

## Chapter 21 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I gasp, my eyes going wide, and then – instantly, like flipping a light switch – I come back to myself.

“Oh my god!” I shout, putting my hands up against his chest and shoving him. “Oh my god you are so gross!”

He laughs then, truly entertained but not moving at all against my pushes. After three or four, though, Kent takes a step back, letting me push past him and dash across the room. I spin when I get to my desk, leaning back against it, my breath coming fast.

Kent stands calmly by the door, watching me, laughing.

God, I hate him.

My lips curl back a little as I sneer at him, this horrible man, torturing me after – after what he did to those people in the basement -

“Oh come on, Fay,” he purrs, putting his hands in his pockets. “You were the one who was so curious to see what was going on in the basement, even after I told you to leave. You should be brave enough to admit that you wanted to see it, that you liked it.”

“I did not,” I say, stamping my foot a little. “I went down to get my phone –“ I scramble at the pants of my jeans, producing it as if it’s evidence and tossing it on the desk. “I definitely didn’t want to see anything that was going on in that room –“

“Fay,” he says, his voice light and tempting, almost sing-song. “I saw you, Fay. I saw you crouched down, peering into the room. You weren’t just passing by. You stopped. You opened the door so that you could watch me.”

I snap my mouth shut, staring at him.

He’s right, of course. I was tempted. I did look. God, seriously, what was wrong with me?

He laughs softly again at me again, at the expression of guilt on my face.

Slowly, he takes three steps towards me, sliding his hands into his pockets. “If you’re going to be in my house, Fay,” he says. “You’ll follow my rules. Was I not clear about that before?”

Quickly, I shake my head. I've known since the moment I walked into this house that Kent's will is law. I watch him as he slowly takes two more steps in my direction.

"If you don't follow my rules, Fay," he says, coming ever closer. "You will be punished. Do you want me to punish you?"

I don't move – don't answer.

A perverse part of me considers the question – actually considers whether –

"No," I say quickly. "No, I'm sorry, I won't do it again."

Kent shakes his head, a little closer right now. Fear rises in me, but so does anger. Why is he still coming closer? I promised him I wouldn't do it again – what else does he want from me?

"It doesn't work that way, Fay," he says, prowling. "You broke the rules once. You just told me you did. Now, you have to take your medicine."

He's only feet from me now. I lean back against the desk, desperate for even a few more inches of space. Then, I see him smile, just a tiny thing at the corner of his mouth and realize –

God damnit, he's enjoying this.

Something in me snaps. I stand up straight. "Don't you come any closer to me," I hiss the words from between my teeth.

Kent laughs lightly, continuing to draw nearer. He likes this, I realize. Likes pinning me back in the corner. He's already gotten everything he needs – my apology, my promise that I won't do it again – and yet, he's pushing...

"Why shouldn't I, Fay," Kent says softly, almost a whisper. "What are you going to do to me," his eyes flick over me as he says it, "if I take one. More. Step?"

He's bearing down on me, his face again inches from mine. "Are you going to run again, Fay?" he asks, so softly only I can hear. "I'll just catch you."

My heartbeat ratchets up as I look up at him, at his powerful face, the complete control in his eyes.

Then, I do the only thing I can think of.

I tilt my head back and scream.

Surprisingly, Kent flinches at this, taking a step back. I look back at him as I run out of breath, my eyes wide, a pinch of joy lighting in me as I realize that I actually rattled him, just a little.

Building on the effort, I throw my head back again, taking a deep breath, getting ready to let it all out when he grabs me –

“God damnit, Fay,” he growls, slapping a hand across my mouth and pulling me to him so that my left shoulder is crunched against his chest. “What do you think that is going to do!?”

But I look up at him with a little bit of victory in my eyes. He wouldn’t be shutting me up if he thought it wasn’t going to do anything. He’d let me scream myself hoarse if he didn’t care.

He gives me a little shake – nothing rough, just enough to try to teach me he’s in control – but I just laugh against his hand, perhaps a little manic now –

The fear is still coursing through me, but along with it is something else – adrenaline, maybe –

God damnit, was he right? Was my body responding to something in this, to the challenge, or the danger of it all?

“Fay, I’m going to let you go, but if you scream again, I swear –“

But just then, the door to my room swings open and my fiancé bursts into the room, panic and worry on his own face, his eyes flying wide when he sees me wrapped in his father’s arms, his hand over my mouth.

“What the hell is going on here?!” Daniel shouts, striding over to us.

Kent lets me go instantly and I gasp in fresh air, falling back against the desk.

Daniel stops by the bed, his father between us. His eyes sweep over me, ascertaining that I’m okay, before turning with anger to his dad. “What were you doing to her?!”

Kent has regained his composure faster than I thought he would. Coolly, he slips his hands back into his pockets and gives Daniel a little smirk. “Nothing, Daniel. Everything is fine.”

Daniel’s gaze slips to mine, looking for confirmation. I hesitate for a moment, looking between father and son, and then give a little shrug, deciding not to push it. Kent has made his point – I need to do what he says – but if he was really going to hurt me, he’d have done it by now.

“See?” Kent says, looking at his son. “She’s fine.”

With that, Kent strides from the room, brushing past his son and not giving me another look. Confused, Daniel looks after him, and then turns to me.

“Am I crazy?” He asks. “Or did I hear you scream?”

I sign and sink onto the bed. “You’re not crazy,” I say. “I did.”

“But you’re okay?”

I nod as he sits down next to me, concern all over his face. I have to admit that I am a little surprised by it – all this time I think I thought, at least a little, that I’m just a pawn in Daniel’s life. It feels good to know that he cares about me enough to come running when he hears that I’m in trouble.

“I just...well, I broke a rule,” I say, twisting my hands together and grimacing at him. Daniel groans, starting to calm down a bit.

“Yeah,” he says, giving a little laugh. “He does not like that. What did you do?”

“Um,” I bite my lip, trying to decide where to start. I was watching some of your dad’s homemade porn in the basement doesn’t seem like quite the auspicious beginning, so I jump ahead. “He told me not to go into the basement. And I did. And I saw him...”

I hesitate, wondering how much he knows.

