

Chapter 191 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Okay!” Janeen says, clapping her hands and putting on a false little smile as she responds to the clear tension in the room. My dad stands at her side, awkward and sad, looking at Daniel like his heart breaks for him.

My own heart surges for my dad, who I told the whole plan to yesterday. But he, like Janeen, hasn’t decided what he’s going to do.

“Is there anything else, big, that Daniel needs to know, Ivan?” Janeen asks, coming to Ivan’s side and looking over at Daniel and Jerome, who are having a heated whispered discussion.

“No,” Ivan says. “Everything is...as expected. Kent will be transferred to the state penitentiary at noon tomorrow. It’s done.”

“All right then,” Janeen says, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Why don’t you and Fay...step outside then. I’ll bring you something cool to drink.”

I nod to Ivan, looking anxiously at Daniel, and together we walk past him and out onto the back deck, where the sun is halfway below the horizon.

We’re alone for a minute as we sit down in the two chairs seated close together facing the ocean, which provide more privacy than the table. We’re both quiet for a second, feeling the cool sea breeze play over our skin. Ivan is more reserved than he usually is, clearly reading the grief in this house. It’s a mark in his favor that he isn’t being smug, as he’s been before but...

Well. It also doesn’t matter - not anymore. The plans are already in motion.

“How are you, Fay?” Ivan asks, taking off his suit jacket and hanging it over the back of his chair before rolling up his sleeves to be more comfortable. I look up at him, studying his quiet face.

“I’m okay,” I say, shrugging.

“Are you sure?” he asks, hesitant. “Because, I mean I know that Daniel’s reaction was the most dramatic but...” he glances down at my stomach here, “it’s not as if you don’t have your own stakes in this. It would make sense if you were upset too.”

“I’m...not not upset,” I say, considering. But then I sigh and look down at my hands. “But, I mean...I think that I came to terms with this a long time ago, Ivan. Or not a long time ago – but...you know what I mean, right?”

“Yeah,” he replies, and I look up to see him slowly nodding, studying me. “Do you feel like you’re...moving on from it?”

“I think that I’m starting to make new plans,” I say softly, and I let my eyes fall here to the tattoo on his arm visible below his rolled-up sleeve – the one he told me, a long time ago, was for his dad.

We’re interrupted for a moment as Janeen does as she’s promised, bringing Ivan a beer and me a glass of seltzer water with lime – the nausea was bad today – and chatting with him for a moment before sensing the tension between us, my desire for privacy.

When she heads back inside, Ivan turns to face me, tapping his beer against the edge of my glass. “Tell me, Fay,” he says, his voice soft. “I need to know what you’re thinking. Clearly, it’s bothering you.”

I take a moment to organize my thoughts. “Ivan,” I say quietly. “You said some really cruel things to me the night Kent was arrested.”

I look up at him then, taking in his sorrowful face, apology written all over it. “I know,” he says quietly. “I’m sorry. I regret them.”

“You told me I was an idiot for letting him knock me up –“

“I just found out you were pregnant, Fay,” Ivan murmurs, shaking his head, “I was devastated –“

“You also listened into all of my private conversations in that house – with Kent, and with Daniel – and many of those conversations had nothing to do with your investigation –“

“I had to listen to everything to decide what was important to the investigation!”

I look up at him then, shaking my head.

“You also told me that Kent killed your dad.”

Ivan deflates at this, blinking at me in surprise. Then he looks away from me, his jaw tight as he glares out over the ocean. “Well that I’m not sorry about,” he says, his words clipped. “That’s true.”

“Is it?” I ask, leaning forward. “Ivan – that’s something I need to know.”

“Well, he already told you about it,” Ivan snaps, turning back to me. “The night before – when you were...in your room. He told you that he killed a cop. The guy he was talking about was my dad.”

“What happened?” I keep my voice soft.

Ivan’s face is stony for a long moment. “I was just a kid,” he says softly. “I – it took me a long time to find out about the details. But in short – it was a raid, on a mob family, like the one I performed. And Kent was there – he doing a deal with them, he wasn’t the target. He was a low-level guy at the time, just scraping by – kind of like your boy Jerome was doing when you met him. But all of the police reports are solid on it: Kent Lippert was the one who shot the bullet that took down my dad. And it wasn’t in self defense. It was cold blood.”

We sit quietly for a moment, and I let Ivan piece himself back together, understanding that that was a lot to confess. And as much as I try to keep myself cold, my heart does reach out to him. Because...damnit, I don’t hate Ivan. I can’t.

And my heart breaks for the little boy whose dad didn’t come home that night.

But I put my grief for him aside, because I have to. There is work to be done.

“So, is all of this...” I start, keeping my voice soft as I reach out and brush my fingers over that tattoo on his arm, “is it...revenge?”

“It’s justice,” he murmurs, and I look up to see his eyes on my fingers. A long moment passes before he speaks again. “But...there’s a little revenge in there, Fay, yes. I became a cop because I wanted vengeance. It...changed as I got older, as I went through it all, and especially as I went undercover and understood the criminal world more.” He exhales a deep breath then, blinking and shaking his head. “It’s...crazy, Fay. The things I figured out when I was undercover. So no, it’s not all for vengeance, but it...it is to get these bosses off the streets. Because they’re hurting people.”

He looks at me now, his eyes a little hungry for understanding, for reassurance.

And I give it to him, nodding, leaning forward. “I get it,” I murmur, and I turn my face upwards towards him. “You’re doing the right thing.”

He leans forward to, reaching his hand out for my face.

But before he can touch me, I glance towards the house, anxious.

“Ivan,” I breathe, but I say his name fast, like it’s a great risk.

“What?” he asks, freezing, going tense beside me. “What is it?”

I shake my head, glancing again at the house, though I can't see anyone inside it – which means they can't see me. "I – I think you need to be careful with Daniel," I murmur.

"Why?" he asks, sitting up straight so that he can peer over the backs of our chairs and through the window to the house, but I hiss his name and pull him back down.

"Because," I growl, letting my eyes flick to the side a little like I'm deciding what to do, "if you...if you understand that need for vengeance...I think you should probably understand how Daniel is feeling right now."

"What are you saying, Fay?" Ivan asks, all cop now – leaning forward to peer into my face. And I steel myself inside, knowing that I have to be very, very careful with what happens next.

I screw my lips to the side and stare up at him, as if deciding whether or not to say anything. But then I close my eyes and let out a big exhale of breath, my hand going to my stomach. "I want to do the right thing, Ivan. But...I think he's planning something," I say, all in a rush.

"What?" Ivan hisses, pissed and a little scared all at once. "What – what do you mean? When? How?"

"I don't know," I say, shaking my head a little as my eyes open and I lean forward to confess. "Obviously he and Jerome don't tell me everything – they just want to keep me safe, I think. But – I've heard them talk. About...about tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Ivan asks, his eyes going wide. And then he tries to glance back towards the house again but I grab him by the shirt, hauling him back down. "Tell me everything you know, Fay," he demands through his teeth. "Every single word."

"I don't know," I say, desperate, "Ivan, please don't hurt him –"

Ivan groans now, leaning his head back and closing his eyes, clenching his teeth – clearly torn between wanting to do his job and wanting to promise me that Daniel – who he knows means so much to me – will be okay.

"I'll do everything I can, Fay," Ivan murmurs, covering his eyes with his hand. "I promise. But you've got to tell me everything you know."

"Promise me, Ivan," I beg, tugging on his shirt, making him look at me. He obliges me, staring into my eyes with his own serious grey gaze. "Promise you'll keep him safe."

"I promise," he agrees, sincere. "Now tell me."

"I don't know much," I murmur. "But – they said something. About – about a perimeter on the state penitentiary. About a coffee shop, and an intersection? About...some flaw in the process – and how...how they think they can get him. Tomorrow."

“Shit,” Ivan growls, letting out a frustrated huff. And then, as I predicted, he starts to stand up. But I don’t let him, tugging him back into his chair with my hands wrapped in his shirt. “Let go, Fay,” Ivan says, his voice serious. “I have...I have to get back to work. We have to prep for this.”

“Please don’t tell him I told you,” I beg, scared, letting my lower lip tremble. “I – it would break his heart to know, Ivan,” I say, shaking my head. “He can’t know I betrayed him, like...like I did Kent –“

“Fay,” Ivan whispers, putting his hand on my cheek. “You didn’t betray Kent. You didn’t know.”

“But I did just betray Daniel, didn’t I?” I say, guilt in every word. I allow my lower lip to tremble, just a bit.

“You did it because it’s right,” Ivan murmurs, leaning closer to me. “You have a good heart, Fay. I see it in you.”

“Promise me it will all turn out all right,” I whisper, desperate.

“I promise,” he says, his face inches from mine now. “It will all come out right. And I’ll...we’ll...”

But I don’t let him finish, because I lean forward, and I kiss him.

Chapter 192 – One Last Night

Chapter 192 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I kiss Ivan like I can’t help it, like I give into what I’ve wanted for a long time now. And it kills me, a little, to hear him moan softly as he kisses me back, as he buries his fingers in my hair and rests a hand on my cheek like I’m the most precious thing in the world to him. He breaks the kiss sooner than I thought he would, shaking his head at me. “I have to go. But Fay – you did the right thing, okay? I’ll make sure that this turns out right. For us.” “Okay,” I whisper, nodding to him. And then he kisses me again, swiftly, and gets up, and heads into the house. I watch him go. And when he walks down the stairs, I drag my forearm across my lips, wiping the taste of him away. Because Ivan thinks that I’m good, and that I’m right, but he’s forgetting one essential thing: That I was born into one mafia family, and that I married into another, and that I’ve got a mafia baby growing in my stomach. And as much as Ivan sees the good in me, sees the fawn? He’s missing the viper. But that part of me is there as well. Kent never made that crucial mistake. He sees all of me, and loves it – all of it. Ivan just sees half. “I’m coming for you, Kent,” I murmur, taking a moment to turn my heart to steel, because I have long hours ahead of

