing his orange jumpsuit, his wrists cuffed.

Kent clenches his jaw, refusing to meet any of their eyes, his gaze going immediately to the front of the room where his team of lawyers wait, and to Daniel and Jerome, sitting in the first gallery row behind them. Kent's heart sinks, just a little bit, when he sees that Fay isn't there with them.

What he'd give to see her, just for a moment – just a glimpse.

She's got to be in her second trimester by now, which means she'll be showing – if just a little bit. He wants to know everything – absolutely everything about it. But he also understands: if Fay and Daniel are trying to go legitimate, to convince the world that Daniel is her husband and the father of her child, then she can't have anyone see her relationship with Daniel's father as anything but a disgraced father-in-law.

It makes sense.

But god damn it, it hits him right in the heart.

Daniel gives him a little smile, just the corner of his mouth pulling up, and Kent nods to him, and then to Jerome sitting beside him.

For a moment, as Kent passes to the group of his lawyers sitting at the front of the room, he considers how weird it is that Jerome is always around. He glances over his shoulder, frowning at the young man who he picked up basically off the streets, never intending for him to be any more than a low-level runner. And now he was the only one Daniel and Fay bailed out of jail? And he was, essentially, living with them?

Who the hell was this kid?

Kent makes a mental note to ask Daniel next time they speak alone, but then he sighs considering that...well, it doesn't really matter, does it? Jerome is in. And he, Kent, is...screwed.

The judge begins speaking and Kent's lawyers kick into gear, giving their responses and making their arguments. Kent glances over at the lawyers for the state, noticing for the first time that Ivan is over there as well, apparently waiting in case he needs to be called as a witness. But then Kent looks away, because it can't possibly matter anymore.

Kent barely listens as his lawyers speak. He knows the details of what they're asking for – he's read all the paperwork and asked all of his questions. This judgment session is, largely, a formality – the teams have come to an understanding, and the judge will only really deny it if she has some kind of personal vendetta. And, glancing up at her face, which is very nearly bored, Kent considers that it would be a surprise if she did that.

So, he lets himself space out a little bit, which he never does, glancing down at the paperwork on the table and passively reading some of the words. But as he looks closer, he frowns, leaning forward a bit to see that...

Her handwriting is...basically on every piece of paper here.

What?

Kent's eyes eagerly pass over everything on the table, noting Fay's chaotic cursive notes on nearly every document that the lawyers have brought today – which were only updated yesterday with the final details. Which means that...Fay was up last night, or this morning, going over every bit of it. What the hell?

Why on earth was she involved? Fay doesn't have a law degree – and while she's certainly clever enough to understand it...why...

Kent stands up straight and sighs through his nose, working hard to keep his face impassive. What on earth is she up to? He knows she wanted him to take this plea deal, but he had assumed it was to...keep things easy for him, for all of them. To just get everything settled so that they could all go on with their lives – Kent in jail, Daniel and Fay out in the world.

But this? The fact that she's not just leaving it up to the lawyers? That she's apparently going over every bit of the paperwork?

Kent clenches his fists as he realizes that...that Fay is fighting for him. And he doesn't get it – he doesn't know how, or why – but she's up to something.

And he could kill her for it – for putting herself in the middle, when she should be concentrating on herself, on the baby.

But damn it, if his heart doesn't swell with happiness and pride. Because his girl is out there, and she's fighting for him.

And he...he doesn't really know if he fully deserves it. Deserves her.

But he'll take it. God damnit, he'll take it, all of it. Because he's a selfish bastard and Fay?

Because she's everything.

“Mr. Lippert?” The judge says turning her gaze on him now and startling him a bit out of his reverie. “How do you plead?”

Kent glances at his lawyer, who nods to him, letting him know to do as rehearsed.

“Guilty,” he replies, his voice ringing out stronger than he thought it would when he entered the court room, almost...god, it almost sounds a little happy, and smug, and sly.

The press whispers with curiosity and anticipation.

The judge takes a moment to look at him and then puts her glasses on, looking down at her the paperwork in front of her. “So be it. The sentencing will be delayed, then, but I am well convinced that the bargain struck here between the state and the defendant is equitable. Mr. Lippert, if you provide evidence to the state regarding the illegal activities of other extant criminal organizations to the satisfaction of the state, you will be sentenced to twenty years in prison for your collected crimes. Do you understand?”

Kent sharply nods, and the judge bangs her gavel. And then it’s done.

Kent turns away from the judge but before he can turn to Daniel, Ivan catches his eye from across the room, giving him a smirk and a nod that clearly says “I’ll be seeing you soon.”

But Kent gives him nothing, and turns to his son.

Daniel’s there, and Kent quickly reaches for him, despite the rail between them. His wrists are still pinned together, but Daniel wraps him in a tight, fast hug. Kent knows that they don’t have much time before the guards pull him away, take him back to prison for the month of interrogations, but he’s going to take what he can get.

“How are you,” Kent growls, resting his head against his son’s for a moment. “Are you all right?”

“I’m good, we’re good,” Daniel says, pulling back a little bit and giving his dad a real smile. “I promise. Fay is...she’s getting fat.”

Kent laughs suddenly, surprising even himself. “No, she’s not.”

“No,” Daniel says, grinning at him, and Kent can’t help the surge of love that fills him to see his son looking so happy, even on such a tough day. “You’re right, dad – she’s not fat. She’s just got this little belly now. I – um, I wish you could see her.” His eyes flick around, aware that there might be listening ears.

Kent just nods, understanding. Daniel has to play the role of a husband telling his father about his wife’s pregnancy. Not updating an imprisoned man on the woman he loves.

“She’s healthy?” Kent asks. He knows it’s dangerous to ask, but he has to know. “The baby too?”

“Yeah,” Daniel says, smiling and running a hand through his hair. “The doctor says they’re doing great – the baby, he’s making her really nauseous –“

“He?” Kent asks, his breath catching, his eyebrows raising almost to his hairline.

But Daniel’s face suddenly falls. “Oh, god, no, dad –“

Kent frowns, not understanding.

Daniel glances at Jerome, who grimaces, and then looks back at his father. “I’m sorry – it’s kind of like, an inside joke. We don’t know the sex of the baby yet – not at all. But we have this bet going, where Janeen and Jerome think it’s a girl, and Fay’s dad and I think it’s a boy, and so we call the baby he and she – it...it doesn’t sound very funny, does it? But it’s –“

“It’s all right,” Kent says, smiling truly now as he nods to his son. Honestly, it’s the best news Daniel could have given him – that he and Fay are living in a house with so much joy in it right now, despite everything, that they have jokes about the baby. That they laugh, and tease each other, and that the baby is safe and warm.

It’s all he could have wanted. Daniel, without even knowing it, has given him a gift he couldn’t have thought to ask for.

But still. There’s more he needs to know.

Kent’s eyes flash to the guards moving close towards him now, intent on taking him away, so he leans close to his son.

“What the hell is she getting into?” Kent says, leaning close and nodding over his shoulder at all of the lawyer’s notes with Fay’s handwriting all over this. “What is she planning?”

Daniel just shrugs. “She’s a real Lippert now, dad,” he says, sighing a little. “She says when we need to know, she’ll tell us.”

“God damn it,” Kent growls, glancing away, his mind whirling. The guards come then, taking him by the arm, pulling him away. He looks back at his son and shakes his head once, sharply.

But Daniel knows his dad well enough to read him, even without the words. Don’t let her get into anything she can’t handle, Kent had said with that shake.

Daniel just shrugs, apologetic. She’s out of my control, dad.

And Kent sighs, because he knows it’s true.

When Fay is determined to do something, or have something her own way?

Lord help anyone who tries to stop her.

The guards lead Kent out of the courtroom and he lets them without hesitation or protest. He doesn’t even look back over his shoulder at his kid.

Because he doesn’t need to. Daniel gave him everything he needed – more than that.

The two of them – the only two people who matter to him in the world?

They're safe, they're happy.

And they're fighting for him.

Kent closes his eyes for just a moment, saying a quick prayer, because whatever she's doing? Fay's dabbling in a dangerous world. Kent just hopes to hell she doesn't get in so deep that she can't get herself back out.

Not for me, he thinks, shaking his head. I'm not worth that.

But if it were him on the other side, fighting for her?

He'd turn over heaven and hell to get her out.