Daniel’s face drops, going a little pale. “I’m sorry, Fay,” he says softly. “Some of the stuff that goes on down there...is...did anyone get hurt?”

I nod a little and he puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Does it happen often?” I ask softly.

“I don’t really know,” he says, shrugging. “I saw it once as a kid and then...I never went down again. Honestly, I think my dad was a little disappointed in me. He doesn’t want me to be...well, a sissy. And I ran away crying.”

I bite my lip at this, feeling for Daniel, who is sensitive. After a beat, I feel a question rise in me.

“Daniel?” I ask. “How are you going to inherit this family, its...business...if you can’t handle its methods?”

He shakes his head at me, looking sad. “I ask myself that all the time. I don’t think even my dad has an answer. Honestly, sometimes it feels like he’s fighting so hard to keep this family’s power together so that he can give it to me, pass it on to future generations, but...if it were up to me, maybe I just don’t want it.”

I nod, understanding. But I also know that there’s so much at stake – even if Daniel were to give up the family’s business, it would cause a power vacuum in the city that could be disastrous, even lethal to the people he loves. He’s in a tough place, and I feel for him.

“I’ll do my best,” Daniel says, looking at me seriously. “To protect you from all of that, in the future.”

I nod, smiling at him softly at his generous offer. But inside, part of me remembers the rush, the adrenaline, and wonders whether I want him to keep that promise.

## Chapter 22 – Everyday Life in the Mafia

# Chapter 22 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

As I fall into the routines of the Lippert house I'm surprised to find that I'm quickly bored by them. Life at my home with David and Janeen was also boring – but they're just normal people. A little of me, I think, expected everyday gang life to be more exciting.

It's not that the house is empty, really. Every day starts with a flurry of activity. Breakfast in the kitchen is a big affair, with everyone rushing through. Kent's top guys – mostly older gentlemen - drink their tiny glasses of espresso at a table in the corner, bantering. Lower-level guys, dressed in thousand-dollar sweatsuits, run briskly through, reporting and getting new orders.

Guards are all around – watching everything, but mostly wishing, I think, that they were important enough to be included with the others. If they work hard enough, though, they can level up.

As the day passes, everyone spreads out to do their work. Daniel goes out a lot – to school, mostly, wrapping up his spring semester. I've been expressly forbidden to go out with him, to school or anywhere else. Apparently, I'm still a kidnapping target. Kent has told the Mafia world that I'm out there, but until he locks me down as part of his family I'm forbidden any freedom.

The first day Daniel left me behind, Fiona had come into the house just as he was leaving. Seeing my sad face, she wrapped an arm around my shoulders, her voice full of pity.

"I know," she said, giving me a little squeeze. "It's like you're a mafia widow already, stuck in this house. May as well dress yourself head to toe in black crepe and spend your day saying the rosary for his soul."

"At least it would be something to do," I moaned, slumping my shoulders forward in misery. "It's so boring here."

And it really is. Again, not that there's not a lot going on in this house at all times, it's just that I'm...not at all a part of it.

Everyone – the guards, the captains, the made guys – they're all very nice and polite to me. They smile at me when they pass me in the hall. But no one really talks to me, even if I try. I get the impression that Kent expressly forbade it.

My only friend is Fiona, and she's very sweet, but we don't have a lot in common.

Fiona is, I think, a mafia boss's dream girlfriend. She's sweet, funny, and has enough bite in her wit to keep from being boring. She's incredibly sexy, but she spends most of her day building and maintaining that sexy appearance for Kent.

When she's not here, she's out getting her hair and her nails done. When she's in the house, she's doing aerobics, or facials and beauty treatments, or playing with makeup and clothes. Fiona always looks stunning and keeps up with the latest fashions, but it's a ton of work.

Fiona has swept me up in her world a bit. I think she likes it, giving me a whole master's course in makeup and hair care that I never, ever would have even thought about before she came along.

But so much of the world just seems...ridiculous to me, though I'd never say it to her. For instance, once, her Botox doctor came by the house and she asked me if I wanted a little. "Just here and here," she had said, tapping the corners of her eyes and between her eyebrows.

Worried, I had touched my fingers gently to my skin in those places. "Seriously? Do I need it?"

Laughing, she had told me that I didn't. "It's just preventative," she said, snapping her bubblegum as she leaned back in her chair and let the doctor do his work. "If you start when you're twenty, you'll look thirty when you're fifty."

I had smiled at her and declined the treatment. What, really, was the problem of looking fifty when you're fifty? After all, Kent was forty and he looked –

Well. I cleared my throat and moved my thoughts on to something else.

I am less tempted by the enticements of Fiona's super-feminine lifestyle, I think, because I already had a sister who delved into all of that sort of stuff. Sure, strippers are all about being sexy while being a mafia side piece is all about being luxe, but there was some overlap. And it just wasn't for me.

Instead, I missed my work. Missed going to the office to meet with my colleagues, missed helping people, even missed going to the prison to interview inmates – though I never thought I'd miss that. I missed going to the coffee shop, missed studying and finding new books. And while Kent has given me free reign to order any books – or really, anything I want - it's just not the same.

I miss my life. And I'm terribly, terribly bored.

Kent and Daniel know, of course. Daniel because I've told him and Kent...well, because Kent knows everything. I stopped begging him for a little freedom a while ago – the answer was always no. Now, I mostly plead wordlessly, with my eyes, my expression.

He knows I'm miserable here, but he still won't let me out.

I'm staving off my boredom, today, by painting my toenails in the back garden. Fiona has given me an elaborate manicure kit, telling me to practice, so my feet and hands are far, far more polished than they've ever been. I sigh as I finish painting a lavender sheen on my pinkie toe. What the hell am I going to do next?

I jump, then, as a box smacks on the ground next to me – a big one, as long as my arm. I look up at the back door with wide eyes, shocked to see Kent standing there, leaning against the frame with his arms crossed.

"Put those on," he says. "We have somewhere to be."

Frowning, I lift the box into my lap and open the top, gasping a little as I see a pair of the most gorgeous boots. They're tall, nearly knee-high, and made of supple black leather with a delicate little buckle around the ankle.

"Where are we going?" I ask, my face lighting up. Honestly, I don't care – out of the house it sounds like, so I'm thrilled either way.