me and they're going to take everything I have to see them through. I take a deep breath and place a hand on my stomach. "We both are." Janeen, seeing me standing alone in the dark on the back deck, staring into space, comes outside and shuts the door behind her. "Well," she says, raising her eyebrows at me. "That was good and steamy. Did you guys just kiss?" "Yeah," I say, screwing my lips to the side, a little ashamed. "Kinda. Just a little bit." "So proud of you, sis," she murmurs, coming and wrapping an arm around my waist. "You know, I never thought you'd make a good stripper –" I gasp, insulted, and turn to stare at Janeen, who laughs at me. "Let me finish!" she says, shaking her head at me and putting a hand up. "Why did you think I'd be bad at it?" I ask, frowning. "Because one, you have no rhythm," she says, and she just speaks over me when I start to protest, "and two! Because I thought you'd probably fall in love with your clients. But what I realized tonight is that you're a stone cold bitch, baby," she says, pulling me tight against her, "and I love that for you! I'm proud." I laugh a little but then look down at the floor, shaking my head. "You don't...think I'm a terrible person?" I ask, quiet. Because...well, honestly, after everything I put into action these past few months, I do know that I'm a terrible person. And after what I do tomorrow... "I'm definitely going to hell." "Well, then at least I'll have someone to keep me company," she says, making me laugh darkly. But then, as I stare at the floor of the deck, doubting myself, Janeen puts her finger under my chin and makes me look at her. "Hey," she says. "You all right?" "I just..." I say, shaking my head at her. "I'm in so deep, Janeen. And the closer we get, the scarier it is – and I'm a person –" "You are," she insists, and I cock my head at her, raising my eyebrows. Because she knows my plan – she knows what's coming up. But she just shakes her head at me again. "You're playing by different rules than the rest of society, Fay," she says quietly, "and you didn't start this game – you were into it. What does a good person get, in your world?" she asks, and I cock my head to the side, thinking about it. "That's right," she whispers. "If you were a little mafia girl, you'd be married off to whoever your dad picked out for you, a miserable little pawn for them to play with. But?" she says softly, "my brave, smart sister? You took this game into your own hands. People did you wrong, and now you're giving it back to them. So stop judging yourself for surviving – for thriving, okay? Kent wouldn't judge himself for doing the same. Neither would your father. Neither does Ivan, for that matter – who is just as cold and calculating as the rest of them, even if he has a shiny badge that lets him pretend he's a good guy." I stare at my sister in surprise because...I definitely didn't think of it that way before. "When did you get so perceptive," I murmur, looking her up and down. "Oh, I've this perceptive," she says, grinning at me and squeezing my waist, pulling me towards the house. "I've just been hanging out with you for long enough now that I have the vocab to tell you about it." I burst into laughter at this, and I'm still laughing when I come into the house. Daniel and Jerome stand up from their spots on the couch, smiling at us. "It's good to see you looking so cheerful," Daniel says, crossing his arms over his chest. "I think it was Ivan's kiss that did it," Jerome says, smirking at me, teasing. "Don't be gross," I murmur, shoving his shoulder. "That kiss was part of the –" "I'm just saying," Jerome says, holding up his hands innocently, "it have been a hug – someone was getting their last taste before –" "But I give a little shriek of protest and smack him again, making him laugh and give it up. Then I take a deep breath, looking around at my team, and my dad in the kitchen, who declines to join us. "Okay," I say after a moment, looking around at them. "So...this is it. Only a couple of hours now. Everything is in place and all that's left to do is...rest." "Yeah, like you're going to be able to sleep, Fay," Daniel says, smirking at me. "Well, no," I sigh. "But you should, if you can. You all should." They're all quiet for a moment before Jerome speaks. "Well, I'm going to stay up," he says, grinning at me. I look at him in surprise, but he shrugs. "I never went to college, never got

to do the all-nighter thing, so. Why not give it a try?" "Ohh, me too!" Janeen says, suddenly eager. "What do we do? Take a bunch of amphetamines?" I look at her in horror but she just laughs at me, shaking her head. "Seriously, Fay, everything that you have planned and you're appalled by the idea of some stimulants to help us stay up?" "Excuse you," I reply, joining my hands below my pregnant belly, a little shocked to notice that it's starting to get difficult to do that, "of us are pregnant." "My scary little pregnant mafia wife," Daniel says, laughing and putting an arm around me, leading me into the kitchen. "We'll get a snack. And then the rest of us will indulge in some nice caffeine supplements." I smile and let him lead me away, Jerome and Janeen smiling as they follow behind. When we get into the kitchen, dad reaches out an arm for me and I go to him, letting him wrap me in a big hug. "How you doing, little girl?" he murmurs, rocking me back and forth the way he always did when I was a kid. "You all right?" "I'm okay," I reply, and then I look up at him. "Did you think about it, dad? About what you want to do?" "I'm still thinking on it kid," he says, his lips twisting a little with apology. "I'm afraid it might come down to a game-time decision. I'm sorry about that but...it's a big choice." "I understand," I say, nodding. "You know I support you, though, right?" He asks, rubbing his hand warmly up and down my arm. "In everything you've got planned, baby. I stand by you." My eyes fill with tears to hear him say it – because while I know Janeen and Jerome and Daniel understand what I'm doing? It's a little different to tell your dad that you're about to commit several felonies and ruin some lives. "Really?" I ask, kind of baffled by it. "I trust you, daughter," he says, kissing my forehead. "If you decided to do it...it must be the only thing you could do. And I'd rather see you cut them all down then let them do it to you." "Thanks, dad," I murmur, burying my face against him. Because that might be the last little bit of support I need to push me through to the end. "Please think about it – about coming with us." "Oh, I am, kiddo," he says with a sigh. "I'm thinking." But before we can go anywhere else with the conversation, we hear a set of heavy footsteps coming up the stairs. I turn with a smile to see Donnie's tanned face at the top of the stairs, looking curiously around. "Hey!" he says, lifting up a box in his hand. "Nice house. I brought pizza!" "Oh Donnie," I say, laughing and walking forward to take the box from him and stand on my tiptoes to give him a kiss on the cheek. "You're the best. Thank you so much for coming." "No problem," he says, grinning at me. "I've never made an easier ten grand in my life." And then everyone else comes forward to say hello to our final guest before we all head into the living room to while away the next few hours together. As predicted, no one sleeps – no one's able to. Instead, there's a lot of happy chatter about nothing. I'm the only one who's really quiet, though Daniel next to me gives me a run for my money. Because as much as everyone else knows that these are the last few normal hours we're going to have for a long time...I think that for Daniel and me? It's the most real. We look at each other as 2:00 AM draws closer, and I know that the same thought echoes in both of our heads. That this is it. That tomorrow – or today now, at this point - it all ends. And something new begins.

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Chapter 193 – The Big Day

Chapter 193 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

At 2:30 in the morning, I stand up and take a deep breath. The conversation awkwardly fades out around me, but I wave my hands at everyone. “I’m just going to go take a shower,” I say, smiling around. “Ignore me – keep going –“

“No, that’s a good idea,” Daniel says, looking over at Jerome. “I’m going to go get ready too.”

“I’ll help you, Fay,” Janeen says, standing up and coming to my side.

Donnie, still sitting on the couch with my dad – who fell asleep hours ago – gives us a thumbs up and grabs for the remote. “I’ll just hang here!”

“You don’t need to help me,” I say to Janeen, frowning a little, “I’m not that pregnant –“

“Well then I’ll just stare at your beautiful face,” she says, raising her hands to my face and smushing my cheeks between her palms.

I scowl and swat her hands away, but she laughs and gives me a little shove towards my room.

Then, my sister and I very quietly get me ready for what is surely going to be the most stressful day of my life. I shower, and then put on very carefully-selected makeup while Janeen lays out my clothes. Of course, everything of importance is already packed and out of the house. Even if I wanted to decide on a change of clothing, this is the only dress that I have left.

“Black,” she says, looking down at the prim little maternity dress spread out on the bed. “Appropriate. Very goth. Very...black widow. Very Regina George with the burn book.”

I laugh at my sister, whose mind sometimes goes places I don’t understand. But then again...who am I to talk.

“I’m a badass mafia donna now,” I murmur as I comb out my wet hair, hoping it dries into pretty curls instead of the crazy frizzy mess it sometimes chooses. “I have to wear black, or else no one will take me seriously.”

Janeen helps me apply my eyeliner – she’s always been better at makeup than me – and then slips my black pumps onto my feet before helping me stand up.

“All set, baby?” she murmurs, looking me up and down.

“I am,” I say, sure of it. Because I have to be.

“For what it’s worth, you look beautiful,” she says with a shrug and a smile.

“Janeen,” I say, my face serious as I put a hand on her shoulder. “Come with us.”

“I have to talk to dad,” she replies, her smile falling from her face as she glances towards the doorway. “I can’t leave him alone.”

“Okay,” I say, nodding my understanding. “Just...convince him to come too. It will be good, I promise.”

“Oh, color me tempted, Fay Thompson,” she says, leaning in to kiss my cheek and wrapping an arm around mine as we walk to the door. “I’m on board – but yeah, I’ll talk to him.”

“Fay Lippert, now,” I say as we step out of my room and my handsome husband turns to me, neatly dressed in his own black suit.

“Damn right you are, little wife,” he says, smirking at me and opening his arm to me. I hurry my steps a little to get to his side, letting him pull me close.

“Wait,” Donnie says from the couch, leaning forward and frowning at us. “Yous two...you’re married?”

We laugh and nod to him. “It’s complicated,” I say, wrinkling my nose in his direction. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Trust me,” Donnie replies, leaning back on the couch and giving us a smile. “I am anything but worried.”

“You understand your job?” Daniel asks Donnie. “Any questions?” Jerome comes to my side as Daniel speaks, dressed in jeans and a button-down shirt, sunglasses perched on his head. He gives me a kiss on the cheek and a little wink to let me know he’s on board.

I smile at him, but something roils in my stomach as I remember what Ivan said about him the other day – about Jerome not being trustworthy.

He’s...he’s got such a big role to play today. If he betrays us...

But no. I wipe the thought from my mind, because Jerome...Jerome loves Daniel, and he loves me. I just have to have faith.

“Of course I know my role,” Donnie says, grinning and nodding. “Never been easier. 10:00, get in the car downstairs, take your phone with me. Put the address in the GPS, drive to that coffee shop and have a nice cup of coffee. That’s it.”

“That’s it,” I say, smiling at him. “Thank you, Donnie. We’re very grateful.”

He waves off our thanks and my eyes shift to my dad, still asleep on the couch.

“Don’t,” Janeen murmurs as I start to move towards him. I turn back at her, a little devastated at the idea of leaving without saying goodbye. “Don’t,” she says again, shaking her head. “He...he doesn’t like goodbyes anyway, baby. He’ll just cry.”

My heart sinking, I nod. But I turn back to him, taking a long minute to look him over, to memorize the way that he looks.

And then I take a deep breath, and wrap my sister in a hug. “I’ll see him soon?” I whisper.