Chapter 184 – Plans Inside Plans

Chapter 184 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

When Daniel and Jerome come home with the news of the sentencing, I don't say much. Honestly, there's not much to say. I had been fairly certain that it would go smoothly - and I've certainly got other things in my mind to worry about.

So I just nod to them, and turn back to the paperwork that's spread out all over the table, concentrating especially on the big calendar I've drawn out before me.

Because what this sentencing actually gives us, which I've been waiting for...

Is a timeline.

One month. One month of Kent spilling his guts to Ivan (which I'm sure Kent will absolutely hate), and then...we move.

"Okay," I say, looking down at my notes as Daniel and Jerome come over to the table, but before I can say anything else –

My hand flies to my mouth as my stomach turns over.

"Oh no," Jerome says, going tense before dashing into the kitchen, looking for the popcorn bowl that I've been using in emergencies when I can't get to the bathroom –

“I’ve got her!” Daniel shouts, taking me by the shoulders and rushing me to the half-bath off the kitchen, where I skitter to my knees before the toilet. Luckily, we make it in time for me to neatly throw up my breakfast directly into the toilet.

Daniel, ever sweet, holds back my hair and pets my head softly until I’m finished. Then I fall back on my butt with a groan and he hands me a tissue.

“You okay?” he asks softly, his eyes full of concern.

“Yeah,” I reply, sighing and frowning down at my stomach. “Stupid baby.”

“In baby’s defense,” Jerome says, leaning against the door frame, “she’s probably really smart.”

“Well, then she’s just a jerk,” I murmur, sighing again and working to stand up as Daniel flushes the toilet. Then he pats me on the back as I reach for the toothbrush and toothpaste I keep in here – I keep a spare set in all the bathrooms now – so I can clean the vomit taste out of my mouth.

As I brush, I stare at myself in the mirror, wondering how the hell I’m supposed to plan everything I need to plan if I’m running to the toilet five times a day, overwhelmed with nausea. There’s just...so much that needs to get finished. And with only one month...

As I lean over to spit out my toothpaste, I look down at my little belly. “You’d better not screw this up, kid,” I murmur. “Or else both of your parents will be in jail. And then you’ll get raised by Aunt Janeen and you’ll turn out really weird.”

I run a hand over my stomach, almost waiting for a reply but...nothing comes. Obviously. So, I just straighten my shoulders, take a deep breath, and get back to work.

The days pass quickly now that we have our timeline. Natalia and Alessi gave us a tearful goodbye and headed back to Italy, promising to come visit when the baby is born. With them gone, and without ever formally agreeing to it, my little household falls into a simple routine. We get up early to share a breakfast together, and then Daniel goes off to work with my father. Daniel always sighs when he comes home because I’m always waiting for him with a plate of food and a notebook. He groans, mumbling something about his second shift, and then he sits down with me and I make him tell me absolutely everything he learned that day – everything he saw, everyone he talked to, everything they said. And then I ask questions, and I make him do it all again.

“Why do you need to know this, Fay?” he asks one night, yawning and rubbing his eyes.

“I’ll tell you when you need to know,” I murmur, writing in my notebook and checking the map of international shipping routes that I had Daniel bring home for me. He just sighs, I think a little sick of hearing it, but...well.

He doesn’t have much of a choice does he?

Janeen, when she doesn't take a lunch shift at the club, hangs out with my dad. Together they keep me fed and hold back my hair when I need to barf. They watch me, and I can tell they're worried, but they don't interfere. Ivan drops in a couple of times a week and Janeen and dad are always kind to him, though Daniel and Jerome are predictably cold – as they've been instructed to be.

Also as requested, Janeen sticks close to my side when Ivan visits, not giving us time alone. Ivan just smiles at me like he knows what I'm doing, but he shrugs it off, giving me my space, letting me know by the way that he looks at me that he's willing to be patient.

But what he doesn't know is that I'm counting on that patience. And that eventually, I intend for it to pay off. That it's actually a very important part of my plan.

But even as Ivan is the one with an agenda, Jerome is the one who surprises me. He mostly hangs out with me at the table every day, passively reading newspapers and magazines, fending calls and texts from Daniel and passing me messages when Daniel asks him to. But I take his passive patience as one of his talents – after all, Kent trained him for years to sit quietly while he waited for commands.

But one day, about two weeks into our month-long timeline, as I'm leaning over a map of the local highway system, Jerome's finger suddenly appears in front of me, tapping the map.

"This isn't going to work," he murmurs, his voice sure and kind.

I look up at him in surprise. "What?"

Jerome looks at me evenly and shakes his head. "I see what you're thinking here. It's smart – but you're not seeing...this." And then he traces his finger along the map to point at an intersection that...well, he's right. I absolutely didn't see that – and it ruins all of my plans.

"Oh, crap..." I murmur, standing up straight and putting my hands on my hips, staring at the map as I realize that I have to start all over...

But then I whip my head up and stare at Jerome. "Wait, how did you know that? How do you know...how do you know what I'm thinking?"

"Because," he says evenly, giving a little shrug. "I've been sitting here with you for weeks, Fay. I've been looking at your plans as well. I mean, I've got some gaps in my knowledge but..." he smirks a little, sliding his hands into his pockets, "I've got the gist of it."

"Oh," I say, my eyes wide, and then I scowl a little, wrinkling my nose at him. I thought I'd been so secretive and clever. "Well?" I ask after a moment, biting my lip. "What do you think?"

Jerome's smirk widens into a big grin. "I think it's going to work."

“Really?” I gasp, my hands flying to my mouth, and then I squeal and throw myself into his arms. Jerome laughs and wraps me in a hug, rocking me back and forth.

“Yeah,” he says, giving me a final squeeze before releasing me. “I think that it’s...a very Fay plan, which means that not many people are going to see it coming. Of course, it all hinges on...”

“I know,” I reply, my face going a little pale. “But...I can do it, Jerome.”

“You can,” he says, giving a little shrug. “But you shouldn’t, Fay.” He puts a hand on my cheek and looks at me with sad eyes, shaking his head at me. “You should let me do it for you.”

“No,” I say, instant, shaking my head and looking back at him. “That part...that part’s my responsibility. Mine alone.”

“All right,” Jerome whispers, not pushing me on it. But then he takes his hand away and sighs, stepping back and studying me.

“What?” I ask, confused.

“I just think it’s time for you to loop Daniel in a little more,” he says, giving a shrug. “After all, he has to do all the stuff with the boats.”

I bite my lip, anxious. “You don’t think it’s too soon?”

“Two weeks, Fay,” Jerome whispers, his expression worried now. “It might not be soon enough.”

I groan and sit back down in my chair, hard, staring at the paperwork spread out on the table. After a long moment I nod. “Fine,” I say, my hand rubbing passively over my belly. “We’ll tell him tonight. And then tomorrow...” I look up at Jerome, seeing if he already knows.

“Tomorrow we go see...her.”

“Yup,” I say, taking a deep breath. Because now that I’m getting my team involved? It’s no longer just a speculation in my mind.

This is real now. And after tonight, it will have consequences.

“Anything you want me to pass along to Fay, tonight?” Ivan asks as he flips through his notes after a long interrogation session with Kent. He watches carefully as Kent declines to reply, smirking when he sees Kent’s shoulders raise in a deep sigh.

“Seriously,” Ivan says, slapping the notebook shut and leaning back in his chair, looking Kent over from head to toe. “I don’t mind. I’ll pass on a message - whatever it is you want to say.”

Slowly, Kent raises his head to meet Ivan’s eyes. He blinks once and just shakes his head at the kid, knowing that he’s needling him again. Kent’s determined not to let it work, but – as Ivan’s said before – he knows his weak spot.

Ivan’s mouth spreads into a slow smile. “She’s getting bigger,” he tells Kent, his voice soft. “Not fat – just...a cute little belly, like she’s smuggling a melon under her dress.”

Kent’s heart seizes when he hears it, and he believes him. Not only does Ivan have any reason to lie but...well, that’s how he imagined Fay would look. Keeping his gaze, Ivan leans forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

“She’s sick all the time now too,” he whispers, “just...morning sickness, all hours of the day. And when she runs to the bathroom? Sometimes I go with her. To hold her hair, rub her back...really, anything that she needs. That’s what a good guy does, isn’t it? He’s there for his girl, when she’s sick. A good dad, too.”