"You'll see," he says, turning and heading towards the garage. "Meet me by the car when you're ready."

I quickly pull on my socks, not caring that it will ruin my pedicure, and then tug the boots on as quick as I can. I have to force my foot in all the way to the bottom, tugging hard at the top – there's no zipper to help. But, when I finally get them on, they fit perfectly.

As usual, Kent has guessed my size to perfection.

I admire the boots for a moment and then spring to my feet, running to the car.

Kent drives us in silence to wherever we're going, but I do note the subtle smile playing on his lips. I've stopped asking about our destination – he never tells – so I just spend my time gazing out at the landscape as we pass. We're out of the city now – just about fifteen minutes, really – but how I've missed the sight of a variety of nature beyond what Kent's little back garden can offer.

I'm surprised to see him slow in what seems like the middle of nowhere, turning towards a simple gravel drive crossed with a metal gate. He presses a button on the roof of the car and the metal gate slowly swings open. I look closely, but I can't see anything beyond it.

"Are we here?" I ask, frowning at him.

He looks at me and nods. I see that he can't help but smile a little, so I smile too and sit up in my seat, looking eagerly out the windshield. Then I just wait, a little breathlessly, to see where he's taken me.

## Chapter 23 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

We drive a little down the lane, over a slight rise, and then a barn comes into sight. A beautiful barn, really, immaculately cared for and painted in shades of gray. Three little gables peak out of the roof and two little cupolas crown it, weathervanes at their peaks.

“Oh!” I say, completely charmed by the sight. But then I see the real draw. In a series of pastures beyond the barn, my eyes can just barely see a group of horses grazing in the afternoon light.

“Oh!” I say, louder this time, far more thrilled. “Is this a stable?!”

Kent laughs as he turns the car into a parking spot next to the barn. “I thought you’d like it,” he says seriously. “One look at you and anyone could tell you grew up dreaming of horses.”

I nod fervently, scrambling to unbuckle my seatbelt and open the door at once. “Can we see them?!” I ask, my words falling over each other in my hurry. “Can I feed them? Do they have any foals?!”

He laughs at me as I almost fall out of the car, climbing calmly out himself. Before I can dash into the barn, he holds out an arm to stop me. “Let me take the lead here, all right, Fay?”

I look up at him, shining with joy, and nod. I quickly look back towards the entrance but then do a double-take, looking back at his face, which is somehow...gentler? Kinder?

We both pause, taking each other in, distracted. But then he blinks, walking calmly into the barn. I follow closely at his heels.

“Sir!” someone says – a young man with sandy hair down to his shoulders. He’s dressed almost like a cowboy, with jeans tucked into western boots and a button-down plaid shirt. He gives me a happy nod and then turns his attention back to Kent. “He’s all ready for you, gentle as can be. A real beauty.”

Kent nods to the man and looks beyond him. “Well, I’m ready if you are.”

The man bobs his head and the three of us walk through the stable to the last stall on the right, which the groom pulls open. Kent walks up to the open door and leans on the far side of it, nodding into the stall.

“What do you think, Fay?” he asks.

Slowly, so excited I can barely breathe, I peak around the corner of the stall to see the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever set eyes on in my life.



“Oh,” I say again, though this time it’s barely a breath of air puffing out of my lips as I take another step forward and cover my mouth with my fingertips, just staring at him.

A beautiful blood bay gelding stands in front of me, an Arabian by the arch of his neck and the height at which he holds his tail. The horse gently paws at the shavings of his stall, looking over at us curiously.

My eyes sweep over him, his glossy mane, his wide and gentle eye. And immediately, I know it. I’m in love.

“Can I...” I say, glancing over at Kent. “Can I go in? Can I touch him?”

Kent laughs and nods at me. Beyond him, I can see that the groom is equally pleased. I turn quickly back to the horse, taking a gentle step forward. The skin on his shoulder twitches a little, but otherwise he does not balk as I walk towards him.

I hold out a hand towards his nose, palm up, and he gently licks my palm, saying hello, checking to see if I have a snack. Slowly, I raise my other hand to run over the rich blaze that runs down his face, stepping close to run a hand over his velvety neck.

“Do you like him?” Kent asks, behind me.

I turn back and glare at him a little. What a stupid question. Then I turn back to the beautiful horse as I stroke his silky mane.

“I thought you might,” Kent says, laughing. Then he pauses. “I’m rarely wrong in my choice of presents. Never, really.”

I freeze at his words. What –

Did he mean –

Slowly, I turn back to him and see him smile at my shock.

“He’s yours, Fay,” Kent says to me. “If you want him.”

I embarrass myself then by bursting into tears.

Kent nods to the groom, who quickly disappears. Then, laughing at me a little, Kent joins me in the stall. He, too, raises a hand for the horse to inspect before stroking the animal’s nose .

“Who knew,” Kent says, looking at the horse. “Here I was trying to cheer you up, and all I’ve done is make you cry.” He smiles down at me. “Guess I’ll have to send him back to where he came from.”

“Don’t you dare,” I growl at him, giving him a little shove away from my horse. Then, I bite my lip.

“Really?” I ask, looking up at Kent. “He’s mine?”

Kent shrugs. “This whole stable is mine, full of horses. What’s the harm in you having just one?”

“And I can come and see him?” I ask, desperate for it, hungry with anticipation.

“Under guard,” he says, looking at me seriously. “Yes, you can come every day, if you want.”

A smile spreads over my face and I resist the urge to throw my arms around him, so thrilled am I. But, I have more questions.

“Why?” I ask, a little breathless now. “Why did you do this for me?”

Kent leans back against the low wall. “Because I could tell you were miserable, Fay. You might not believe it, but I don’t take pleasure singularly in making people unhappy. I want you to be safe, for Daniel’s sake, as his future bride,” he looks at me carefully, “but there’s no reason you should be so sad about this life.”

I look down at the floor of the stall. Have I been that obvious? I knew that he noticed, but I wasn’t aware that his perception ran so deep.

“Also,” he says, standing up straight again and putting a finger under my chin to lift my face up. “You have been a good girl, Fay. I have noticed. No more illicit trips to the basement, no more obstinate disobedience.” He smirks, then. “Or at least, not much.”