“I hope so, Fay,” she whispers seriously back, holding me close.

And then, when she lets me go, all three of us call goodbye to Donnie, who wishes us luck. Then we troop downstairs to the rarely-used garage where Janeen’s old car is waiting.

Without another word, Janeen pops the trunk and Daniel and Jerome climb in. She closes the trunk as I climb into the back seat, laying down on the floor. Janeen closes the door behind me and then gets into the front seat, starting the car and pushing the button that opens the garage door.

When that’s all done, Janeen pulls onto our front street and – as casually as if she doesn’t have a car secretly packed with people – she pulls away from the house.

“I don’t see any other cars,” Janeen murmurs. “I think we beat Ivan to it, like you said we would.”

“The cops will still have a tail on Daniel’s car later,” I murmur. “I just hope we left early enough to beat them to it, and they’re not being sneakier than I thought they’d be.”

Janeen just nods and drives for twenty minutes. When she pulls into the parking lot of Crabby Dicks, I sit up and let myself out of the back seat. Jerome and Daniel climb out of the trunk after Janeen opens it, looking serious and rumpled.

We all look around, but there isn’t a sign of anyone anywhere. I feel a great deal of relief at that. If Ivan had been more proactive with a tail...this all could have fallen to pieces much earlier than it might.

“You have the address?” Daniel says, turning to Janeen. “To meet us?”

“I’ve got it,” she says, nodding to him. And then, to my surprise, she wraps Daniel in a big hug. “Good luck, brother-in-law,” she murmurs, her voice a little choked. “Take care of my baby sister.”

“I promise,” he replies.

Jerome comes and bumps my shoulder with his. “No hugs or kisses,” he says. “I’m too cool for that.”

“You liar,” I say, laughing and throwing myself into his arms. He laughs too and twirls me in a little circle before putting me back on my feet. “I’ll see you tonight,” he says. “And if you’re good, I’ll bring you something pretty.”

“You’d better,” I say, laughing up into his face. “I’m depending on it.”

Jerome winks at me before Daniel pulls him aside for a whispered word. Janeen gives me a last kiss and tousles my hair, making me scowl – it’s just starting to dry right. And then, before I know it, she climbs into her car and drives away, and Jerome climbs into another car parked in the lot, empty and waiting for him, and does the same.

And then it’s just Daniel and me, alone.

“You ready, little wife?” he murmurs, looking down at me with half a smile.

“I guess so,” I say with a deep sigh. He turns towards the car but I grab his hand. “Hey, I love you, you know,” I say, pulling him back.

Daniel smiles and comes close, running a hand over my hair and tucking it behind my ear as he looks down at me. “I love you too. Even though you’re insane and might get us killed.”

“What’s life without a little adventure,” I say, grinning, feeling suddenly a little reckless. Daniel laughs, and kisses me on the cheek, and then we climb into the black town car that we left here days ago. In the back a little leather briefcase is waiting with absolutely everything we’ll need.

“Okay,” I say, taking a deep breath and slowly letting it out. “Off for a nice breakfast at my father’s house.”

“Nice for you,” Daniel murmurs, pulling out of the parking lot and getting started along our long road. “But if all goes as planned...”

“Not so nice for...others.” I finish.

And then, as we hit the highway, I turn my heart to steel.

Eighty miles away, a guard comes to open Kent’s prison cell.

“Come on, Lippert,” he says as Kent sits on his bed, his head hanging low on his shoulders. “Lots of transfer paperwork to process. We’ve got to start early.”

But Kent doesn’t get up. Instead, he just sighs, exhausted.

He hasn’t slept in...god, he doesn’t remember the last time he slept. He just has no idea what’s going on and it’s killing him. Daniel stopped answering his phone days ago – did...did something go wrong? They had been planning something – he was relatively sure of it. But...was something still in the works? God, he’s completely in the dark, and he hates it.

Kent's so riddled with anxiety about all of it – and so completely shattered by the idea that he can't do anything about any of it – that he can barely think straight.

The guard bangs his nightstick against the bars. "Lippert!" he barks. "Up!"

Groaning, Kent gets to his feet. He doesn't fight the guard any more, but instead follows him down the hall to the intake chamber, which he guesses is where they'll process him for his exit before he is loaded into the transport van that will take him to the state penitentiary.

Kent's sitting quietly, waiting for someone to come do...whatever it is they do...when suddenly he hears a familiar voice.

Kent lifts his head, confused, and listens carefully to the shouted words.

"You've got to cancel this transport!" a man shouts and Kent blinks when he realizes that...that it's Ivan. "I swear to god, something is going down!"

"I'm sorry, Detective," someone protests, "but we have no control over this. This transport is happening! If you want to stop it, you have to go to someone way above me to get it authorized."

There's some grumbling, and a few more harsh words, but Kent can't make them out before he hears footsteps stomping away.

And then Kent clenches his teeth as new energy – pure adrenaline, he knows – floods his system.

Because he just got his first hint.

And he's relatively sure, now, that Ivan is right. Something is happening.

And if he's going to survive this – whatever insane scheme Fay has planned – he's going to need his wits about him.

So, Kent sets his jaw, and stares at the wall, steadying himself for whatever is coming next.

Chapter 194 – Daddy

Chapter 194 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent does precisely what he's told over the next few hours, signing papers and obeying instructions – standing, sitting, waiting, not giving anyone an ounce of trouble and saying as little as possible. Inside, his mind churns, wanting desperately to consider every single possibility and

how he'll react in any situation. But he forces himself to still inwardly as well, knowing that it's impossible for him to know.

That instead, his best option – his only option – is to remain calm and vigilant so that when it's time to act he can avoid panic.

Kent's breath comes cool and easy as he is loaded into the transport van with two other convicted criminals, all headed to the state prison for their longer-term sentences. As the guard uses a chain from the van's floor to link Kent's ankle shackles, stomach chain, and the cuffs around his wrists, Kent takes note of everything: the driver up front, the cop car that's going to follow behind. From what he knows, it all seems like a standard prisoner transport.

He smirks, just slightly, at the singular cop car and everyone getting ready to move. Looks like the kid had no luck trying to convince the state to make any changes.

After the two other convicts – in orange jumpsuits, like he is - are secured in the row behind Kent, the guard joins the driver up front and slams the door. After a few seconds, the van starts off and Kent takes a deep breath in through his nose, his shoulders tensing despite his determination to keep calm.

Because...something's going to happen any second. He can just feel it.

But as those seconds pass...god damn it, but nothing happens. Kent's shoulders slump in his bewilderment. Was...was Ivan just mistaken? Was he mistaken? Did whatever Fay and Daniel were planning fall through?

While the drive started out with tension and anticipation, Kent has to admit that...well, he's kind of bored. One of the prisoners behind starts to snore loudly and Kent turns to glance at him. They're about thirty minutes into the three-hour drive to the state prison, off the highway for the moment, making some kind of connection through farmland. Kent grimaces a little at the sleeping prisoner's loud snores and then sighs, kind of wishing he could sleep too – because if nothing's going to happen, he might as well get some rest –

Out of nowhere, the blaring sound of a truck's horn breaks through the peaceful white noise of the transport van's engine -

Kent's eyes go wide as his head snaps toward the sound - he is barely able to gasp in shock and surprise before the eighteen-wheeler slams into the side of his van, hurling it across the road –

The driver screams and the guard and the prisoners do as well –

Kent just clenches his teeth and braces for impact as the transport flies through the air, glass and debris flying everywhere.

I take a little sip of the breakfast mimosa that Daniel made for me, grimacing a bit at the taste of the sparkling cider mixed with orange juice. I scowl at it, thinking that today of all days I should at least have a cocktail before what's coming next.

I shift the direction of my scowl to my stomach, thinking stupid baby.

But then I run a hand over my belly, because I don't mean it. I'm actually growing much fonder of the baby now that I can feel it moving more. It's not an absence or a sickness now, but instead a little somebody that comes by to say hello. Which is nice.

"It is good to see you becoming a mother, Fay," my father says, smiling at me from across the table as he takes a bite of sausage from his brunch plate.

"Is it?" I ask, putting my drink back down and turning my head towards him. I don't bother to put on the fake smile that I'd usually paste on my face at moments like this. It's not necessary anymore.

"A delight," he confirms, nodding to me. Then he waves his fork towards my plate of mostly-untouched food. "Though I'd like to see you eating more – you should put on more weight. Give me a nice, fat, healthy grandchild."

"You're right," I murmur, looking at my full plate of food. "I'm just not...feeling very hungry today."

Daniel, next to me, nudges me with his elbow. "You really should eat," he says quietly, and I know that he's right. But I just nod to him with a little grimace because, honestly, anything I put into my stomach right now isn't going to stay down.

And for once, it isn't morning sickness.

"So," my father says, taking a deep breath and putting his fork down for the first time in about half an hour. "You asked me for this private little breakfast. What is it you'd like to speak to me about?"

I look up at Daniel, who nods to me. Solemnly, I nod back. It's time.

I take a deep breath and turn my eyes to my father, letting him see my true expression for the first time in months. Maybe ever, honestly.

"It's a big day, father," I say, cold. "We came here to celebrate."

Daniel stands now, moving to the sideboard behind my father where a bottle of champagne is chilling. Then he pours three glasses, his back turned to us.

“Celebrations!” my father says, pleased, reaching for the glass that Daniel carries to him. But then my father hesitates as Daniel hands me my own glass and sits back in his seat with his own. “But...Fay, should you be drinking? It isn’t good for the child.”

“Oh, a sip won’t hurt,” I say, raising my glass of champagne to consider it. Then I turn my eyes back to him. “Though I hope you and Daniel will drink deeply. It’s a big day.”

Daniel raises his glass then, initiating a toast, and he mumbles some useless words about family, and happiness, and the future. My father, pleased and interested, leans forward and clinks glasses with us. As I suggested, he and Daniel drink deeply, emptying their glasses as I simply take a sip and place the flute on the table away from me.

The champagne fizzes on my tongue, dry and sharp. But I ignore it, staring at my father.

“And what are we celebrating,” he says, leaning back in his chair and resting his folded hands comfortably on his belly. “Just familial happiness? Or something more specific?”

I speak quietly, obliging him to lean forward to hear me. “We’re celebrating your retirement.”

“My retirement?” he says, surprised, and then he laughs, thinking it’s some kind of joke. He leans back in his chair and smiles at me. “What do you mean, daughter?”