Kent just closes his eyes and looks away. Because even though he knows exactly what Ivan’s doing...well, he’s right, isn’t he?

That is what a dad should be doing for the mother of his child.

And here he is, rotting away in jail.

And there Ivan is, more than happy to take his spot.

“Why don’t you let her husband do those things,” Kent murmurs, not knowing why the hell Daniel keeps letting Ivan into the house. Unless Fay has a reason for it...

...or Fay is...considering him. Considering Ivan as a real replacement.

But the bare thought of that threatens to crush him, so Kent dismisses the idea.

“Daniel’s distracted,” Ivan says with a casual little sigh. “Working for Alden now, and he’s got Jerome to think about – don’t want him getting jealous - “

Kent’s eyes flash open at this and his head snaps to look at Ivan. What?

“Oh,” Ivan says, genuinely surprised. And then Ivan laughs, delighted, as he leans back in his chair. “Oh, you didn’t know about that, did you?”

Chapter 185 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Ivan's in a particularly good mood that night when he comes by tonight, but I don't find out why until just before he leaves.

"Oh, by the way," he says, glancing over at Daniel and Jerome with a friendly smile as he flattens out the empty boxes of the pizza that he brought all the way from the city. "I think I let a little something slip this morning when I probably shouldn't have. Sorry about that. I thought he knew."

Daniel sits up straight in his chair, staring at Ivan. "What are you talking about?"

Ivan can't keep the smile from his face as he runs a hand through his hair, and I shake my head at him, seeing through his apology act. He's loving this. "I may have let something slip," he says, giving a little shrug as he points a finger between Daniel and Jerome, "to Kent. About you two."

"WHAT!?" Daniel shouts, jumping to his feet.

"Whoa," Ivan says, pretending to be surprised and stepping back with his hands up, though I just sigh because I know he's faking it. "I said I was sorry – could have happened to anyone –"

"Bullshit," Jerome snaps, glaring. "You knew precisely what you were doing."

"I promise –"

"Welp," my dad says, getting to his feet and slapping his hands loudly against his thighs, interrupting everything. "I guess it's about time to get to bed." And then he gives Ivan a hard look, letting him know without any further words that it's time for him to make himself scarce.

Ivan gets the message and cheerfully says his goodbyes. I walk him down to the driveway in silence.

"Did you have to do that, Ivan?" I ask quietly as he turns to me at the driver's-side door.

"I didn't do anything," he protests, but then he just laughs a little ruefully when he sees the knowing look on my face. Because he didn't fool me – or frankly any of us. Not at all.

"I actually didn't mean to do it," he says, slipping his hands into his pockets and leaning back against his car. "This morning, when I said something to Kent? It really was innocent. I thought he knew – it's so obvious."

“Not to Kent,” I murmur, glancing up at the house where I know Daniel is probably flipping out. “But you didn’t have to do that to Daniel. It was mean.”

“Yeah well,” Ivan says, looking down at his feet a little guiltily now. “You shouldn’t lean on them as much as you do anyway, Fay. They’re going to leave you at some point, after all.”

“What?” I ask, confused.

“They’re together,” he says, looking up at me. “I mean, I get why you married Daniel – for the baby – but eventually? Those two,” he says, pointing up at the house, “are going to leave you.”

“So, what’s your advice,” I ask dryly, crossing my arms and staring at him. “Put all my eggs in your basket? Hang out with you?”

“Well, obviously, yes,” Ivan says, giving me that smile, the one I can’t resist returning. But then his face gets serious again. “But really, Fay, why do you trust this Jerome guy?”

“What?” I ask, confused. Jerome...I trust Jerome completely. He’s never given me a reason not to – has always been there. He’s my best friend and husband’s boyfriend – my literal partner in crime now. Why wouldn’t I trust him?

“That guy, Fay?” Ivan asks, standing up now and moving close to me so he can talk quietly. “He’s shady as hell. He’s always looking to get higher – always clinging on to the most powerful person he can and telling them whatever they want to hear. I’ve done my homework on Jerome Rosello, Fay – he was born with nothing, and now he’s shackled up in a million-dollar shore house, living for free, sleeping with the heir to the Lippert and Bianci fortunes? I mean, come on.”

I frown at Ivan, shaking my head, completely unwilling to believe it.

“I mean,” Ivan says, truly asking now as he glances up at the house, “is he even actually gay?”

And my mouth drops open as I remember, quite suddenly that...that Jerome hit on me – like a lot – before I found out he was with Daniel. Part of my shock at them being together was because I was thoroughly convinced that Jerome liked me.

I say nothing, but when Ivan looks back at my face he grins a little, shaking his head. “See?” he says, reaching out to put a hand on my shoulder. “I’m onto something there. Don’t trust him, Fay.”

But I frown and pull my shoulder out from beneath Ivan’s hand. “You should go.” I say, hard. Because even if Ivan has a point? Jerome has done nothing but be good to me, and help me, and prove himself a good and loyal friend. And I’m not going to let Ivan shake that faith now – not when he directly benefits from it.

“Fay,” Ivan says, his face suddenly sad. “I’m sorry – I didn’t mean to –“

“Yes, you did,” I snap, glaring up at him. “You were deliberately nasty up there tonight, to Daniel and to Jerome – you threw that in their face and couldn’t keep the smile off your mouth. And now you’re trying to drive a wedge between us. You’re being deliberately manipulative, Ivan,” I say, shaking my head at him, “and it is not a good look on you. So would you please go, and stop trying to destroy what’s left of my life?”

Ivan purses his lips as he looks at me, but I can see that he’s well aware that what I’ve said is fair.

“I am sorry, Fay,” he murmurs, and then he sighs and looks down again. “You’re right. I...wasn’t trying to be nice.”

“Well at least you admit it.” I sigh, stepping away from him.

“Can I at least –“

“Good night, Ivan,” I snap, glaring at him. And Ivan sighs and meets my eyes again.

“I’ll see you soon, okay?” I don’t respond, and after a few seconds he climbs into his car and drives away. I stand alone in the driveway for a few minutes after he’s gone, thinking through what he said.

Because even if he was just trying to rattle me?

Well, it worked. I am rattled.

Should I be trusting Jerome as much as I have been?

I turn when I hear the house door creaking open behind me.

“You coming inside?” Daniel asks. “It’s cold out here.”

I blink at him for a second and then slowly walk over to where he’s waiting with a blanket. He wraps it warmly around my shoulders and I smile up at him, touched that he’s so thoughtful.

“Thanks, Danny,” I murmur, stepping closer and letting him wrap his arms around me.

“He shook you up, didn’t he,” Daniel murmurs.

“Yeah,” I reply, sighing deeply. “He’s good at that, isn’t he?”

“The best,” Daniel replies. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Nope,” I reply, knowing that it’s true. Because even if he did sow a seed of doubt in my mind...it doesn’t matter. Jerome’s so thoroughly a part of my plan now that even if I did decide not to trust him...well, everything would fall apart. I need him, and if he decides to betray me?

Well, then I guess I'm going down.

My only option now – at all – is to trust the guy who bought me my pregnancy test, who has always been kind to me. And not the one who put my baby daddy in jail.

“Come on,” I say, pulling away from Daniel and smiling up at him. “Let’s go inside. I’ve got a lot to tell you.”

“What?” he says, his eyes going wide. “You’re – you’re actually going to fill me in on part of the plan?”

“On the whole plan,” I say, grinning up at him. “And then tomorrow? We’re going to a bar.”

“Wait, what?” he says as I take his hand and pull him into the house, kicking the door shut behind me. “We’re...which bar? Why?”

“Patience, Lippert,” I laugh, pulling him up the stairs. “All will be revealed in due time. But I think you’re going to like it.”

Chapter 186 – A Seedy Bar

Chapter 186 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Jerome, Daniel, and I are all pretty much exhausted as we pull up to the bar the next day around noon, when it opens. Jerome and I stayed up pretty late explaining the details of the plan to Daniel, and then telling him what we need him to do next...

...and then a couple more hours patting his back when he hyperventilated, convincing him not to run away from us screaming.

Because...yeah, it's a little crazy. But it's going to work!

“I can’t believe this is how I’m spending my Saturday,” Daniel murmurs as Jerome turns the car off in the nearly-empty parking lot of a very, very crappy bar. “You know that we could just go have brunch, right? Somewhere nice?”