I keep my face expressionless, not really wanting to tell him that I wasn’t being good for his sake. There just hadn’t been a lot of opportunity for rebellion in the last few weeks. Or I might have taken it, for the sake of variety.

“When those in my care are good,” he says carefully, studying my face closely, “they get presents. When they are bad, they get punished.” He lowers his face, bringing it closer to mine.

My gaze shifts to his mouth, watching it form his words. “I’d recommend, Fay,” he says softly, “that you stay on my good side. Then you can have more rewards.”

A chill runs down my spine and a darker part of me – one that hasn’t raised its head for awhile – wonders which one, really, I want more.

The horse nickers softly, nudging at the pocket of Kent’s coat. Kent turns his attention away from me, chuckling. “All right, boy, you’ve found me out,” he says, reaching into the pocket and producing two sugar cubes. He holds them out to the horse, who eats them eagerly from his palm.

Then, Kent produces two more sugar cubes and hands them to me. “To get your friendship off right.”

Kent takes a few steps back as I feed the horse, enjoying the feel of his coarse little mouth hairs against my palm. When he’s finished eating, I go back to petting him, marveling at this beautiful creature. I can’t believe that he’s mine.

A few minutes pass in silence as Kent lets me get to know my new friend. Then, I hear his voice again.

“What will you name him?” Kent asks, still watching me from the doorway.

“Hmm,” I say, considering it, looking at the horse. Then, I decide. “Heathcliff,” I say.

Kent laughs at me and I turn to give him another little glare. “What? You don’t like it? What’s wrong with it?”

“Such an ugly name,” he says, but there’s no real bite in his words, “for such a beautiful horse. Why did you pick that?”

“Because,” I say, turning to Heathcliff and smiling lovingly into his face. “Whatever souls are made of, his and mine are the same,” I say, brushing his forelock away from his rich brown eyes. As if he understands me, Heathcliff presses his nose to my chest.

A beat passes and then I look back to Kent, curious as to why he doesn’t tease me further.

“Well well,” he says slowly. “The young lady has read her Brontë, at least. Though I do wonder if such a great passion is a bit wasted on a horse.”

I blink at him, shocked, really, that he understood my reference. I wouldn’t have thought *Wuthering Heights* was on the reading list for the Mafia King. Then, I speak without thinking. “Well, I suppose that until a greater passion reveals itself, I will spend all my love on him.”

Kent lifts himself from the wall, standing solidly in the stable doorway with his arms crossed. “I wonder what my son would say to that,” he says, low and soft.

I blink at him, panicking suddenly as I realize my mistake. I have just tacitly admitted that there is no passion between me and Daniel.

Neither of us say a word for minute, but then Kent turns away. “Come,” he says, looking back towards the parking lot. “That’s enough for now. You can come back in the morning, I’ll have my trainer here. We’ll see whether or not you can ride.”

I take a quick moment to lay a kiss in the whorl of hair right in the middle of Heathcliff’s forehead. “I’ll be back soon,” I whisper to him. “I’ll bring you apples.” He knickers in friendly response as I bolt the stable door and hurry after Kent.

I stare at the barn until it fades from my sight. Then, I turn back to the front of the car, steeling myself for the return to Kent's world. Because tonight, I know, he and my father have arranged something else for me.

Perhaps the horse was just a way to butter me up, get me on Kent's good side before the real trial.

Chapter 24 – Getting to Know my Mafia Dad

## Chapter 24 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I'm alone in the back seat of the black sedan that takes me to dinner at my father's house.

I look up at the grey stone mansion and grimace, not looking forward to this. I know that there should probably be some curiosity in me, some desire to know more about my family and my heritage. But honestly? Lorenzo Alden doesn't feel anything like my father. That, to me, will always be David.

Kent sent two guards with me and instructed them to stay by me at all times. For protection, presumably, but also – I think – to be Kent's eyes and ears at the meeting. Alden is his ally, but I think even the term "ally" in this underworld has some tenuous distrust built into it.

I had begged David to come with me but Kent denied that too. Alden, apparently, wanted me all to himself. Great. I was already awkward enough, now I have to go into this alone? It was definitely going to be a disaster.

The guards get out of the front of the car after they park and come around to open my door. I step out and sigh, wishing I was anywhere else. The stables, preferably, getting to know Heathcliff.

The three of us trudge up the front steps to the house and formally ring the bell. I twist my mouth at the irony here. If he's my dad – if this is my house – shouldn't I be able to walk right in?

A maid opens it for us, giving us a kind smile, and then opens the door wide in welcome.

As we step in, I stop dead in my tracks. The guards almost bump into me.

"Are you okay?" one asks – Jerome, I think. One of the friendlier guards in Kent's employ.

"Yes," I murmur in response, staring around the room.

But in reality? I'm totally not okay.

Walking into this house is like walking into a dream. I've been here before, I suddenly realize. I know things about this space – what's around some of the corners, what things will feel like, what it smells like. Even the rugs are familiar – a soft burnt orange, thick and plush underneath my feet. The arch that leads into the dining room – yes, I know that, and if I look just beyond it I'll find...

Yes, there. A hutch, filled with blue and white china.

"Oh my god," I murmur, looking around as I slowly walk through the dining room.

The maid looks at me hesitantly. "Dinner isn't ready yet, miss," she says. "If you'll come with me to the sitting room..."

I ignore her – not really meaning to be rude, but – I can't help myself as I walk to the back of the room and push open the door to the kitchen. The avocado green fridge and stove are exactly as I remember them. Except, I didn't know that I did remember them.

I hear footsteps behind me. "Familiar, is it?"

I turn to see Alden standing there. I look at him with wide eyes.

He looks around at the kitchen. "We couldn't keep you out of here," he says, "your mother, the maids, or me. You always wanted to come in and pull out all of the pots and pans. Pretend you were cooking. Or just bang on them."

I just stare at him, bewildered. I was only five when we went to live with David – it was certainly old enough to remember something. How did I remember nothing?

Alden indulges me for a moment and then nods back towards the living room. "Come," he says. "I want to introduce you to some people."

I follow, still staring around at the house. My house, where I lived, as a small child. As I consider it, I realize that they are not unhappy memories – I have no feelings of fear or trauma attached to this place.