“I mean,” I say quietly, making him lean forward to hear me, “that today is the day you step down as the head of the Alden family, father. Congratulations – you’ve had an incredible run. You’ve truly built an empire, father.” I take a moment to consider him, my eyes flicking up and down over his face, his body, his hands.

“Or,” I continue, “if you haven’t built it, you have at least cleverly acquired all of the pieces, stolen them from those who actually did the work. Truly – it is impressive. We can celebrate that.”

The smile falls from my father’s face as he realizes that I’m quite serious, and that not everything I’ve said is a compliment. “What is this,” he says slowly, turning his attention to Daniel now. “What the hell are you doing?”

“No,” I snap, my voice ringing through the room. “You look at me. I did this.”

My father slowly moves his eyes back to me, his breath hissing between his teeth.

“What?” he seethes, and then he begins to cough, just a little.

I settle back in my chair, watching him carefully. “Your move against Kent was masterful, father, it really was. It was bold, and fast, and effectively eliminated your biggest rival while neatly transferring his criminal empire to your hands. It was effective. But you made one critical mistake.”

My father's face reddens now and he shakes his head, not understanding, his eyes again going to Daniel – which lights a fire in me.

I slam my hand on the desk. “Stop,” I command, and his eyes shoot back to me, wide with surprise.

Then, slowly, I stand and lean forward, ensuring that I have his absolute attention. “You underestimated me, father. Not Daniel. Not Kent. Me.”

“Sit down, girl,” my father growls, starting to realize that something serious is actually happening here. But then he starts to cough harder, his face turning red.

I stand up straight now, raising my chin, letting my actions speak for me. Because I patently refuse to be told what to do – not by this man, this greedy snake.

“I suggest you sit still and listen,” I say quietly, looking at him evenly, feeling more calm in this moment than I have for the past few weeks combined. “The more you move, the faster your heart beats, the worse it will get.”

“What?” he growls, working to get to his feet, but then he stumbles a little, finding that his body betrays him. He falls back into his chair.

“She's not kidding,” Daniel says beside me, lifting his fist to the table and opening it to place the tiny bottle where my father can see it. “This is the good stuff. You'll be dead in minutes. Faster,” he says, shrugging, “if you encourage it.”

My father, his eyes going wide with fear as he realizes that this is very, very real. Frantic, he starts to look around for his phone, but I just take a deep breath, letting him figure out that it's gone. Because of course Daniel snatched it earlier, when my father was busy stuffing his face with food.

We have thought of everything – everything. Dozens of sleepless nights turning over every scenario, every escape, every way out. I have considered every possibility and defended against it.

The result?

There is no way out of this for my father except the very thin avenue that Daniel and I have paved for him. But still, I understand that he has to figure that out for himself.

So I wait, patient, while my father realizes his phone is gone, and realizes that he has no way of getting out of his chair. He opens his mouth and lets out a wide shout – a scream, even.

But no one comes.

Of course they don't. Fiona is already in control. Everyone who didn't turn to her side is dead, or currently dying.

"Are you finished?" I ask, my voice bored.

My father growls low in his throat as he glares at me. "I'll have you killed for this," he rasps.

"No, daddy," I say, leaning forward to hold his gaze. "That's what I'm doing to you."

Chapter 195 – Signing his Life Away

Chapter 195 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I take a deep breath and lean back as my father gnashes his teeth, clearly still trying to figure a way out of this.

"Stop wasting your energy," I snap. "It's done. I want you to listen to me, and do as I say, and if you do, then I will give you this." Very carefully, I lift an even smaller vial from the little pocket I sewed into the side of my dress. Carefully, I place it on the table.

My father's eyes go immediately to the bottle, knowing that it can only be one thing.

"We don't have a lot of time, dad," I say softly, "so I'll keep this short. But it's important to me that you realize that it's your oversight that put you in this position. Because while you thought of the thousand ways that Kent could retaliate against you, and how to keep him under control while you burned his life to the ground and stole his empire? You forgot about me."

"But you're..." he croaks, reaching out a hand towards me. I don't let him finish.

"Pregnant?" I say with a sigh, looking at him steadily. "Yes. A girl? Absolutely. Young, naïve, delicate? Sure." I lean forward now, fire burning coldly in my eyes. "But you let all of those parts of my identity convince you that I'm not a player in this game. A mistake that Kent Lippert never made."

Slowly, deliberately, I smooth a hand down over my stomach.

My father's face reddens with rage as his gaze snaps to my stomach and he puts the pieces together.

"That's right," I hiss, leaning forward so that I'm bent over the table now, baring my teeth. "You may have checked the king, but you forgot about his queen. You fucking fool."

And then I slam a hand down on the antidote, smashing it down into the table. My father gasps, clearly frantic with worry that it will break, but the bottle just falls flat against the wood beneath my palm, as I knew it would.

Slowly, raising my hand, I let him see that the bottle is unbroken. But the message is clear: his life is in my hands now, and a big part of me is angry enough to let him die for what he did – not to Kent, but to me.

Because that's the thing none of these men have considered – all they thought about was destroying Kent's world, and gave no thought to the fact that they destroyed mine as well.

And god damn it, I'm going to make them pay through the teeth for it.

Daniel stands up, knowing his cue, and heads to the door. Once he realizes that the antidote is still safe, my father's eyes frantically follow Daniel as he opens the door to let in a notary public, who looks around the room with his shoulders anxiously bunched. My father's eyes go wide as he realizes that it is his notary – the one he uses for all of his business.

My father starts to growl something about him about betrayal, but I snap at him to shut it and – rather to my surprise – he does. A little pleasure stirs in me as I realize that he's finally getting it – that I'm in charge. Daniel leads the notary to my father's side and helps him set out the intended paperwork, as we've practiced.

“Here's what's going to happen next,” I say, my voice sharp and efficient now as I stand up straight and cross my arms over my chest. “Mr. Worth is going to show you where to sign some paperwork. And in doing so, you will pass all of the individual pieces of your enterprise to either me or to Fiona, as previously agreed by the two of us.”

“Fiona?” my father croaks, his eyes again wide as he shakes his head at me.

“Yes,” I say, turning my head a little as I consider him. “Another of the women in your family treated better by the Lipperts than by you. Or, at least marginally better,” I say with a shrug, “Because Kent was not always kind. But I'm a Lippert now, and I've been very generous with her.”

My father snarls as Daniel comes back to my side. The notary stands awkwardly next to my father, offering him a pen. “I will never –”

“You will –” I shout, starting to get sick of these protests. “Because it doesn't matter to me if you'd rather die than turn it all over to me now. Because if you die, I get it all anyway.”

My father stares at me, confused, and the notary anxiously clears his throat before pulls another document out of his bag, laying it carefully before my father. “Your will, sir. Which you had me change months ago? To make...Fay Lippert, your daughter, your singular heir?”

“What?” he gasps.

“The day you hired me,” Daniel explains, perfectly cool. “It was a long day of signing for both of us – but I had a few extras page slipped into the packet. But your signature is there,” he says with a shrug, “witnessed by myself, and by the notary. It’s totally valid.”

My father looks up at the notary for confirmation. While the notary is clearly terrified, he nods anxiously and taps on the will. “You signed it, sir. I was – it is verified.”

My father’s breath comes in quick rasps now and he scrambles at the buttons of his collar, seeking air. Time is short now.

“Notarized copies of this will exist in at least three safety deposit boxes across the state, of course,” I say, wanting this done and getting sick of all of the divergences. As soon as my father realizes that he’s locked into this, the sooner this can be over. And I very much want it to be over.

“So,” Daniel says, nodding to the notary, who again holds out a pen to my father. “I’d suggest you sign. Because at least if you do that, you’ll live to fight this in court. Or take a shot back at us. Or...whatever it is you want to try. But either way, we’re leaving this room with what we want. And your time...” he says, hesitating and looking at my father’s purpling face, the veins starting to stand out on his neck, “is running short, Alden.”

Frustrated, pissed as hell, my father grabs the pen from the notary’s hand and starts to sign the paperwork. The notary, still flustered, flips through the pages as fast as he can, pointing at the places my father needs to sign. As he does Daniel takes a deep breath and moves around the table, to the sideboard, where he pours himself another glass of champagne.

I watch him, curious, wondering if he should have it. Because he still has to drive us after this.

But then I look away from him, ignoring it. Because I have bigger things to worry about it.

As my father nears the end of the pile, I put my two hands on the table and lean forward, speaking to him softly.

“I am sorry it had to go this way, father,” I say, meaning it. “But you destroyed my life too, when you destroyed Kent’s. And you should have realized that I’d retaliate. I am, after all, your daughter.” He raises his eyes now, finishing his last signature, looking at me with disgust.

But that just makes me smile.

“Family is everything, after all,” I say quietly, holding his gaze. “And the Lippert’s are my family now. And you? You’re nothing to me. Not anymore.”

I straighten as the notary gathers the papers into his briefcase and nods to me. “Digital copies in half an hour,” he murmurs. “Physical copies in the boxes by the end of the day.”

“Thank you, Mr. Worth,” I reply, not looking at him as he scurries to the door. “Your fee will be wired when we have confirmation.”

The notary leaves without another word and I lift the tiny vial off the table, intending to toss it across the table so that my father can guzzle it down. His eyes move directly to it, hungry, desperate –

But before I can even wind my hand back, Daniel moves, a flash of silver in his hand –

And I gasp, my eyes going wide, as Daniel swiftly grasps my father by the stray strands of hair growing on his scalp, and pulls his head back, and drags a knife across his throat.

My hands fly to my mouth as blood burbles from the long slash in my father’s neck, quickly drenching his skin, his shirt –

There’s a horrible, gasping groan before my father falls slack against the back of his chair, his head lolling grotesquely to the side.

“Daniel,” I whisper, my eyes shooting up to my husband as my father’s life spills red down his chest. “What – what did you do?”

Chapter 196 – Family Ties

Chapter 196 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“I had to do it, Fay,” Daniel says, looking at me evenly, his voice serious and heavy with the weight of the life he just took. “He couldn’t live – you know that. You’ve read enough Machiavelli to know that if he lived he’d have come for vengeance. He had to be destroyed -”

“Daniel,” I say, trying to interrupt and moving around the table now.

“I’m serious!” Daniel continues, stepping away from my father’s corpse and facing me as I come around, the bloody knife still clutched in his hand. “This is the only way we survive this, Fay – any of us. He had to die – and I – I know you’re too gentle to be able to do it – I wanted to take the blood on my hands so you didn’t have to –”

“Daniel -” I say, stepping close to him now and looking up into his eyes – reaching out a hand to place against his heaving chest.