“I bet they can rustle up some brunch here,” I say from the back seat, leaning forward to pat Daniel on the shoulder.

“At least some peanuts,” Jerome adds, glancing at me and laughing a little.

“Seriously, why are we here?” Daniel asks, frowning at us. Because while we told him pretty much everything else...we kept this one a secret.

“It’s a surprise, Danny,” I say, opening the car door and hopping out, smoothing down my black dress as I smile towards the door. I’m actually excited for this one too. I haven’t seen her in a long time, and I miss her.

Daniel sighs as he stands by my side and we wait for Jerome to come around the car. “I don’t like this Danny thing, by the way,” he says, frowning down at me.

“Yes, that’s my nickname for him,” Jerome says, grinning at me as we start for the door. “You can’t get it on it now – it’s very personal.”

“I can do as I please,” I say, flicking my hair back over my shoulder and lifting my chin. “I am a very powerful mafiosa, after all.”

“That remains to be seen,” Daniel murmurs, a little smirk on his face.

But as soon as he ducks into the bar, and sees who is standing by the counter?

That smirk falls away, completely replaced by shock.

“Hey, sugar,” Fiona says, laughing as she comes out from behind the bar and walking over to Daniel with open arms. “I missed you too, kid.”

“Oh my god,” Daniel murmurs, wrapping Fiona tight against him and lowering his dark head to press against hers. “Oh my god – Fiona – I...I honestly thought you were dead –“

“Dead!?” she laughs, pulling away. “Honestly, he was mad at me, Daniel – and rightly, I betrayed him big time. But he likes me too much to kill me –“

“I didn’t think he liked anyone too much to kill them,” Daniel replies, staring down at Fiona in awe, “not even me –“

“Yeah well,” she laughs, giving him a wink, “I did some really weird shit in bed. I earned some respect.”

Daniel blushes scarlet as Fiona pats him on the cheek and gives Jerome a hug and a quick greeting before she turns her attention to me.

“Well well well, baby Fay,” she says, wrinkling her nose and giving me a grin as she takes my hands and looks down at my stomach. “Looks like someone got you into some trouble.”

And then, before I can respond, she steps forward and wraps me in a warm hug as well. “I missed you, little cousin,” she murmurs in my ear. “I’m so glad you came. I’ve been worried about you.”

“I’ve been worried about you too,” I murmur, holding her close and closing my eyes. Fiona – she was so, so good to me, the entire time that we were in that house together. And while she, too, betrayed Kent...I just can’t bring myself to be mad about it. Because she never betrayed me.

After a long moment Fiona pulls away from me. “Looks like Kent has been busy,” she says, and I go a little pale as she looks down at my stomach with a wink. Anxious, my hands instantly go to my belly.

But then I scowl when she laughs at me, because I should have guessed that she would know immediately. I mean, she for sure knows that it wasn’t Daniel.

“Oh, come on, Fay,” she says, laughing again. “I saw how he looked at you the minute you came into that house. I wasn’t even jealous! I couldn’t compete,” she shrugs, “didn’t even want to.”

“So, you’re not...mad?” I ask, hesitant.

“It’s not like you stole my boyfriend, Fay,” she says, patting my cheek. “Kent and I – we liked each other a lot, but it was more transactional than that. Nothing close to what I saw between you two.”

“I can’t believe you caught it before the rest of us,” Daniel says, shaking his head. Jerome just smirks and I consider him, wondering how long he knew.

“It wasn’t hard,” Fiona replies, “if you were looking for it. But what the hell happened to that vasectomy I heard so much about?” she asks, frowning and looking down at my stomach again. “Was that a lie?”

“No,” I sigh, “it was real. It just...got patched up, or something.”

“Wow,” she says, her eyes going wide. “Sounds like I got out of there right in time!”

And then we’re both laughing as she warps her arm around my waist and leads me over to the bar, Daniel coming along. Jerome, as planned, quietly steps aside and works his way around the room with a little device that’s supposed to detect any places in which the room has been bugged.

I glare at the little device in his hands for a moment as Fiona works her way to the other side of the bar, wishing to hell I’d had that a couple of months ago to scan my bedroom. It would have saved us a hell of a lot of trouble.

“As much as I love a reunion for reunion’s sake,” Fiona says as Daniel helps me up onto a barstool, “I have a feeling that there’s more going on here.”

“Can’t a cousin just come for a nice cup of tea?” I ask, coy.

“They can,” Fiona says, leaning against the bar and studying me with narrowed eyes now. “But you’re not here for that. You’re different. No longer my little baby Fay...you’re all grown up.”

I smile at her, leaning forward and resting my chin in my upturned palms. “Maybe not all the way grown up. I still need my cousin’s help.”

“Really,” she says, continuing to clean the glasses and raising an eyebrow at me. “With what?”

“Phone, please,” Jerome says, putting his hand out to Fiona and nodding to me, letting me know that the room is clean.

“What?” she asks, a little appalled at the request.

“Just to take into the other room while you chat,” Jerome says, giving her a warm smile. “Can’t risk being recorded.”

“Oh,” Fiona says, looking between me and Daniel. “Oh, so this is a real talk.”

She pulls her cell phone out of a purse sitting near her and puts it in Jerome’s hand. He moves quickly away, carrying it to the next room. Fiona crosses her arms and looks between us.

“Before you start,” she says, raising a finger. “You should know that I still work for your dad, Fay. Anything that you don’t want him to hear about...you should probably keep to yourself.”

“Is he good to you, Fiona?” I ask quietly, looking down at the bar and then up into her eyes.

She just frowns at me as Jerome comes back to my side.

“Because it looks to me,” I continue, my voice soft, “that he asked you to take a very dangerous job informing on Kent for years, and then – when you were found out – he didn’t compensate you very well for all of that labor. Or all of the information you provided.”

Fiona blushes a little, looking around the crappy bar which can’t be paying her well and which is nowhere near the quality of living to which she became accustomed under Kent’s care. “Well,” she says, a little chagrined, “I was a shit spy, wasn’t I? I got caught.”

“You weren’t a shit spy,” I say, shaking my head. “You worked for years doing that, and Kent never suspected for a single second. My dad just convinced you that you were bad at it because he doesn’t feel like he needs to respect you.”

“What are you doing, Fay,” Fiona snaps, staring hard at me. “You are getting into some dangerous waters right now. And you might want to stop – because as much as I admit I don’t really like your dad, and I think he’s doing kind of a shit job making the right choices for this family? I am not ever going to betray this family.”

“I’m not asking you to betray it,” I say, leaning forward and holding her gaze. “I’m asking you to...consider a change in leadership.”

“What,” she scoffs, laughing at me as she starts to shake her head. “What, you want me to follow you now, baby Fay? After you’ve had, what, three months of experience? You want to take over the Alden family business?”

“No, Fiona,” I say quietly, still holding her gaze seriously. “I want you to do that.”

And her jaw falls nearly to the floor.

Fiona stares at me, and then Daniel, and then Jerome for a long, long moment before shutting her mouth, hard. “All right,” she says hastily, looking around the room anxiously. “I’m listening. And that does not mean that I am in. But I am listening.”

And then Daniel, Jerome, Fiona and I talk for a long, long time.

By the time we’re finished making our offer to Fiona, the bar has filled up a little bit with some of its regular clientele – neighborhood folks, mostly, but no one who’s paying a great deal of attention to us. Fiona serves a couple of beers and then comes back shakes her head at me, a small smile on her lips. “I always knew you had the balls, little cousin,” she says. “I just never knew if you’d find them or not.”

“Yeah well,” I say, shrugging and sipping on the Shirley Temple that Fiona made me, “one learns a certain set of skills at Kent’s knee.”

“Oh yeah?” she says, smirking. “Bent you over his knee, did you? He likes that.”

“Enough!” Daniel almost shouts, cutting the air between us with a slice of his hand. “No more of that! Too much sharing of things I do not need to know!”

Fiona and I are still laughing, hard, when the old beige rotary phone next to her starts to ring. She makes a move to answer it but I grab her hand instead.

“Fiona,” I say quietly, my heart in my eyes as she looks into my face. “I understand that you might say no. And that’s okay. But if you do...could you please not totally fuck me over? Or tell anyone anything that’s going to get me killed?”