Which, I suppose, is a good thing.

Alden leads me into the sitting room, my guards following closely behind. When we enter, I'm surprised to see a woman sitting there with a boy at her side and a baby in her lap.

"Fay," Alden says, putting out a hand to me. "I'd like to introduce you to Tristin, my wife." I blink at the woman, surprised. Why had no one mentioned to me that my father had remarried?

"How – how do you do?" I ask, fumbling over the words.

She doesn't reply, simply giving me a cold look. She's a beautiful woman, petite, with dark hair and large hazel eyes. Her full pink lips are pursed with dislike.

"And this," Alden says, gesturing towards the children, "Is my son Romulus and my daughter Estrella. Your...ah. Your half siblings, I suppose." He runs a hand awkwardly through his hair.

I smile at Romulus, who looks up at me with excited eyes. He's the picture of his mother, really – dark hair, delicate pale skin, pretty hazel eyes. The baby is also very sweet, smiling up at me in her white bonnet. As I look at the three of them, I can tell that Tristin has dressed them in pale green to match her own outfit.

A glance at the green accents on Alden's suit suggest that he's part of their group as well. I look down at myself, dressed in sapphire blue. Perhaps she's sending me a message about exactly who belongs in this family.

"Welcome," Tristin says, her voice cold. She looks me up and down with distaste. I sigh, seeing that this isn't going to be an easy road.

"Thank you," I say, doing my best to give them all a smile as I lower myself awkwardly into a chair by the coffee table. We're silent as a maid brings in a silver tray with a tea set on it. As she lays it down on the table, I can't help but stare at it.

"Oh my god," I say, leaning in close to get a better look. "I remember this. There's a little chip..." I turn the sugar bowl halfway round and, indeed, there it is. Right on the rim.

Alden laughs a little but Tristin goes stiff in her seat. "Yes, well," she says, shifting uncomfortably. "If someone would let me replace it."

"Oh no," I say without thinking, looking up at them all. "It's such a beautiful set – you can't possibly –"

"Well if you're so fond of it," she says, glaring at me. "You shall take it with you when you go."

I bite my lip, realizing that it's not precisely a friendly gesture that she's making.

"In fact," she says, glaring at me and gesturing all around the room. "I guess all of this is yours now. So you should take it with you. Thank you so much for graciously letting me live among your inheritance for so many years."

"I –" I start, but then I fade off, not knowing what to say. My inheritance? What was she talking about?

"Tristin," Alden says, leaning back in his chair, his voice low with warning.

"What," she says, turning to him. "Am I incorrect? Now that your first-born has returned, has been recognized by you, everything belongs to her."

“That is not,” he says, “precisely the case, Tristin –“

“Oh please,” she huffs, “just look at her, already prowling around the house, inspecting it like it’s hers.” She turns her cold eyes on me. “Will you wait until his body is cold before you come and claim it? Or will you turn me out before the funeral?”

My mouth falls open as I look between them, my eyes finally settling on little Romulus, who looks about ready to bolt. Oh god, poor kid. Is this his life every day?

“I’m really not here –“ I say, trying (and failing) to put on a cheerful smile, “to take anyone’s inheritance – seriously, you can keep it all –“

“Lies,” she hisses, standing up and clutching the baby to her chest.

“Tristin,” Alden says, raising his voice, the rage growing in him. “You will sit, and treat my daughter with respect.”

“Your daughter?!” she yells, appalled. Then holds the baby out towards him, right at his eye level. “This is your daughter! The one whose rights you are stripping to give to that girl who hasn’t spent more than ten minutes with you in her entire life!”

I open my mouth to say something but Romulus shakes his head fervently at me, warning me against it. I close my mouth, then, trusting him to know his parents better than me.

My father and step-mother proceed to get into a blow-out fight, then screaming at each other, flinging insults and accusations left and right. Alden lifts his hand once in threat against his wife, and in response Tristin picks up a music box, hurling it at his face. He dodges, but as soon as it crashes against the wall, Romulus flees from the room and one of my guards wraps his hand around my upper arm.

“Time to go,” Jerome says, giving me a little tug.

## Chapter 25 – Personal History

# Chapter 25 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Willingly, I follow Jerome and my other guard out of the room and into the hall. The three of us scurry towards the door, guilt roiling in me to be the cause of so much strife. Before I step out the door, though, I hear a little voice call out behind me.

“Wait!” it says.

I turn to see Romulus running down the stairs, a little book in his hands. He dashes to meet me at the door. "I found this in my closet!" he says, "a long time ago!" He holds up the book to me and I can see that it's a very small photo album. I take it from him gently and flip it open, shocked to see that it's images of my mother's wedding day –

And, oh my god – that I'm in them –

"That's you, right?" Romulus says, peeking at the pages of the book, pointing at the picture of my mother.

"No," I say softly. "That was my mom. Thank you for showing it to me, Romulus," I say, looking down at him gratefully. I push it back towards him, as the noise escalates in the next room. I hope that some day I'll be able to look through it more closely, but now, it definitely seems like time to go -

"No, I you can keep it," Romulus says, smiling up at me. "And maybe, when you come back, you can bring me a present." He gives me a big smile and I can't stop myself from laughing.

"A fair trade," I say and then jerk up, suddenly, at a crash I hear from the sitting room.

"You'd better go," he says, nodding at me.

"Will you be okay?" I ask, looking over his shoulder.

"Sure," he says, grinning at me with confidence. "This happens all the time."

"Miss," one of my guards says, again tugging at my arm.

"Okay," I say, following my guard. "It was nice meeting you!" I call back to – wow, to my little brother.

"You too!" he says, waving to me as I go.

As I sit in the car on the way home, I clutch the photo album in my hands, not yet ready to open and explore it. What the hell was I going to find inside?

Kent is waiting for me as I come back into the house. "Well?" He asks, smirking at me as he leans against the wall in the entry. "That was a fast little family dinner."

I glare at him a little, taking off my coat and handing it to the waiting housekeeper. "Why didn't you tell me I had a step-mom?"

He laughs then, low. "I wanted you to have the pleasure of getting to know Tristin Alden all on your own. Tell me, how long did it take her to kick you out? Five minutes? Ten?"