“I’m right about this, Fay!” he protests, insistent, needing me to see it. “Men ought to be indulged or utterly destroyed – if you –”

“Daniel!” I interrupt again, wrapping my hand around the lapel of his jacket and tugging it, hard, to get his attention. And then a little smile breaks out on my lips as I open my hand and hold up the little vial still sitting on my palm. “It’s just sugar water,” I whisper.

I look up at my husband, my best friend, very carefully, loving him anew for wanting to take this from me – this inevitable thing that I wanted to save him from as well.

A hard little gasp breaks from Daniel’s throat as he throws out an arm and grabs me, pulling me close, his hand that still holds the knife held far away from both of us. “Fay,” he groans, and I can hear his voice break on the word. “Why didn’t you tell me that part of your plan?”

“Because I didn’t think you’d let me go through with it,” I say, laughing a little. Because, ultimately, I was right – he didn’t let me. He did it himself.

I feel Daniel sigh against me and then he lowers his head to rest his cheek against my hair. “Shit, Fay...we did this. I killed a man.”

“We both did it,” I murmur, wrapping my arms around his waist and burying my face against his chest, fighting all of the horrible emotions welling up in me. Guilt, and fear, and – perhaps worse, because I’m a murderer now, and I shouldn’t feel any of the good things – but relief and freedom, they’re there too. “We’ll share this, Daniel, all right? Me and you did it. The blood is on both our hands.”

“All right,” he murmurs, and then slowly he releases me.

“You okay?” I ask, my own voice shaking now as I raise a hand to his cheek.

He glances at the corpse next to him and swallows hard before stepping away from me. “I’ll be okay when...when it’s all done. Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I say, stepping back and smoothing my hands down over my dress. And then we both move. Fast. Because as much as Fiona has already got most of the family on her side, she is making her own moves scorched-earth moves right now against those she thought might hold out.

And there’s a chance that her efforts have failed, and those who survive would seek to hurt us when they find out what happened at this casual family brunch.

Daniel drops the bloody knife onto the table and fishes a small bottle out of his pocket. As I gather the black briefcase, he pours the contents of the bottle – I smell rubbing alcohol – onto the knife and takes a second to wipe it clean of any fingerprints with a spare napkin. Then he tosses the soaked napkin into a metal bowl and quickly lights it on fire with a lighter from his pocket.

“Is that necessary?” I ask as I wait by the door.

“I don’t know,” he murmurs, waiting to make sure that the napkin is sufficiently consumed and waving the smoke out of his face. Then he looks at me with a shrug. “My first crime scene too, Fay.”

“True,” I concede, and then when he joins me at the door I open it and we hurry through the house. We head immediately for the front door but I stop in my tracks when I see Tristin sitting primly on the couch in the parlor, Romulus still by her side, and Estrella asleep in her arms. She looks at me with wide, dark eyes.

I can tell from Tristin’s stark expression that she knows precisely what she’ll find when she goes into the breakfast room. I don’t know how she knows it but...she does.

Daniel stops when he reaches the front door and realizes that I’m not at his side. “Fay...” he says, his voice worried as he hesitates by the front door.

But I just give him a steady look before moving to the door of the living room, meeting Tristin’s gaze without an ounce of apology on my face.

“Is it done?” she asks, her voice soft.

I nod. And then my eyes move to the children, to Estrella’s perfect face, to Romulus’s dark and worried eyes. “The house is yours,” I say quietly. “And all of the money in the personal accounts.”

“What?” she breathes, shocked. But I don’t look at her. Instead, I focus only on Romulus, my little brother who has every reason in the world to come after me one day, to seek his own vengeance. Breathlessly, I hope that he won’t, that instead he’ll get out of this world.

What I’ve done today, it’s supposed to be a gift – what my mother tried to give to me.

But perhaps one day he’ll decide – as I did – that it’s not a gift he wants.

“You’ll receive the paperwork for the house in about a month,” I say quietly, looking back at her. “And the money in the accounts – you should move it to another account. I won’t come after it, but...it’s probably a good idea. The businesses, both criminal and legitimate – they’re gone. They belong to me or to Fiona now.”

Tristin’s jaw drops open as she stares at me, realizing that I’m doing my best to make amends. While I’ve taken her husband down, I’m not trying to burn her life as well. Instead, I seek to give her the means to build one for herself.

“You’re not my enemy, Tristin,” I say quietly. And then I look at Romulus and Estrella, my siblings. “And neither are they. I hope you find happiness in this world. Fiona will give you whatever you want. But honestly? I hope you sell this house, and take the money, and take them far, far away from all of this.”

And slowly, to my shock and pleasure, a very small smile curls on Tristin's lips.

"All right," she says, nodding her head slowly.

And I nod back, and take one more look at my siblings, and step away.

As I move to meet Daniel at the door, a man comes down the steps from the second level of the house, which makes me go rigid with fear. But when I look up, anticipating an enemy, I'm shocked to see that it's simply their electrician – who I've seen here at the house before.

"Where is she?" he breathes, anxious.

"What?" Daniel asks, baffled.

And then I laugh as I figure it out. Because no house has this many electric problems, requiring the electrician to be on call. "In there," I say, gesturing to the living room. "Take care of her."

He gives me a strange look, but then nods, and hurries into the parlor. Laughing still a little, I take Daniel's hand and tug him out the door.

"What the hell just happened?" he asks, looking over his shoulder as we head down the steps and over to our waiting car.

"Let's just say I don't think Tristin is going to come after us any time soon," I say, pulling open my door and tossing the briefcase into the back seat. "And that she and the electrician are going to live a very happy life."

"Oh," Daniel says, his eyebrows raised as he climbs into the driver's seat as I sit in mine. Our doors snap shut at the same time. "Well, that's one less thing to worry about," he murmurs, reaching for the cheap burner phone we picked up last week and typing in the address of our next destination.

"One less thing on a list of about a million," I murmur, pulling out my own burner. I pull up Fiona's number as Daniel starts the car and begins to pull out of the driveway.

"Calculating Best Route to...Pier 62, South Point Marina." I nod when I hear the phone speak out our destination, hoping everything goes as planned when we get there.

"Here we go," Daniel murmurs, pulling onto the road.

I finish typing my message and press send.

It's done. Good luck, cousin.

Her response comes quickly.

Everything going as planned on our end too. Drop me a line when you get to where you're going. Love you, baby.

I smile, thinking of all the times she's called me Baby Fay, wondering if the nickname still applies anymore.

Can people still refer to you as baby when you're a murderer? When you've killed your father and stolen the life he's built?

When you've got about twenty more felonies planned for your afternoon?

Well. I guess we'll find out.

I roll my window down and casually toss the phone out of the car, where I hope it gets pulverized by traffic. But even if it doesn't, it won't matter. We'll be off the grid by nightfall.

I take Daniel's hand as I press the button to close the window, giving his palm a little squeeze.

"Love you," I say quietly, my eyes on the road ahead of us.

"Love you too," he replies, quite simply.

And then we sit in silence as we drive the hour and a half journey to the coast.

Chapter 197 – Crash

Chapter 197 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent blinks his eyes twice, hard, shaking his head and trying to clear it –

The world – fuck, it feels like the entire world just exploded –

He looks around at the mess of bent metal and glass around him, realizing that the prison transport van is on its side – that he's laying slumped against the broken window, on the side of the van which does not have the door –

He groans, realizing that his head is aching, that there's a wetness on his forehead. He reaches up to touch it, to assess the damage, but his wrists jerk when he tries to go too far – because, of course, he's still chained up in here –

One of the prisoners in the seats behind him groans in pain, the other is silent –

Is he even alive?

Kent turns to look, but suddenly two gunshots ring out in the air and he goes still, realizing that...this is something more than a car crash. Instantly alert, he looks around, trying to see whatever he can, to learn –

There's a scuffle somewhere – he can hear bodies hitting each other, shouting, commands – more gun shots, people being told to get on their knees, to put their hands behind their backs –

Fuck, were those cops? Or...

His attention suddenly turns to the front of the van – the driver is unmoving but the guard – he's ripped from the passenger side door, shouting in pain and fear -

Before Kent can even process this, the sliding door of the van – currently above his head - slides back with a loud screech. Kent flinches at the sound and the sunlight that comes streaming in. Blinking, he looks up to see a silhouetted figure peering down. And then, to his shock, the figure jumps down into the van, landing right in front of him.

Kent's eyes go completely round with shock as the figure comes into view, kneeling beside him with a set of bolt cutters in one hand.

“Hey, Kent,” Jerome says, his voice serious but concerned. “Are you hurt? Can you get up?”

“What...”

“Seriously,” Jerome pushes, his voice tense as he glances at the other prisoners and then back up at the door. “We don't have a lot of time – if I get you loose can you walk?”

Kent takes a second to assess himself as the kid starts to snip at the chains that link his hands, his legs, and the floor of the van. Then he takes a deep breath as the final pieces snap into place in his mind: that this wasn't a random accident, it's a rescue mission, planned by his people. And if they're going to get away with this, they have to go. Now.

“I'm all right,” Kent says, pushing himself to his feet as Jerome snips the final chain. “Just an achy shoulder and...” he swipes his hand at his forehead, which indeed comes away bloody. “Something with my head, but I can't tell...”

Jerome takes a second to peer at it. “It doesn't look bad.”

“Hey!” the conscious prisoner says from behind them. “Hey, let me out too! Hey!”

“Sorry,” Jerome says, tossing the bolt cutters at his feet. “No time.” And then, with more athleticism than Kent has seen him display before, Jerome jumps up and grabs the edge of the door, pulling himself out of the van and reaching a hand down to help Kent.

Kent, shaking his head a little in disbelief at the sloppiness of this endeavor – clasps Jerome’s hand and lets the kid help pull him out of the van.

Things move quickly from there. Kent and Jerome slide down from the van and Jerome heads immediately for the field next to them at a run, gesturing for Kent to follow. Kent does, knowing that Jerome is – a least temporarily – in charge. But as he goes, Kent looks around in wonder at the truck with the smoking engine that sits next to the totaled transport van – and then at the other car, a pickup truck, that hit the police car that followed the prison transport –

Kent’s eyes move next to the guys in black ski masks who move quickly and efficiently through the group of cops and guards, securing them with zip ties so that they can’t follow or contact anyone for help. As Kent follows Jerome through the field – still not knowing where the hell they’re going, or why they’re going away from the road – a black van appears over the edge of the hill, driving down the road to the scene of the accident.