Fiona clicks her tongue and takes my hand, squeezing it. “I promise you, cousin,” she says quietly, holding my eyes. “If I decide to say no, then this conversation never happened. You’re my baby Fay. I’ll never hurt you.”

Tears sting my eyes a little bit as I nod to her, smiling, grateful. Daniel puts a warm hand on my back, letting me know that he thinks we can trust her.

“But really, kid,” she says, nodding towards the phone. “You want me to get this one.”

“What?” I ask, confused, pulling my hand away and letting her reach for the phone.

“It’s for you,” Jerome says quietly, leaning forward from Daniel’s other side. “I, um...I set it up. Because I thought you needed it.”

Chapter 187 – A Few Short Words

Chapter 187 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“What?” I ask again, baffled.

But my head snaps back to Fiona as I hear her answer the phone. “A caller from the prison? Sure, I’ll accept.” And then she gives me one of her trademark winks and holds out the phone to me. “It’s for you.”

“W...what?” I say again, obviously at a loss for words as I stare first at my cousin, and then my husband, and then at my friend.

“Honestly, this is what I thought you were coming here for today, Fay,” Fiona says with a laugh, holding the phone out to me. “I didn’t know you were going to make me an offer I can’t refuse on top of that.”

“It’s all right, Fay,” Jerome says, reaching out to take my hand and squeeze it. “As far as anyone in the prison knows, he’s calling a bar where his ex works. No one knows it’s you.”

And I stare at the phone, realizing that Jerome’s right. That...if I’m careful with what I say, and Kent isn’t a complete idiot...there’s no reason for anyone to think that it’s me on the other end of this phone call.

“Time’s a-wasting, baby,” Fiona says softly, holding the phone out to me. From the receiver, I can hear someone – quite faintly - saying “Hello?”

My hand is shaking as I reach out and take the beige receiver from her hand. As soon as I do, Fiona moves away. “Come on,” she says, waving to Daniel and Jerome. “Let’s give her a minute.”

Daniel leans in to give me a kiss on the cheek, but then he’s gone – across to the other side of the bar with Fiona and Jerome.

And then it’s just me. With this phone in my hand.

Slowly, I raise it to my ear.

The first thing I hear is Kent heave a frustrated sigh. “God damn it,” he mutters, “is this thing even working?”

“H-hello?”

There’s a sharp intake of breath, and then I hear him hold it. And I can’t help the little smile that comes to my lips –

Because, even if he’s locked up in prison...there’s always something satisfying about catching Kent off guard.

“Hey,” he says, the word coming out on a huge, relieved exhale of breath.

“Hi,” I reply, a smile widening as I press my eyes shut and let my head fall back, laughing a little at how unoriginal our conversation has been thus far.

“What’s so funny,” he murmurs, and I can feel the ease come into his voice, can almost see the way his shoulders must be loosening right now.

“You are,” I reply, my heart and my stomach fluttering with joy as I try to concentrate on listening, on taking in every sound along the line of the phone – his words, his breath, even his very Kent-like silences. “We are. You’d think we’d have more to say.”

“Oh, I’ve got plenty to say,” he replies, a little growl in his voice. “Though I’d rather say it to your face.” I laugh again, knowing that he means more than what these few words carry on their surface. Instead, they hold a whole world of meaning – letting me know that Kent’s mad at me for doing whatever I’m doing, that it’s causing him a great deal of anxiety as he sits there in his cell worrying about me. He’d much rather I just chilled out and grew a baby instead of hatching these insane plans.

“Yeah well,” I reply, working hard to fight the growing tightness in my throat. “I’ll take what I can get.” Then my cool breaks a bit, and the words stumble out of me. “Um, Kent? Can you just...talk? For a long time? Read out the dictionary or something?”

“What?” he replies, baffled. “Why?”

“Because,” I murmur. “I just...I want to listen to you speak. I miss the sound of your voice.”

“God damn it,” he mutters, his voice choked, and – again – even though I can’t see him, I know he’s burying his face in his hand, overwhelmed and trying to pretend like he’s not. “I’m sick of hearing my voice,” he says. “I’d rather hear yours.”

“Selfish,” I chide, making him laugh, and I almost groan when I hear it. I’d forgotten it, what it sounds like. And I hate myself for forgetting.

“Yeah well,” he murmurs. “You’ve met me. You can’t be surprised by that.”

I’m quiet for a long moment.

“Are you there?” he asks.

“Do you remember the last thing you said to me?” I ask quietly.

It’s his turn to be quiet now, but he comes back faster than I did. “I called you a liar.” I can hear the shame in his voice, and it kills me to make him feel that way because I know our time is short. But...I need to know.

“Do you still think that?” I ask, hardly able to raise my voice above a whisper.

“No,” he replies, immediately. “I – I’m sorry. I never should have...”

“It made sense for your first reaction to be doubt,” I say, pressing my eyes shut and shaking my head. “But I didn’t lie, Kent – I swear, I –“

“You don’t have to swear to me, F-...” I can hear him press his lips shut as he avoids saying my name. And I take a sharp, deep breath, knowing we’re on shaky ground. “I have no doubts,” he finishes.

“Good,” I murmur, and again I laugh just a little bit, because the word is pathetically inept in terms of encapsulating everything that I’m feeling right now.

“How is...it?” he asks, again hesitating, knowing that he can’t say anything more obvious than that.

“It?” I say, sighing and rubbing a hand across my belly. “It...is a jerk.”

He laughs again at that, a long peel of laughter that makes my heart clench almost painfully as I grin and shake my head.

“It won’t always be like that,” he sighs, and I can hear him smiling.

“Better not be,” I murmur, “I’m sick all the time.”

“And eating like a horse, I bet.”

“Yup,” I reply, losing track of my caution a little for a moment. My voice falls into a lower register now, deepening, softening. “You know food what it likes?”

“I do not,” he replies, his own voice velvet, and I can feel us falling into our old rhythms. If I close my eyes and ignore everything but the sound of his voice, I can almost imagine being

curled up next to him in the dark, my head on the soft place between his shoulder and his chest that I like best. “Tell me.”

“You have to guess,” I tease.

“No,” he refuses, making me laugh again, because I almost missed – momentarily - how contrary and stubborn he can be.

“Do it!” I insist, wiping a stray tear away from my eye as I lose myself completely to the conversation.

“Bananas,” he ventures, and, still laughing, I shake my head. But even though he can’t see me, he can tell he was wrong. Maybe he, too, knows me well enough that he can imagine my gestures alongside my words, the sound of my breath.

“Tiramisu,” he tries.

“Ew,” I reply, wrinkling my nose and feeling actual nausea build in my stomach at the thought.

“How can you say ew to tiramisu, it’s delicious –“

“It is not,” I counter, my face disgusted now. “Ugh – coffee and custard? Who came up with that? You’re bad at this – maybe we shouldn’t play –“

“Fine, fine,” he sighs. “Because it’s you, and you have the food preferences of a fourth grader...I’m going to guess pizza.”

“Bingo,” I say, my face breaking out into a huge grin. Kent laughs, victorious.

“At least it’s Italian,” he murmurs.

“Yeah, but it wants lots of ranch dressing on top –“

Kent groans. “Don’t tell me these things – I don’t need to know how you’re bastardizing the national dish –“

“One Minute Left,” says a mechanical voice, interrupting our conversation and making my eyes fly open.

“Oh,” I say. “Um...I didn’t realize it would be so short.”

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs, “I didn’t have much phone time left this week. If I’d have known –“

“It’s okay,” I interrupt, sitting up suddenly and feeling frantic, not knowing...how to end this. “Um...”

“Promise me you’re not doing anything stupid,” Kent orders, his voice suddenly very serious.

“I can’t,” I whisper back, unwilling to lie to him. “But...I’m safe, okay? We all are.”

He sighs, not saying anything, I think struggling with the fact that there’s nothing he can do about it.

“Okay,” he murmurs, finally. My breath ratchets up now and I wish I’d started counting after the mechanical voice gave us the time check – how many seconds are left?

“Hey,” I say, all in a whispered rush, “I...I love you, all right?” My voice cracks as I say the words, my breath hitching in my chest.

There’s a long beat before Kent replies.