“More like three,” I say, wrapping my arms around myself, the photo album pressed against my chest. “I indicated that I recognized the sugar bowl and she...didn’t like that. Said I was stealing her kids’ inheritance.”

Kent laughs harder at that, shaking his head a little. Then, his eyes light on the photo album. “What’s that?” he asks.

“Photos,” I say softly, unwrapping my arms and looking down at the little leather-bound book. “Of my mom’s wedding.”

“Very interesting,” he says, but thankfully he doesn’t push it. “Dinner in twenty minutes,” he calls after me as I head up the stairs. “Considering Alden didn’t feed you.”

I nod, but don’t look back at him as I climb.

When I’m alone in my room, I sit on my bed and page through the album. It’s shocking to me, how much is familiar and how much is a mystery.

I’m just a toddler in the pictures, so I guess it makes sense that I don’t remember any of it, but even at a glance I can tell how precious I was to my father on this day. He had me standing at the altar with him as he said his vows to my mother, a hand on my little shoulder as I looked out to the crowd.

Then, there’s another photo of their first dance with me crying, my arms wrapped around his leg, unwilling to let go. Both of my parents are laughing in that one, pleased, I can see, by my attachment to them – to him.

Then another, with my father feeding me a piece of wedding cake, laughing as I get icing all over my face. My heart sinks as I bear witness to the love on his face on that day, his happiness at being able to share it with the woman he loved as well as his child.

I suppose it really was a love match, then - my father and my mother. They had me first and, even though he could have just pushed her aside for someone else, he had married her, recognized me officially as his daughter.

My lips begin to tremble as I look through picture after picture of my parents’ joy, their love for me, and I feel incredible shame that I don’t remember any of it –

What must it have been like, just a few weeks ago, for my father to walk into that room to see me again – his little girl – and see that I had no idea who he was? That I had completely forgotten him?

I fall back against my pillows then, tears slipping down my cheeks. I know it’s not my fault – I was just a little kid – but I feel absolutely rotten. I must have broken his heart into a million pieces.

My door creaks open again and I see Daniel's dark head peak in. "Fay?" he asks, hesitating. "Are you home already? Can I come in?"

"Sure," I say, wiping at my eyes.

"Are you all right?" he asks, pressing the door closed and coming to sit next to me on the bed. I nod, sniffing and working hard to contain myself.

"Yeah, just...looking through old pictures," I say, gesturing towards the album. Daniel picks it up and leafs through it.

"Oh wow," he says, looking between me and the woman on the page. "Fay, she looks just like you."

"I know," I respond, my eyes wide. "Obviously I remember what she looks like, from when I was a kid, but...I didn't realize I'd grown to resemble her so much."

He nods, still leafing through. Then he looks at me. "I can see how this would be hard for you. I never, ever go through my mom's old albums."

I nod, reaching out a hand for his, understanding. Life can be so terribly difficult sometimes, especially when you've lost a parent. It's a fine line, between wanting to remember them and missing them so horribly that all you want to do is run from the feeling.

Daniel squeezes my hand and we both sit quietly together, having our separate thoughts.

I stare at the album – closed, now, on my duvet – and wonder what changed in her life. What made her go from that day, when she was so happy, to deciding to flee with me, to leave it all behind.

And I can't help but wonder if it will all be the same for me. I mean, I'm not in precisely the same situation – I'm not married to a man I clearly love, having borne his child – but in some ways, seeing my face in those albums, it feels like it's her again – repeating the past.

Am I really doomed to repeat it? Will I, too, find reason to flee from this world, to try everything I can to leave it behind and build a new life in hiding? Would it eventually take me out to?

And what, really, killed her? Was it really just a car accident, or is that too much of a coincidence, for a Don's bride to be killed so shortly after she fled?

Oh my god, was I going to die young as well?

I burst into tears again, fear and sorrow and panic flooding my body. Daniel puts his arms around my shoulders, confused, beginning to ask again what's wrong when the door opens again.

I look up to see Kent standing there, but I can't stop crying.

“What’s all this?” Kent asks, crossing his arms over his chest, taking in Daniel’s sad expression and my flood of tears.

I’m crying too hard to answer, but Daniel responds to him with a frown. “She’s just having a hard day, dad,” he says. “Leave her be.”

“It’s time for dinner,” Kent says, ignoring his son. “Dry your tears and come down to eat before it gets cold.”

I shake my head, sniffing again, working hard to stop crying – it’s so embarrassing to cry in front of someone like Kent, who always has it together – but I can’t. I take a deep breath and try to speak through my tears. “I’m not –“ Hic – “Hungry.” Is all I can manage.

“You are hungry,” Kent says, his voice low. “You’ve barely eaten all day!”

The tears start to come harder as he yells at me – I’m just completely overwhelmed. I watch him, watching me cry, see the anger in his face turn into something else – worry, pity, even fear.

“Stop that!” he yells, pounding a fist against the wall. I take a deep breath, working hard to do as he says – to obey. But I can’t hold it in. Despite myself, the tears continue to roll down my cheeks, my chest wracked with repressed sobs.

“Dad!” Daniel says, getting to his knees on the bed. “Will you just get out of here!? She’s having a hard time, and you yelling at her isn’t doing anything to help!”

Kent just glares at us, first Daniel, and then me, and then storms from the room, slamming the door behind him.

We both wait a minute to see if it takes, but he doesn’t come back. “Sorry about that,” Daniel murmurs, leaning back against the pillows again.

“Why –“ I say, wiping at my eyes with a corner of the bed sheet “why was he so mad?”

Daniel shakes his head, still staring at the door. “Little known fact about my dad,” he says. “He can’t stand to see people he loves cry.”

I sniff a little. “He seems okay watching you cry,” I say, tentatively.

Daniel shrugs, considering. “Just the women, then. I guess.”

Chapter 26 – Self-Control

## Chapter 26 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent storms into the dining room, where the table is set for four. He sits down hard in his chair at the head of the table, waving at the place settings on either side of him.

“Remove these,” he says to the waitstaff, biting off the words in his frustration. “Have Daniel’s and Fay’s plates sent up to Fay’s room, they’ll take their supper there.”

The waitstaff give each other worried looks but silently do as they’re told. The chef comes out next, looking around the room.