“Jerome!” Kent snaps, grabbing at the kid’s arm. “What the fuck is going on! Shouldn’t we be in that?” he says, pointing towards the black van which arrives at the scene of the accident and slides open the door before even coming to a stop. The men in black ski masks start to climb in.

“Nah,” Jerome says, glancing over his shoulder and then pulling his hand out of Kent’s grasp, starting to move again. “That’s just the decoy van for Fiona’s guys –“

“Fiona’s guys!?” Kent gasps, slowing in his shock.

“Would you come on,” Jerome snaps, turning back to grab Kent’s arm now, hauling him along with him. “There is a plan, Kent! The slower you move right now, the more likely it is that we get caught! Let’s go!”

Realizing that he’s right, Kent grits his teeth and follows Jerome at a run, hating every second of it. Because this – it doesn’t make any sense, and it’s basically the opposite of how he would have done any of this –

Jerome slows when they get to a copse of trees on the far side of the field, beckoning Kent to follow. Kent does, and then his jaw drops open when he sees – of all damn things – two horses waiting for them there, tied to a branch.

“What the…”

“Come on,” Jerome says, untying one of the bridles and flipping the reins over the horse’s head. “We have a long ride, and we have to get started before – “

“Stop,” Kent commands and Jerome – used to obeying this man – freezes with one foot in the stirrup, turning to his boss. “What the hell is going on here? Who – who planned this?”

And to Kent’s surprise, after a moment of frozen silence, Jerome’s face breaks into a tiny smile as he laughs. “Kent,” he says, shaking his head and then tossing Kent a small black backpack

from a saddlebag. “When we were faced with the problem of how to get you from the scene of the crash to the coast unseen and off of main roads, who do you think was the first person to decide that the answer was horses?”

Kent catches the bag and then just blinks at Jerome for a second, confused, before he groans and lets his head fall back. “Fay,” he answers, sighing and scraping a worried hand down the length of his face. “You’re right. This...screams Fay.”

“Yeah,” Jerome says, pulling himself up onto his horse forward. “But it’s a good plan, Kent. It’s going to work. But in order for it to work, we need you to get changed and then on the damn horse. All right?”

Kent glares up at Jerome for a second, not liking his tone, but then he quickly opens the backpack, taking out the simple pedestrian clothing before stripping off his orange jumpsuit and tugging the clothes on, struggling a little to get them over the handcuffs and leg shackles are still fastened to his body. That done, Kent shoves the jumpsuit into the backpack and then tucks it neatly under a bush before moving over to the horse, untying the bridle. As he climbs onto the horse, Kent suddenly recognizes it, realizing that this is one of his horses. How the hell did they manage that?

“Ready?” Jerome asks, turning the horse towards him.

“You’ve got a path?” Kent asks, looking steadily at the kid.

Jerome winks and taps his head with his fingertips. “Memorized. She quizzed me. I can do it in my sleep.”

“Leave it to Fay,” Kent murmurs as he nods to Jerome and they start to ride, heading through the woods away from the scene of the crash, “to design a prison break that involves quizzes.”

“It’s going to work, Kent!” Jerome calls over his shoulder. “Have faith in her!”

“Oh, I do,” he sighs. “Perhaps despite all logic and common sense...I have faith in Fay.” And then they kick their horses into a canter and flee the scene.

Jerome wasn’t kidding when he said they had hours of hard riding ahead. As the afternoon starts to wane, Kent’s body aches with having to use the unfamiliar muscles needed for riding, especially after two months of relative inactivity in the jail. That, combined with sleepless nights, the chafe of metal at his wrists and ankles, and one hell of a car crash –

Yeah. He’s hurting.

So when Jerome waves for Kent to follow him towards a red barn after jumping one final fence, Kent does so with relief. They don't dismount until they're inside of the barn, and when Kent does he lets out an unintentional groan of exhaustion.

"You okay?" Jerome asks, looking over at him.

"I'm fine," Kent sighs, looking evenly at the kid. Then he looks around at the empty barn. "What next?"

"We wait," Jerome says.

"For what?"

"You'll see." Jerome laughs a little, smiling and leading the horses away to waiting stalls.

"Why is this so cryptic?" Kent asks, frowning as he follows Jerome. "Why can't I know?"

"Because," he says, bolting both horses into their stalls and nodding for Kent to follow him towards the other side of the barn. "She wanted to surprise you."

"Are you...serious?" Kent asks, his mouth falling open as he follows.

Jerome just laughs and shakes his head. "I know. I told her not to, but she insists. Here, give me your hands – I'll see what I can do about those cuffs." Kent does as asked as Jerome takes a paper clip out of his pocket, deftly twisting it in the locks of the cuffs and popping them off.

Kent is a little surprised to see Jerome's skill at this, but then he sighs, deciding to get over being so surprised all the time. It's becoming normal now, his constant shock.

"You know you have the power," Kent says, leaning against the wall and watching Jerome work. "You can just tell me what the surprise is."

"Yeah, but then she'd find out, and that would break her heart," Jerome replies, smiling fondly as he reaches for another pair of bolt cutters and sits on the ground, reaching for Kent's ankle so he can do something about the shackle bolted there.

"This is ridiculous," Kent sighs, closing his eyes and rubbing them with the fingers of one hand as he moves his leg closer to Jerome, making his job easier.

"I think that's why it works," Jerome replies, removing the first shackle and then moving to the other. Kent opens his eyes, looking down at the kid, watching him. "If this had been planned by anyone more experienced than Fay, the cops would have been able to predict what was coming next. But because she doesn't think like a seasoned mafia criminal – at least not yet – they won't see her coming."

“I guess there’s...a bizarre kind of logic in that,” Kent murmurs as the second shackle falls from his ankle.

The barn is quiet for a moment as Jerome gets to his feet. When Jerome stands straight and tosses the bolt cutters to the floor, he turns back to Kent and flinches back a little at the steady, determined expression on Kent’s face.

It’s one he’s seen a thousand times before. And it always means trouble.

“So,” Kent says, his voice low as he finally brings up the subject that’s been lingering between them for hours. “I hear you’re dating my kid.”

Chapter 198 – On the Run

Chapter 198 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Something’s wrong,” Ivan murmurs, chewing on his lower lip as he watches Daniel Lippert sitting in the coffee shop, his back to the window. Why the hell isn’t he moving? Why is he alone – shouldn’t he have some sort of team in place?

It was going to take a hell of a lot more than just Daniel to snatch Kent Lippert on his way into the state penitentiary. So why...where was everyone?

Ivan, at least, came prepared. The state wouldn’t consent to delay Lippert’s transport on such short notice, or add any extra force to the escort, so Ivan had called in every damn favor he could muster and gathered everyone he could here. There were at least twenty cop cars waiting, all focused on Daniel Lippert, waiting for him to make his move.

Daniel Lippert, who is sitting in a damn coffee shop eating a croissant...

“Fuck,” Ivan murmurs, sitting back hard in the passenger seat of the police cruiser and smacking a hand against his leg. He’s missing something – he knows it.

But all morning – all of it – each of his suspicions had been confirmed. First, the dark-haired Lippert had come out of the beach house, alone, and taken the Tesla the Alden corporation had given him out onto the road – in the opposite direction of his job.

They had trailed him for hours, and it was all exactly as Fay said it would be – Daniel, trying to get close to the state penitentiary on the day his father is being transferred there. Trying something, though Ivan doesn’t know what the hell yet...

But now...he's just sitting in a coffee shop? Having cup after cup of coffee, alone? What the hell...

Suddenly, a voice buzzes through on the police scanner.

Car crash involving a prison transport –

Ivan's head whips towards the scanner and he stares at it, his jaw dropping open.

No fatalities – police officers found bound and gagged –

“Shit,” Ivan breathes, his eyes going wide. Because...

Two inmates recovered – the third, Kent Lippert, escaped – we're tracking a black van now, anticipating that Lippert is inside –

“FUCK!” Ivan shouts, moving instantly for his door, pushing it open and throwing himself out.

“Kaminski!” his partner shouts from the driver's seat. “Where the hell are you going!? We need to –“

But Ivan ignores him, striding across the street towards the coffee shop, ignoring the fact that traffic is screeching to a halt all around to avoid hitting him. He doesn't care – he wants answers.

Ivan hurls the door open to the shop and crosses it quickly, slapping a hand on Daniel's shoulder and making him turn. “What the hell is –“

But before Ivan can finish his sentence, the man turns to him and smiles. Ivan freezes, his jaw dropping, his eyes going wide.

Because...because it's not Daniel Lippert.

It looks a hell of a lot like him – the same height, dark hair, square jaw – hell, he's even dressed like Daniel – god, they could be...brothers...

But it's definitely, definitely not him.

“Can I help you?” Donnie asks, but he's no good at keeping the smug look off his face.

“Where the fuck is he,” Ivan growls, leaning over to glower at this imposter.

“Don't know what you're talking about, man,” Donnie says, grinning a little.

“Up,” Ivan says, making a snap decision and grabbing the larger man's arm. “You're under arrest – you're coming with me for questioning –“

“I am not,” Donnie says, the smile dropping from his face. “I didn’t do a damn thing – I’m just having a nice cuppa coffee -“

“You’re –“ but Ivan stops, because this guy is right. Arrest him for what, looking like a Lippert? Driving Daniel’s car? Sure, they might be able to get him on some kind of aiding and abetting – but...they don’t even know what the crime is yet –

“That’s what I thought,” Donnie snaps, pulling his arm out of Ivan’s grasp and turning back to his coffee as the other customers all watch in silent shock.

Ivan’s head whips back to the police cruiser across the street, outside of which is partner is still standing, looking pissed as hell.

“God damn it,” Ivan snaps, realizing finally that he’s been had. That whatever Daniel was planning – Ivan got the wrong timeline, he’s in the wrong damn place –

Fuck, it had better not be too late – he’s invested too much in taking Lippert down –

Ivan strides towards the door of the coffee shop, but as he reaches for the handle a voice calls out from behind him.

“Hey!” Donnie shouts, and Ivan turns. “Hey, the little one – she wanted me to give you a message.”

“What?” Ivan asks, going suddenly pale.

“The little one,” Donnie repeats, “the redhead?” When Ivan nods, letting Donnie know he understands precisely who he’s talking about, Donnie’s face breaks back into his smug grin. “She asked me to say to you: ‘Am I lying now, Ivan?’”

And then Donnie laughs, shaking his head and turning back to his croissant.