“God damn it,” he murmurs, his own voice strangled. “You were supposed to let me say that first. And in person, not over a damn phone -”

I burst into laughter at this. “Well, we don’t have a lot of options now, do we?”

A beep comes on the phone. What does that mean?

“Times up,” he murmurs, and I can almost feel him smiling.

“Well!?” I say, a little frantic.

“Don’t worry,” he says, serious. “I love you. Of course I do. And –”

But he can’t finish his sentence. The line goes blank.

Time really is up.

I lower the phone to my lap and just stare at it for a long few moments, a stupid smile on my face.

Because Kent loves me.

I mean, I knew. I think I’ve known since that last night, since he climbed through the wardrobe and slept with me in my little bed.

But...hearing him say it? It’s...absolutely everything to me.

And this plan?

God damn it, this plan is going to work – I’m going to make it work.

Because Kent's right – the next time I say that? It's going to be to his face.

Chapter 188 – Boy at Home

Chapter 188 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

When I take a deep breath and look over at my family, I burst into laughter because they're all watching me with wide, anxious eyes.

So, I hang up the phone and walk over to them, shaking my head and wiping at the slight dampness beneath my eyes.

“Well, that looked suitably intense,” Daniel murmurs, opening his arm to me and inviting me to come in for a good cuddle, which I accept.

“You could have told me,” I murmur, wanting to sound angry but feeling far too happy for that. “Then I could have had something to say. We talked about...bananas...”

“What!?” Daniel exclaims, laughing. Fiona and Jerome join in.

“I don't know!” I reply, breaking into laughter myself. “It all happened really fast!”

“Aww, poor baby,” Fiona murmurs, leaning across the bar and smiling at me as she wipes a thumb across my cheek, getting the last of my tears away. “You've got it bad, don't you?”

“She suuuure does,” Jerome says, grinning at me. “I just hope Kent knows how lucky he is.”

“Well,” Fiona says with a sigh, looking around at us. “I have a feeling he's going to find out in a few short days.”

Before I can ask her if what she says means what I think it means – that she's going to agree to my plan and help us – Fiona's face breaks into a big grin and she waves at someone at the door.

“I want you guys to meet someone,” she says, leaning eagerly forward.

We all turn to see who it is and my mouth drops open a little bit as I take in the man who comes forward and eagerly reaches for my cousin across the bar, instantly claiming her mouth with his own for a good long kiss.

“Um,” I say quietly, glancing over at Daniel and Jerome. “Am I imagining things here or...”

“Nope...” Jerome says, his face just as shocked. “Fiona...clearly has a type.”

Fiona laughs when she hears this, pulling her face away from the man but keeping a hand on his arm as they both turn towards us. “Yeah,” she agrees, wrinkling her nose. “Kinda. Everyone, I want you to meet my boyfriend, Donnie.”

And then she introduces the rest of us around to Donnie, but none of us can peel our eyes off him, except to look back and forth between him and Daniel.

Because this guy? With his dark hair, and his diamond-cut jaw, and his broad, muscled shoulders?

He’s a dead ringer for a Lippert.

“This,” I murmur, catching Jerome’s eye, “...could come in useful.”

“Oh, I can think of many uses for this one,” he murmurs, grinning up into Donnie’s confused face and reaching out a hand. “Hi, I’m Jerome. It is an absolute pleasure to meet you –“

But Daniel just scowls and swats Jerome’s hand away before Donnie can take it. “Enough of that,” he growls, “we’re out of here.” Everyone but Daniel bursts into laughter at his obvious jealousy, except for Donnie, of course, who looks around at us in confusion.

“What did I miss?” Donnie asks, but Fiona just pats him on the arm and tells him not to worry about it.

To my surprise, Daniel sits in the back of the car with me on the way home, letting me rest my head on his shoulder as I close my eyes. He pretends that he’s sitting back here so he can hold a barf bag for me if I need to throw up, but we all know that he’s just being sweet.

Because frankly, I need him close right now, and he’s intuited that. As much as I’d never give up the short minutes I spent talking to Kent today, it certainly took its toll on me emotionally.

I’ve been so good at being focused these past few weeks, at being strict and disciplined and keeping all of my anxieties neatly tucked away. But, as I feared it would, even a short conversation with Kent has me feeling vulnerable, and missing him terribly, and just wanting to crawl into a little ball of fear and grief.

“It’ll be all right, kid,” Daniel murmurs, kissing me on the head.

“I know,” I sigh. “Just a few more days.”

“Just a few more days,” he confirms.

We continue to sit in silence until I feel the car make the final turns which I know signal our approach to the beach house. I open my eyes and then moan a little when I see Ivan's car in the driveway.

"Do you want me to tell him to go?" Daniel asks, maybe a little too eager. This is an unscheduled visit, after all – or at least I think it is. I didn't bring my phone with me today, so I don't know if Ivan texted me earlier to ask if he could stop by, which he usually does.

"No," I sigh, sitting up straight and patting at my dress and hair and turning my face up to Daniel's. "I can do it. Do I have mascara all under my eyes? Do I look like I've been crying?"

"Nope," he says, taking my chin between his thumb and forefinger and turning it a little in the light of the setting sun to make sure he gets a good look. "You look beautiful, as always." And then he leans in and gives me a little peck on the lips.

I glare at him as he pulls away, knowing that he waited to do that until we were close enough for Ivan to see.

"What," Daniel says, glancing out the window as Jerome pulls our car into the driveway and we can both see an angry Ivan waiting there for us. "You're my wife! I can kiss you if I want."

I roll my eyes at him. "Don't mess with the plan, Daniel," I murmur, reaching for my door. "Your job is to be jealous, not infatuated."

"They go hand in hand," he says, opening his door and stepping out to give Ivan a too-warm welcome, clapping him on the shoulder before heading to the house at Jerome's side.

I watch them go as I walk over to where Ivan is waiting for me, unmoving. "Was I expecting you?" I ask, unable to keep the exhaustion out of my voice.

"Where were you today?" Ivan snaps, and I blink at him, actually surprised.

"Is it any of your business where I went today?" I ask, starting to get pissed.

"Answer the question, Fay," he replies, quick – more the police interrogator than the lovesick boy I've seen lately.

"I went to lunch," I say immediately, crossing my arms over my chest and looking Ivan up and down.

"Long ass lunch" he murmurs, leaning forward and studying me.

"Yeah," I say, nodding and not backing down. "It was. Now, why the hell do you care?"

"Because I was at the jail today," Ivan snaps, still watching my face for any reaction. And suddenly I realize precisely where this is going, and that I have to be very, very careful.

God damn it, I knew a phone call was a bad idea. I'm going to kill Jerome.

"And," Ivan continues, "while I was there, Lippert took a very interesting call."

I sigh and then clench my jaw, letting him see my frustration. "What does this have to do with me, Ivan?"

"Were you on the phone with him? Did he call you?"

Good, I think to myself. He wasn't listening in. Because if he was, he would definitely know that I was, and then this would be a different conversation.

"No," I say again, shaking my head. "He didn't. Why? Did you think I was?"

Ivan grits his teeth now. "I've been interrogating Kent for a month, Fay," he says, "and the only time he gets worked up like that is when I bring up you. Now tell me the truth: were you talking to him today?"

"I wasn't," I say, and then I sigh, as if I'm over this whole thing. "But honestly, Ivan, why would it even be any of your business if I was?"

His eyes flare then and I realize with pleasure that it was the right thing to say. Because now we're not talking about me anymore: we're talking about us.

"Because, Fay," Ivan growls, wrapping his hand around my upper arm – not cruel, not hurting me, but possessive. "I care about you – and I have been caring about you this entire time while he has just been sitting in a jail cell spilling his guts to the state. I thought that – that we –"

And then he snaps his mouth shut and looks away from me. I study him, feeling suddenly a little guilty about the sincere jealousy on his face. Because Ivan, I realize – not that I didn't know it before – he really is trying. He wants this to work – he wants to be with me.

And I am using him, brutally, to get what I want.

But damn it, he started it when he slipped that listening device into the jacket he gave me. Whatever happens next is his own damn fault.

"Hey," I say quietly, stepping closer to him and raising a hand to cup his cheek. "Ivan, I didn't talk to Kent today, all right?" I say, shaking my head and looking up into his pretty grey eyes. "You can always tell when I'm lying, right?"