“Sir?” He asks, his French accent heavy in the word. “Will you be dining alone?”

“Apparently,” Kent says, angry that Fiona isn’t here either. “Please bring it out.”

The chef nods, impassive, and heads back into the kitchen. A few moments later he appears again with Kent’s first course - salmon tartare with a small side salad and a freshly-sliced French baguette.

Kent ignores the fish and reaches directly for the bread, slathering it with butter as he sits back in his chair and thinks.

Thinks, inevitably, about her.

God damnit, he almost couldn’t take looking at her tonight, sitting there in her bed, crying as if her heart would break. He had tried – tried to break the mood, to cajole her out of it, to scare her out of it by pounding on the wall –

But she had just kept crying –

He grits his teeth between bites of bread, angry with himself for not being able to control himself. For wanting, even now, to dash up those stairs and do something – anything – to make her stop.

But she was Daniel’s problem now, a right with Daniel had just asserted upstairs. Kicking him out and keeping Fay all to himself.

Kent has tried, these past few weeks. Tried to distract himself, to busy himself with his work and his plans, tried to ignore her when she walks by, the light lily scent of her shampoo drifting through the air –

The wide-eyed expressions of her face, when she’s shocked, happy, sad, angry –

God, she’s at her best when she’s angry, with that fire in her eyes, that courage she drags up from somewhere deep in her soul – he loves to prod her, to push her, to raise that fire in her –

The way it felt, those few times when he lost his control, when he caught her spying on him in the basement, for instance, and chased her up the stairs, pinned her against the wall of her room, saw the passion in her, then – the defiance –

The way it felt when she pounded her little fists against his chest – god, he had wanted to turn her around right there, press her up against the wall, press the length of himself up against her ass as he slipped his hand beneath her shirt, taught her a lesson about what it meant to defy him –

Kent squeezes a slice of the bread within his fist, crushing it, ruining it. Then he drops it to the table and stares at it.

God damnit, that girl. She will be the undoing of him. She made him just lose it – lose absolute control of himself, the one thing he never did. And she had absolutely no idea.

He had to get rid of her, Kent decided, looking blankly across the room. He'd send them away – marry them quick, send them back to the old country to his family there, where they'd be safe –

But the idea of it, of them building a life together, of her smiling at his son while she bore his children –

Kent grits his teeth and pounds his fist against the table once. God damnit.

He stares down at his plate as his mind races.

What could he do. What, really, was the other option. Could he, somehow, claim her for his own – convince Daniel to give her up, to move on to someone else –

Kent scoffs at himself, then, putting his hand over his face, disgusted. What was he thinking – trying to find a way to take his son's fiancé from him? It was unthinkable, despicable. Daniel would never forgive him, and Alden –

God damnit, Kent had never been in such a tight spot. Had never wanted something so badly, and yet had it so completely forbidden to him – in terms of morality, of honor, of political alliance, of family. Absolutely forbidden.

Yet as every day passed, Kent felt his control over himself slipping, bit by bit. If he loses control of himself, he knows that he will lose everything. And yet...

It doesn't help, sometimes, when she looks at him that way. When she half-lids her eyes and pulls her lower lip into her mouth. Like she's holding back too.

Kent slams his fist against the table again, forcing his mind away from the thought.

What the fuck was he going to do.

At that moment, the door to the dining room swings open and Fiona breezes in. “Hey baby,” she says with a big smile, settling into her seat across from him. “What, you couldn’t wait for me?”

She looks up at him, then, and her smile falters. She can see, clearly, that he’s in a foul mood and she has to tread very, very carefully if she wants to get out of this in one piece.

“Wait for you?” Kent says, narrowing his eyes at her. “Why should I wait for you, when you are late?”

Fiona glances at the grandfather clock on the far wall and notes that, yes – shit – she was five minutes late. Still, she tries to keep it light as the chef comes through the door again, putting her own entrée and bread in front of her.

“I didn’t know we were on such formal terms in this house,” she says casually, trying a small smile. “I’m sorry, I won’t be late again.”

His eyes narrow further, and Fiona realizes she miscalculated. Shit. The right choice would have been all apology – no joke. She screws her mouth shut, looking down at her plate and taking a piece of bread out of its little basket, fiddling with it between her long-nailed fingers.

“Do you think,” Kent asks slowly, dangerously, “that I should wait for you? That as the man of this house, I should be at your beck and call?”

Slowly, Fiona shakes her head. “No,” she says. “You’re right, I should have been on time.”

“Damn right you should have been,” Kent says. He knows, deep down, that he’s being unfair to her. He doesn’t care, really, if she’s been late. But he’s so worked up – feels so powerless – and Fiona is there to take it out on.

“After all,” he continues, pushing his plate away from him. “You are not my wife,” he says, cruel. “You are here, eating my food, wearing the clothes I buy you, spending my money, in my house, just so you can give me pleasure. When I desire it.”

Fiona blinks at him then. Never, ever, has he stated their relationship in such stark terms. He never called her his girlfriend – she knew it wasn’t really like that – but really? He had basically just called her his whore.

Kent sneers at her, watching the realization of his insult break out onto her face.

“Is that...” Fiona starts, unable to stop herself. “Is that really how you see me?” Slowly, she puts down her piece of bread.

“Yes,” he says, leaning back in his chair, enjoying the feeling of power that comes when he sees her balk. “And right now, I want you to go upstairs. To my chamber. I want you to wait for me there.”

“Kent –“ she says, going pale.

“You are not my wife,” Kent says, banging his hand on the table. “You are here at my leisure. And if you decide that you no longer wish to be, no longer wish to receive my generosity and my gifts,” he says, “you are free to leave at any time.”

Her chin begins to shake a little, in fear and frustration. What had she done wrong? Still, she knows her place in this relationship. In reality, she always has. Kent lets her get away with a lot – treats her, spoils her, rarely contradicts her.

But really, deep down? She’s here for one thing.

Slowly, she stands and – giving him a proud look she can’t help – walks from the room, heading up the stairs. To the third floor, the attic. The room that he keeps there. The room she absolutely hates.

Kent calls to the chef for his next course. When it’s delivered, he quickly slices the steak into pieces, biting it down without tasting it. When he’s finished, he tosses his napkin onto the table and follows Fiona up the stairs.