Ivan stares at the back of Donnie’s head as his heart feels like it stops in his chest.

And then shatters into a million pieces.

Jerome freezes like a rabbit for a second as he stares up at Kent, and then he slowly takes a step back.

“What are you doing?” Kent asks, his eyes narrowing as Jerome slowly backs away from him.

“Getting away from you,” Jerome murmurs, his eyes watching Kent for any movement.

“Why?” Kent asks, frowning.

“Because,” Jerome answers, his voice tense. “You punched the shit out of me twice when you falsely accused me of dating Fay. So, what the hell are you going to do when I confirm that I actually am dating Daniel?”

And Kent, despite himself, bursts out laughing.

“I’m not going to punch you, Jerome –“

“Then what are you going to do!?”

“Nothing!” Kent sighs, laughing and running a hand through his hair. “I just...I’m surprised I didn’t see it.”

“Yeah, well,” Jerome murmurs, still keeping his distance and a wary eye on his boss. “The secrecy was kind of on purpose. You know, to avoid the...punching.”

Kent just chuckles, shaking his head and looking Jerome over. He has to admit, the kid is more capable than he had given him credit for before. If this is Daniel’s choice...well, he can’t say it’s a bad one.

“Listen, I know you say you’re not going to hit me, but history would suggest otherwise.” Jerome says, watching Kent warily from a safe distance.

“Listen,” Kent says, smiling at the kid, liking him despite himself, “have you kept your hands off Fay?”

“Yes,” Jerome says, spreading his hands out as if it’s obvious. “Because beyond knowing what you’d do to me if I touched her, I actually have no interest in any of Fay’s many charms. I prefer...” But then Jerome just blushes, realizing...well, that any description he gives of what he actually does prefer is going to sound a lot like a description of Kent himself, considering that Daniel is essentially his replica.

Kent laughs again, a wide smile on his face. “Well then,” he says, “I have no reason to punch you, do I? As long as you don’t go breaking Daniel’s heart or anything. Then I’ll beat the shit out of you again.”

“No problem,” Jerome says, raising his hands innocently. “I will... refrain.”

Kent opens his mouth to say something else, but before he can, they both hear a car – or, is that two? – crunching in the gravel in front of the barn.

“They’re here,” Jerome says, turning towards the front of the barn. “Ready?”

“Sure,” Kent says, standing up straight and sinking his hands into his pockets. “Surprise number...six today. Let’s do it.”

And then Kent follows the kid out of the barn, where a car waits, parked next to a truck with a horse trailer attached.

Kent blinks in the light of the setting sun, looking around, but his face bursts into a smile the moment he hears his name called.

“Kenny!”

Kent laughs, turning towards his favorite uncle, who climbs down from the passenger side of the truck hauling the trailer. Kent opens his arms, welcoming the shrunken old man into a hug.

“Uncle Gino,” he says, shaking his head in a little bit of wonder as the old man holds him tight for a brief moment before letting him go. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Your girl sent me,” Gino says, smiling up at his favorite nephew. “She knew I’d take care of the horses better than anyone else. I’m going to take them back, give you the car so you can get to the port.”

“Port?” Kent asks, confused.

Gino just waves a dismissive hand. “I don’t know much about it – she said she’d tell me what I needed to know when I needed to know it.” Then he laughs, looking at Kent slyly. “Sounds like someone else I know.”

Kent laughs too, slipping his hands into his pockets, a little amazed at how...easy this is. How with every passing moment he feels further and further from prison and captivity and more like his old self. “Yeah,” he replies, “I think she picked up a thing or two from her time with me.”

“Don’t let this one go,” Gino commands, lifting a gnarled finger to point in Kent’s face. “She’s a good one.”

Kent, to his own surprise, blushes a little. He hadn’t been aware that Gino...figured it out – that anyone had. Damn, and he thought he’d been so closed down about it. Who else knew –

“Don’t overthink it, kid,” Gino says, laughing and patting Kent’s cheek with an open palm. “I’ve known you since you were born. I can read you. I saw the way you watched her.”

Kent smiles, just a wry twist of his mouth. “Yeah well. Can you blame me?”

“I cannot,” Gino says, laughing and moving away to the door of the stables. He waves a hand over his shoulder. “Good luck, Kenny! I’m glad I got to see you before you left. Come see me again when you can.”

Kent stands still a moment, watching his uncle disappear, thanking Fay silently in his mind for giving him a chance to say goodbye to the one person he’d actually regret leaving behind. Because as much as his final destination is a mystery, Kent knows that they’re leaving – that their only choice now is to go somewhere far away for a long, long time.

“Ready?” Jerome says, already at the driver’s side of the sedan, accepting the keys from a man that Kent doesn’t recognize. One of Fay or Fiona’s guys now, he assumed. Not his.

Laughing a little at the bizarre changes the world has taken on in the past two months, Kent nods and makes his own way to the passenger side of the sedan. “I’m ready,” he says, opening the car door and climbing in. “Where are we headed?”

“Coast,” Jerome says, giving him a wide smile as he sits and pulls his door shut. “We’re close, though – she didn’t want us on the road too long. Just pray we don’t hit any police check points on the way.”

Kent nods, fastening his seatbelt and lowering the back of his seat so that his head can’t be seen above the window. And then he closes his eyes and puts his trust in Jerome as the kid begins to drive.

Chapter 199 – The Ship

Chapter 199 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent can tell when things get a little dicey on the thirty-minute drive to the coast because Jerome’s whole body goes tense.

“Shit, shit,” Jerome murmurs once, his eyes darting to the side towards what Kent assumes is a police vehicle.

“Do we have any weapons?” Kent asks, keeping his voice low.

“Glove box,” Jerome replies, working hard not to move his lips. “But...not yet, all right? I don’t know what they’re...”

Kent watches Jerome’s head move as whatever vehicle it was moves past their sedan, which is studiously driving the speed limit. Jerome lets out a deep breath.

“Okay,” Jerome says, nodding. “I think it’s just...a normal highway patrol.”

Kent nods, tense but...well, he’s done this sort of thing before. He knows that there’s no benefit to panicking before there’s a reason to panic. They drive a few minutes in silence before Kent speaks again.

“Jerome,” he starts, and Jerome glances down at him, letting him know that he’s listening. “Why haven’t we met more cops on this trip? We were on those horses for two hours – the highways should be crawling with cops looking for me.”

Jerome smirks a little and shakes his head. "I feel like you know the answer to this one too, Kent," he says.

"Is it because the answer is the same as all your other ones?" Kent asks.

"Yup," Jerome says, laughing a little. "She set up a diversion. Had Ivan and every spare cop he could muster chasing Daniel's car across the state. They've probably figured it out by now but," he shrugs, "we have enough of a lead that Ivan and all of his buddies are at least an hour away. We've only got highway patrols out looking on this side of the state. And we're gambling that they don't know, specifically, to look for me in the driver's seat."

"One hell of a gamble," Kent murmurs.

"Yeah, well," Jerome says, slowing the car as he pulls up to a gate at their apparent destination. Then he grins down at Kent. "Looks like it worked, didn't it?"

"Shit," Kent says, starting to sit up as Jerome rolls down his window and leans out, punching a code into a keypad and opening a gate. As they drive through, Kent looks around the shipping port, not truly surprised at the location but a little more impressed than he expected to be. "What is all this?"

"It's our ride," Jerome says, lifting his chin towards a gigantic cargo ship looming above them, blocking out the sky above. "And if everything went according to plan...we should be the last to arrive."

Jerome pulls into an empty parking spot as Kent looks around the completely dead lot. It was...god, the whole thing had just been so smooth. Even though it had started with a crash, every piece fell into place so neatly after that. It was...gorgeously done, but...

Is it too easy?

Kent feels a wariness curl inside of him. It should be harder than this, more complicated. Something in him is waiting for someone to burst out, to grab him, to drag him back to the prison.

Kent looks over the roof at Jerome after they climb out. "This is...too easy."

Jerome just shrugs. "That's because you're not seeing the months of prep that went into it. She gave it everything she had, planning this, Kent. She wanted it to be smooth. And it's not done yet." Jerome nods towards the ship. "We still have to get on board. And not get attacked by international customs or pirates or something."

"Well," Kent says, shaking his head and shutting the sedan's door. "I guess...it's a risk I'm willing to take."

Jerome nods, heading towards the set of metal stairs that leads towards the ship. But he stops, and turns when he realizes that Kent isn't following. "What?" Jerome asks, confused.

"They're on there already?" Kent asks, nodding towards the ship as he stands at the bottom of the stairs. "Daniel? Fay?"

Jerome just laughs a little, shaking his head. "They're supposed to be! But there's only one way to find out. Come on!"

Kent shakes his head, sighing and following Jerome, his stomach turning with anxiety in a way that it absolutely never does. Not even when he was arrested, months ago, did he feel like this.

And Daniel – Daniel he's not worried about -

But Fay...having to face her, after how he treated her the last time he saw her...

God, he owes her everything now. And it's not that he minds the debt but...how could he ever repay it? And why would she ever forgive him?

Kent hangs his head a little, worried as he climbs the long series of winding steps and ramps that lead to the lowest open deck. He only raises his head when he finally reaches the gate, seeing an unfamiliar man – a sailor, he realizes – standing waiting for him.

"Last to board," the sailor says in a heavy accent that Kent can't quite place, nodding harshly after Kent steps onto the deck. The sailor closes the gate, pressing a button that detaches the staircase. "No one else. We sail now, immediate." Then he points down the line of the deck.

When Kent follows his gaze, he blinks in surprise to see...

Daniel, his kid, his arms wrapped around Jerome, laughing.

Kent stares at the two of them as they grin into each other's faces, each clearly thrilled to see the other, to have had their plan – that they apparently slaved over for months – finally come to fruition. Kent watches as Daniel places a fond hand on Jerome's cheek, gazing at him, laughing at something he says.

And then Daniel turns his face to his father, and his smile broadens.

And something in Kent cracks as he stares at his son, who begins to stride across the deck to him.

Daniel, his kid, his child – who he's never been close enough to, who he's never been...been able to tell how much he loves him. But who somehow did all of this –

Saved him – pulled him out of that prison where he was absolutely going to be murdered, after everything he told to the police about the Russians –

His son, who deserved a better father, has saved him –

“Dad,” Daniel breathes, throwing his arms around his father, holding him tight. Kent falls back a step at the force of his son’s greeting, but then his own arms close behind Daniel and a laugh breaks out of his throat.