It's a gamble, I know – because Ivan's internal lie detector is actually pretty good.

But it's a gamble I'm willing to take.

He studies me for a moment and then exhales a long breath. “Yeah,” he replies, nodding a little bit. “All right, Fay. All right.”

“Come inside,” I murmur, taking another step closer so that my baby bump almost presses against his stomach. Almost – but not quite. “Let’s get you something to eat, okay?”

“Okay,” he says, though I can still see his mind whirling, probably wondering what got Kent so worked up if I wasn’t me. Then Ivan reaches up and takes my hand from his cheek and holds it in his as we walk inside.

He’s still holding my hand as we get to the top of the steps and enter the kitchen, where everyone is waiting and pretending to be busy.

As soon as we walk into the room, Daniel’s eyes fasten immediately on Ivan’s hand mine.

And I honestly can’t tell if the anger and jealousy on his face is real or fake.

Chapter 189 – Movement in the Night

Chapter 189 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I drop Ivan’s hand and clear my throat, looking away as if there’s a blush on my face. From the corner of my eye, Daniel glares hard at Ivan, his jaw clenched. Luckily, my dad steps in, as I hoped he would.

“Hey, Ivan,” dad says, coming forward with a smile to clasp Ivan’s hand. “You want some pizza? We’ve got plenty.”

“No, thank you, sir,” Ivan says, friendly. I cross to the fridge and grab a bottle of water before coming back to Ivan’s side. “I’d hate to deprive Fay of any pizza; I know she’s going to be up in the middle of the night wanting a slice.”

“Considerate,” I say, raising my eyebrows at him with a little smile before nodding towards the back deck. Ivan nods in agreement and, after some murmured hellos to everyone else in the house, he follows me out onto the back deck. We settle ourselves into two little deck chairs that are seated close together facing the ocean and I wrap a waiting throw blanket around my shoulders before turning to him.

He’s charming, over the next hour or so, as he always is, but I force myself not to fall into the ease into which he usually lulls me. Instead, I keep my answers tensed and clipped – wanting the evening to be more awkward than our usual ones. I find that it’s harder than I thought it would be, though – Ivan’s a great conversationalist.

A lull falls between us after a moment and I stare out at the sea. I jump a little when I feel a hand gently touch my forearm.

“You’re tense, Fay,” Ivan murmurs, and I turn to look at his worried face. “Are you...anxious? About what’s coming next?”

“I guess so,” I say, shrugging and speaking a truth that I know he doesn’t understand, because Ivan – I’m absolutely positive – suspects nothing of my plans. That much I’ve done well.

“Tell me,” he says, letting his hand linger and softly starting to stroke my arm.

“It’s just...” I say, hesitating, and then I sigh. “It’s so final, Kent getting sentenced to twenty years in a few days, and then being sent off to the state penitentiary. I mean, we knew it was coming but...”

“Something about it?” Ivan prompts, being genuinely kind. “Feels different?”

“I guess so,” I say, smiling a little. “Just...door slammed shut, you know. And...it kind of stinks that Daniel isn’t going to be allowed to be there for the sentencing. This one’s not public, you know? So,” I shrug. “I hate to see him hurt like that.”

“I know you do,” Ivan murmurs, “you’re a good person, Fay.”

I laugh inside at this, but the laughter doesn’t give me any real joy. I wish I was a better person than I am, or am going to become in a few days’ time.

“Do you want me to come and tell you?” Ivan says softly, and I turn my head to the side, inviting him to say more. “What happens at the sentencing,” he clarifies, and I blink as if in surprise.

“Will you be there?” I ask, even though I already know the answer.

He nods. “I’ve done a lot of the questioning. I’m actually one of the ones who signed the paperwork saying that his testimony has been satisfactory – so, I’ve got to be there, in case the judge has questions. If you’d like...I could come by afterwards, let you guys know, so that you too can ask questions.”

“Ivan,” I whisper, reaching out to place my own hand on his arm – the most intimately I’ve touched him in months. “That would be incredibly kind – and Daniel might feel complicated about it, but I know in the long run he would appreciate it. Would you?”

“I will,” Ivan promises, giving me a steady nod. “I’ll come after it’s done.”

“Thank you,” I murmur, leaning towards him.

Ivan leans forward too.

But then I hesitate, and bite my lip and turn away. I hear Ivan sigh, just the tiniest bit, but I don't look at him.

"It's late," I murmur, my voice almost embarrassed.

"Sure," Ivan says, understanding my request. He gets to his feet and helps me stand up too. He keeps my hands in his as he looks down into my face. "Goodnight, Fay," he says quietly, his heart in his eyes.

"I'll see you soon, Ivan," I whisper.

And then I stay outside in the darkness while Ivan makes his own way through the house and down the stairs. I stay out on the deck for a long time, looking out over the water, sorting through all of my thoughts and feelings. Janeen, at one point, opens the door and calls out to me, asking if there's anything that I need.

But I tell her that there's not, and she leaves me alone. They all leave me alone, and I'm grateful for it. I need it.

Because what's coming next? It's going to be chaos – and all I want right now is just...a few minutes of peace, all by myself.

I glance down at my stomach though, laying a hand on top of it. "Guess I'm not ever alone any more though, am I, little avocado?"

But the baby doesn't answer, which is perhaps answer enough.

The house is dark when I go inside. I go to bed alone.

I gasp awake a few hours later, my hands immediately going to my stomach.

"Oh my god," I whisper, my eyes already wide and unblinking as I stare down at myself – as if I'm going to see something, even though I know that's ridiculous –

But then it comes again – just a...a little tiny fluttering, low and deep inside me.

I squeal a little bit with excitement, but when I do the fluttering stops.

"Oh, sorry!" I whisper down towards my stomach, going very still. "Sorry, baby! I didn't – well, you're going to have to get used to those kinds of weird noises, I think – I make them all the time _"

And then the fluttering comes again, and I give a little shriek of joy. Baby! The baby's moving!

Gasping with happiness, I leap out of my bed and dash out of my room without even really thinking about it, or where I'm going – and I head to the door closest to mine, throwing it open.

“Daniel!” I whisper-shriek, “Jerome!”

Jerome – sleeping in his boxer briefs - starts up first, snapping awake and grabbing instinctually for his nightstand, throwing open the drawer and grabbing a –

Oh my god, a gun – as Daniel groans and sits up next to him –

“Jerome!” I gasp, stepping back in shock and fear. “Put that down!”

He isn't pointing it at me or anything – it's still mostly in the drawer, but I can still see the handle of it pressed tightly into his palm.

But as Jerome blearily focuses on me he groans and drops the gun, slamming the drawer shut. “God damn it, Fay,” he mutters, leaning back on the pillow and covering his face with his hands. “Have you seriously learned nothing – do not burst into a mafia bedroom in the middle of the night –“

“What is happening,” Daniel murmurs, still not getting it – still half asleep and half-dressed in his pajama pants with no shirt, his face pressed into his pillow -

“Jerome tried to shoot me,” I say, grinning and jumping onto the bed now that my first shock is passed.

“What?” Daniel gasps, turning towards me. But when he sees my happy face, and that I'm exaggerating, he kicks at me and puts his head back down. “Go away. Or I'll let him.”

“No!” I say, laughing eagerly. “You guys have to wake up! The baby moved! I want you to see if you can feel it!”

“What?” Jerome says, suddenly excited and pulling his hands from his face. “Seriously?” And then he's sitting, leaning forward, peering at my stomach at the dark. “What's it like?”

Daniel murmurs something grouchy but sits up too, rubbing his eyes and looking at me. “Is it okay? Does it...hurt?”

“No,” I say, shaking my head and grinning, my hands on either side of my belly. “It doesn't hurt, it feels like...like butterflies – it's so cool!”

Jerome reaches out now, putting his hands on my belly next to mine. Then he nudges Daniel, who sighs and reaches out too.

“Okay wait a sec,” I murmur, looking down at the six hands pressed against my stomach, wondering if the baby knows how excited everyone is to feel it move. But the baby – perhaps stubborn, like its dad – doesn’t do anything.

“Is it happening?” Daniel murmurs. “Am I...am I not feeling it?”

“No,” I sigh, slouching back with a pout. “It stopped.”

“Bummer,” Jerome sighs, and he takes his hands away.