“Hey kid,” Kent whispers, one arm going tight around Daniel’s back, the other cradling the back of his head, his fingers buried in the soft fuzz of his son’s dark hair. Kent exhales a heavy breath, squeezing his eyes shut as he holds Daniel close. “Hey,” he says again, at a loss for words.

“I can’t believe it worked,” Daniel laughs, pulling back a little and grinning at his dad.

“What, you had doubts? Jerome didn’t.”

Daniel just laughs. “Jerome likes a little unpredictability in his life. You should have seen how he wanted to do this – guns blazing, fight and flight kind of stuff. Fay and I had to really talk him down.”

Kent laughs, studying his son’s face, but then he can’t help but look beyond him – seeking another figure. Smaller, with bright hair –

“She’s downstairs,” Daniel says after a moment, his voice soft. Kent turns to see a knowing smile on Daniel’s face.

“Why?” Kent asks, frowning. Because the Fay he knows – he can’t believe she wasn’t at the rail watching him climb the steps. Not that he expected her to be – or wanted her to –

“She had a hard day, dad,” Daniel says, his face falling a little bit. “And –“

“Wait, what? What was hard?”

“Dad,” Daniel sighs, looking at Kent a little sadly. “Just...let her tell you, all right? And she got hit with some morning sickness as soon as we got on the boat. She’s down in the little cabin –“

“Where?” Kent demands, already moving down the deck, looking for a door.

“Down one flight!” Daniel calls as Jerome pulls open the door in the wall that he’s looking for. Kent nods to him as he passes through. “Cabin 4 – you won’t miss it!”

Kent nods again, mostly to himself, as he picks a direction – he doesn’t care which – and strides down the hall, looking for a set of stairs. He finds it at the end of the hall and jogs down, his mind only on her. As he turns towards the door to the deck below Kent feels the entire boat shudder and takes a second to steady himself, raising his eyebrows.

Apparently, the sailor wasn’t kidding – the ship is sailing now.

As soon as Kent adjusts to the movement he's again striding down the narrow hall, counting down the doors – 7...6...5...

And then he's there. Cabin four.

Kent grabs the handle, turns it, pushes open the door and steps into the room – not even breathing as he looks –

But. God damn it, where is she?

The cabin's small – there's barely room for a bed. Kent knows it's the right room – there are some objects that just scream Fay scattered around – a hairbrush with a few red hairs, a satchel with some books tossed on the bed, even a pair of expensive pumps which she clearly kicked off, sick of them. Kent crosses the room in a few strides, peering into the small attached bathroom but...

Nowhere.

Shit.

Shit.

Panic hits Kent – why isn't she here?

Was there...did someone take her off the ship? Did she...

Kent's breathing starts to come hard as he heads back for the door, throwing it open and looking frantically down the hall.

Chapter 200 – Reunion

Chapter 200 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent is already moving, anger and panic thrumming through him, when he sees a figure move towards the end of the hall. Kent shouts for him, a loud and commanding “Hey!”

The sailor stops, turning towards Kent warily. Kent closes the distance between them fast, looming down over the sailor, who looks at him with wide eyes. “Where is she?” he asks, pointing towards the door of Cabin 4, which swings open.

“W-who?” the sailor asks, frantic, his accent – like his colleague's – thick and unaccustomed to English.

Frustrated, frantic, Kent growls down at him. “Girl!” he demands, “red hair!” He gestures up towards his own hair and then points to an orange emergency kit attached to the wall.

The sailor looks between Kent and the emergency kit and then laughs. “Ah!” he says, smiling up at Kent and nodding. Then he holds up two fingers. “Two decks!” he says, and then he points downwards. “With the...ah...the horse!” And then, laughing, he waves and starts away, leaving Kent baffled behind.

What? The...the horse?

Feeling his temper slip with his anxiety, Kent storms through the ship, down two flights of stairs, slamming open the door to a level that is clearly not for passengers, but which instead gives access to some of the cargo containers. Gritting his teeth – wondering why the hell she’d be down here – ready to murder anyone who may have – may have –

God, he doesn’t even know – forced her down here against her will –

Or tried anything – anything –

But suddenly, of all things, Kent hears... a whinny?

What?

His steps falter, but then he makes up for it, stalking down the hall, heading for the open door just feet ahead of him –

His hand hits the threshold first, stopping him from careening into the door itself as, panting, he turns to look –

And god damn it –

God damn it –

She’s right there.

Kent forgets to breathe as he sees her, her back to him in a little black dress, her hair falling over her shoulders in lazy red curls, standing on her toes in a pair of bedroom slippers – of all damn things – as she strokes the forehead of her horse –

Heathcliff, her god damn horse – standing next to another one Kent recognizes his own – a white mare called Butterfly -

The words are on his lips, to demand why she did this ridiculous thing, bringing her horse on a ship –

But as she turns, her blue eyes wide, and looks at him with her perfect mouth in a surprised “oh...”

Everything leaves his mind.

All of his words, his panic, his thoughts, his guilt, his desire...

Kent stares at Fay, breathless.

And she turns to him, slowly, her hands going immediately to the barely-there bump at the front of her dress. And Kent’s eyes flash to it as well, before coming back to her face.

The two stare at each other for a long moment.

And then his eyes fall to her mouth as her lower lip starts to tremble, just barely.

Kent moves - he’s there in an instant. He doesn’t remember crossing the room, but his arms are suddenly around Fay, pulling her tight against him as she gasps a desperate breath and bursts into tears.

“Fay,” he whispers, tucking his head against her as his own knees go weak. He lets himself sink to the floor and takes her with him, pulling her into his lap, tucking her close against his chest.

Kent holds Fay just like that while she cries for a long time. He rocks her back and forth, his cheek pressed against her head, feeling the softness of her hair against his skin. He murmurs soft things to her – he doesn’t know what - and she wraps her hands in the fabric of his shirt, burying her face in it and pulling herself closer to him. And he lets her, lets her do whatever she wants, as long as he can keep his arms around her.

Because this is all he wants, for the rest of his life, forever.

Just to have her here in his arms.

I cry for...way too long. But I can’t help it – I can’t – can’t believe that he was just standing there when I turned around –

So many times, I imagined this reunion. I imagined that I’d be waiting for him in the cabin, and would have something cute to say –

But then he was just there, and I saw him, and damn it but something in me just broke –

It all pours out of me – the months of holding it together, of long nights planning and worrying, of – of deciding to lean in hard to the criminal element I was born to, of deciding to take out my own father to make this all work –

But it was this moment that I was waiting for, and it's absolutely nothing like what I planned – and yet, somehow, it's so much better -

His arms are steady around me as I cry myself out, creating a warm, safe cocoon in which I can completely fall apart. As my tears start to subside I begin to notice things – like the warmth of his body, and the slow pace of his breath, the sound of his heartbeat in his chest, pressed against my ear.

And I calm, and come back to myself.

And then suddenly blush bright red – because I'm supposed to be this powerful mafia donna now, and here I am crying my eyes out on the floor of a makeshift stable in a shipping container, for heaven's sake.

I hear him laugh a little and I look up to see him peering down at me now, his arms loosening just enough so that he can see.

And then I laugh a little too, because I know it – I know I'm being ridiculous.

But somehow, it's right, and I don't feel foolish at all anymore. And I know he doesn't see me that way.

“Hey, Kent,” I say, sniffing and bringing a hand to my face to wipe at the tears that have streaked down my cheeks, leaving me a wet and blubbery mess.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he says, smiling down at me and relaxing a little so that I'm settled neatly against his arm now, not being clutched to him like he'll never let me go. Not that I minded that, really. It was kind of nice.

But now that I get to sit back a little, and look at him? My smile grows, because I missed this – I missed seeing his face, the complexities of his expression as his emotions pass over it like clouds. But then, as I study him, I note the blood in his hair – the gash high on his hairline –

“Oh,” I say, sitting up more, reaching for it. “What happened –“

“Don't,” he murmurs, pulling his head back a little bit. “It's fine, Fay – just a little cut, it stopped bleeding hours ago –“

“Oh,” I say again, guilt suddenly flooding me as I stare at it and then bring my eyes back to his. “Are you – are you okay? Are you all banged up? When did this –“

“When do you think it happened,” he growls, narrowing his eyes at me playfully while a smile tugs at his lips. “When you had me riding across the countryside on horseback? Or when you had a tractor trailer slam into my prison transport?”

And I grin, suddenly, to hear him say it. “Well, it worked, didn't it?”

“A little reckless,” he chides, “and that crash, Fay – what were you thinking? There was no way to predict whether or not I’d be killed –“

I frown at him. “Well, I told them to be gentle.”

He blinks at me, shocked. “You told the men who were going to t-bone the van I was riding in to be gentle –“

My mouth falls open. “Well, weren’t they!? I said to hit just hard enough to stop the van –“

“They knocked us sideways! The sliding door was on the roof – Jerome had to climb down into it -”

I gasp, my hands covering my mouth as my eyes go wide. I shake my head at him. “That was not part of the plan,” I murmur. “I told them...just a tap...”

“Well, they really went above and beyond, Donna Lippert,” he growls, bringing his face close to mine, teasing me, and I bite my lip, pleased. “You’ll either have to give them a raise or kill them, one or the other.”

I laugh at this, the sound bubbling out of me – and then we’re both laughing, harder than makes sense, because honestly none of it is funny, but somehow...it’s all too much.

Kent gathers me closer to him as we laugh, wrapping one hand around my waist, and butterflies erupt in my stomach when I feel his fingers against the swell of my belly. But then he tucks his other hand around the back of my head, his fingers tangling into my hair, smiling at me –

And he’s so damn handsome, and we’re both so happy, staring at each other and laughing that I can’t help it –

I wrap my fingers in his shirt again, and tug him closer, lifting my face to his –

And suddenly the laughter is gone as he first nudges my nose with his and then presses his mouth to mine, his lips at once impossibly soft and recklessly determined. A moan rises in my throat immediately as my arms wrap around his neck, pulling him closer to me, wanting him –

Wanting every piece of him, every bit –

Every flawed, horrible, wonderful, incredible part of this man who I gave everything to save - who I know would have done precisely the same for me.

Kent doesn’t bother being gentle, his mouth hard on mine now as his breath comes in quick pants, as he again clings to me, his hand scraping its way down my back, his teeth bared and claiming my lower lip before he –

“Well,” a voice says from the doorway, delighted and a little scandalized. “I mean, I didn’t expect anything less, but Fay, you certainly don’t waste any time, do you?”