“Maybe we can like...make it happen,” Daniel murmurs, leaning close. “What were you doing, Fay? When it happened?”

“Nothing,” I reply, shaking my head. “I was asleep. Well – I was dreaming.” And then I blush as I realize that I was dreaming about Kent. About just talking to him about nothing.

When I look up at Jerome, I see him smirking at me, putting the pieces together. “Do you think it was your conversation this afternoon?” he asks. “That brought the baby out of its shell, made it start moving around? I mean, if you were hearing Kent...maybe the baby was too.”

“Does it work like that?” Daniel asks, confused.

“I don’t think so,” Jerome says with a shrug. “But, Princess Baby certainly felt what Fay was feeling during the phone call. It makes...a certain kind of sense.”

“All right then,” Daniel says, grinning at both of us before laying himself down on the bed, resting his head on my knee and peering closely at my belly. “Let’s see if we can get Prince baby to come out of his shell again.”

“He’s not a hermit crab,” I murmur, but I can’t stop smiling.

“What are you going to do?” Jerome asks, curious.

“I’m going to talk to it,” Daniel says, “like Kent.”

And I burst out laughing, dying to see where this goes.

Chapter 190 – A Judgement

Chapter 190 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Now listen, baby,” Daniel growls, pitching his voice a register lower – and I’m laughing already, because honestly it does sound so much like Kent that I can barely believe it. “I’m very disappointed in you – you need to be tougher –“

Jerome bursts into laughter too and I smack Daniel on the shoulder, though I can’t help my glee. “Kent would so not say that! Not to a baby!”

“I guarantee that’s what he said to me!” Daniel protests, laughing too. “Seriously, that’s dead on! Welcome to my childhood!”

“Oh, you’re exaggerating,” I murmur, rubbing a hand along my belly. “Don’t listen to your uncle, baby – he’s being mean.”

“Okay okay,” Daniel says, still laughing a little. “Let me try again.” He clears his throat and takes a deep breath, and then starts speaking in his Kent voice again, which has me laughing from the very first word. “There is only one proper way to make a Sunday Gravy – and you have to start by sweating the onions for a long time –“

I’m still laughing, harder and harder as he goes, but suddenly I gasp because –

“Oh my god!” I almost shout, and Daniel and Jerome snap their faces up to mine. “It worked!” Instantly their hands are back on my belly, trying to feel for it –

“Keep going!” I say, urging Daniel on.

Laughing, Daniel brings his head an inch closer and – to my pleased surprise – starts speaking to the baby in Italian, his voice still low.

And the movement inside of me – it increases – a fluttering, and a bubbling, and every once in awhile a little tap tap.

And quite suddenly I’m crying, my hands on my cheeks as I stare down at my stomach.

“Can – can you feel anything?” I ask my friends between my tears.

“No,” Jerome says, taking his hand away and smiling at me. “But we can tell you can, which is still really cool.”

“I’m glad the baby knows its roots,” Daniel says, grinning up at me, and I run my hand through his dark hair, smiling at his handsome face. “Little Italian baby knows what’s important.”

“Ugh,” I sigh, pretending to be disappointed at this development. “It’s going to be insufferable,” I murmur, “like the rest of you. Always going on about different kinds of parmesan cheese and the appropriate ratio of pork to beef in a meatball –“

“What on earth is going on here?” I hear Janeen ask from the doorway, and all three of us turn to grin at her. “Honestly, Fay,” she says with a sigh, “I’ve always hoped, for your own sake, that you’d find yourself in bed with two half-naked good-looking guys - but this,” she sighs, “...disappoints, just a little.”

“Come in!” I call, patting the bed. “The baby’s moving!”

“What?” she gasps, and hurries into the room, her hands instantly going to my stomach. “Can I feel it?”

“I don’t think so,” I sigh, as disappointed as she is. “I think the baby’s too small for that. But this is the first time I’ve felt it move!”

“That’s so cool,” Janeen murmurs, taking her hands away but still smiling at my stomach. “It’s only going to get better and better from here.” And I take my sister’s hand, squeezing it, so grateful for her and pleased that she’s as excited as I am.

But Janeen’s face, when she looks up at me, is sad.

“What?” I ask, suddenly stricken to see her looking like that.

“Fay,” she sighs, shaking her head. “You’re almost halfway through this pregnancy and...I mean, I know that whatever you’re going through is complicated but...what on earth is coming next? I mean...am I even going to be around when this baby is born?”

And I hesitate because...well, it’s a very real question.

I look down at the blankets on the bed, tracing my fingers across them, not knowing what to say. Because as much as I want – desperately – for Janeen to be there, to be a huge part of this baby’s life?

In order to do that, she’s going to have to make some big changes.

“I think it’s time,” Jerome says quietly, and I look up at him.

“You do?” I ask, quietly.

“It’s now, or two days from now,” he says, giving me a little shrug. “No time like...” he glances at the clock, “3 am for a nice long, difficult chat.”

And I nod to him before looking back at my sister. “If you’re ready,” I say softly, seriously. “I’ll tell you now...everything you need to know to make that decision. Because I have to make some big changes very soon – and you’re very welcome to be part of them. But it’s a big choice...and I’ll understand if you say no.”

“Okay,” Janeen says, and then to my shock she stands up from the bed.

“What?” I ask, shocked. “Where – where are you going?”

“To the kitchen,” she says, calling over her shoulder. “Because if we’re going to have this long, difficult chat, we’re having cold pizza while we do it!”

“Ohhh, bring it in here!” I call, suddenly ravenous. The baby flutters within me too, making me grin.

“Not in the bed,” Daniel groans, falling back against his pillow and covering his eyes with his hands. “Crumbs in the bed!”

“You’ve never sounded more like Kent in your life,” I say to him, grinning as Janeen comes back into the room with three half-filled pizza boxes.

And then my sister flops down on the bed next to us, and I tell her everything.

Three days later, Ivan comes back to the house. I watch him from the front window in my dad’s bedroom as he gets out of the car, my eyes taking in the blue suit he probably wore for court. Because today – this morning – Kent’s sentence was passed. And Ivan’s here to tell us what happened.

To my surprise he looks up and sees me in the window, but his expression doesn’t change. He just gives me a sad little shrug, letting me know that it’s done, and I nod, letting him know that I accept it.

And then he starts for the front door, and I turn away from the window, heading back towards the main part of the house, my mind eagerly turning. Because if everything went through, and Kent’s going to be transferred to the state penitentiary tomorrow...

Then that means tomorrow is the big day.

And that I have a great deal of work to do.

When I come into the main part of the house, I see that Ivan is already in the kitchen, looking sympathetically around at my family, and especially at Daniel, for whom today is probably the hardest.

Ivan’s eyes light on me, though, as I cross to the kitchen and he can’t help the smile that pulls up at his lips. “Hi, Fay,” he says as I come forward to give him a hug.

“Thanks for coming to tell us, Ivan,” I say, my voice sad.

“It’s no trouble,” he replies.

“Well?” Daniel snaps as I step away from Ivan, and I turn to give him a pretend little glare. I’m not really mad, though – Daniel is acting precisely as I asked him to: angry, frustrated, and unwilling to tolerate Ivan’s presence in his household after everything Ivan did to take his dad down. “What happened?”

“It went through as expected,” Ivan says coolly, meeting Daniel’s eyes and slipping his hands into his pockets, keeping himself even as he delivers the facts. “The state – at my recommendation as well as four other detectives – decided that Kent has given enough information to satisfy the requirements of the plea deal.”

“And enough information,” Daniel growls, “that if he ever steps foot outside of the prison, the families he ratted on will kill him instantly. If they don’t arrange to do it in prison.”

Ivan purses his lips a little and I see him clench his jaw. “I can’t do anything about that, Daniel,” he replies. “Your dad made his own choices about how to live his life. This is how the state has decided to respond.”

“My dad,” Daniel snaps, taking an aggressive step toward Ivan, but Jerome grabs his arm – like he’s done before - speaking softly to him in what looks like an attempt to get Daniel to calm down.

Because right now? Daniel looks like he’s about ten seconds from leaping forward and ripping Ivan’s head from his shoulders.

And Ivan goes just as tense, looking like he’d like to let Daniel try, just so he’d have the chance to take another Lippert down.

I go cold when I see this on Ivan’s face, but I do nothing.

Because this? This tension?

This is exactly what I want.