## Chapter 27 – An Invitation

# Chapter 27 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I’m wolfing my breakfast down as fast as I can the next day, already wearing my riding boots and the tight fawn-colored jodhpurs I found not-so-mysteriously in my room this morning. I look towards the galley, but Kent isn’t cooking today.

Where is he? I can’t wait to get to the stable – to see Heathcliff again – to get started –

I drink my orange juice in one big gulp and Daniel laughs at me. “Seriously,” he says, his plate still full. “You’re not going to get my dad to appear any faster if you choke on your food.”

I smile at him and he grins back, tilting his head to the side. “It’s so good to see you happy, Fay,” he says. Then his expression falls a little. “I’m just sorry I didn’t think of it first – I had no idea you wanted a horse – I could have easily –“

“It’s okay, Daniel,” I say, putting a hand on his and giving him another bright smile. “I didn’t know it either. Or, well, I’ve always wanted one – but I had no idea it was a real possibility.”

He laughs lightly at me. “Anything money can buy, Fay,” he says warmly. “If you can dream it, we’ll get it for you.”

“Hmmm,” I say, winking at him. “You do know that I have a very active imagination. You might regret that, Danny-boy.”

He laughs at me again as I stand up, stretching. Kent comes through the door then, pausing a moment to look at me. I drop my hands and give him a big smile as he comes over.

“Hi!” I say, excited.

He looks at me again, a little indulgent, and then tosses a piece of paper onto the breakfast table. “Sorry to have to burst your bubble, sweetheart,” he says, a little rueful. “But the stables have to wait until tomorrow.”

My face falls immediately with disappointment. “Wha – what?!”

He shrugs, indicating the paper. I glance at it, realizing it’s an invitation. Daniel picks it up.

“Looks like your dad feels bad, Fay,” he says, raising his eyebrow. “The invitation explicitly says that he and Tristin are having a party tonight to welcome you as a member of their family.”

Daniel looks up at me, holding it out so I can see. “Looks like he’s trying to make amends. Public ones.”

I take the invitation from him, studying it, sighing. The party is tonight, five o’clock, but with all I’ll have to do to get ready...

“Damnit,” I mutter, my shoulders slumping, looking between them. “I guess I have to go.”

“We have to go,” Kent says, pointing at the envelope which is explicitly addressed to the three of us.

“What about Fiona?” I ask, picking up the envelope as well.

Kent shrugs, impassive. “She can come if she likes. It won’t matter.”

I nod, hoping she’ll come. I always feel braver when she’s around to make me laugh.

“What,” Daniel asks, looking at his father. I turn my attention to him as well, wondering what Daniel is seeing. Kent’s face is grave.

“I don’t know,” Kent says, shaking his head and rubbing his chin. “I don’t like the looks of this.”

“Why?” I ask, frowning.

“My guys looked into it,” he says, gesturing towards the invitation. “Alden is using this opportunity to introduce your entire extended family – cousins, aunts, uncles, everyone.”



I go pale at this, a little scared. If just meeting my step-mom went so poorly...

“And in exchange,” Kent continues, “he’s invited all of our people as well. It was different, when I had Alden come here – there was just a small guest list, only those who needed to be here –“

No one you introduced me to, I think, twisting my mouth a little, but okay.

“But tonight,” Kent says, not noticing the face I’m making, “he wants all of his people, and all of my people, in a room together. And not on either of our turf – in an outside location.”

I glance at the invitation again and see, indeed, that he’s invited us all to meet at a local country club.

Kent continues to shake his head and Daniel joins him. “I just don’t like it,” Kent says pensively.

Daniel nods but I look between them again. “Wait,” I say, “catch me up. What’s so bad about that?”

Kent says nothing, staring at me – challenging me, I think, to figure it out myself. But Daniel shakes his head and explains. “Fay,” he says, “when big families get together like this, sometimes other gangs see it as an...opportunity. Two birds with one stone, as it were.”

“Or,” Kent says, picking up the thread. “Because Alden has greater numbers than us, he could see it as an...opportunity. To pressure us into deals we’re not happy making. It’s...non-preferred.”

“Oh,” I say, raising my eyebrows. “Maybe we should...not go.”

Kent shakes his head again. “No, he’s got us cornered there. He’s already sent out the invitations to all of his people, all of mine. It’s short notice, but...if I keep you from it, it will look like I’m keeping you from your family.”

Daniel and I nod, understanding.

“Well,” I say, hesitating, “I could just go...alone...”

Kent freezes then, looking at me with humor and disbelief in his eyes. Then, he bursts out laughing.

“Not a chance in hell, Fay,” he says, walking by me and giving me a little swat on my jodhpur-clad butt. “Go get ready!” he calls. “We’re leaving at 4:30, sharp! I want you two looking good!”

Both Daniel and I stare at him as he walks away.

“Did he...” I say, shocked.

“Just...” Daniel continues, his voice low and unbelieving.

I turn to look him, my eyes as wide as saucers. “Did your dad just smack my ass?”

A few hours later, Fiona is putting the finishing touches on my hair. I groan a little as she pins the last piece into place, finishing it off with some hairspray. My entire scalp hurts, each strand of hair having been combed and tugged and curled and pinned and sprayed.

The hairdo is a triumph, of course. It’s so elaborately curled and swept up delicately off my shoulders that I look like I could be getting married.

“You’re gorg,” she says, leaning down so that I can see both of our faces in the mirror. She laughs, then, giving me a kiss on the cheek and then whipping her lipstick off my skin with her thumb. “Absolutely gorgeous!”

I stand up and let Fiona help me into the little black cocktail dress she’s chosen for the occasion, the fabric shimmering subtly in the low light of my room. It skims off my shoulders and cuts high on my thighs – definitely racier than anything she’s put me in before.

“Are you sure this isn’t a little...risqué?” I ask, considering myself in the mirror. “For like, a meeting the family sort of thing?”

“When it was your dad, it was one thing to look like a pretty pretty princess,” Fiona says confidently, zipping me up. “But trust me, I know women like those you’re meeting tonight. If you come in looking like a little girl, they’ll eat you alive.”

We both look at me in the mirror and I’m surprised by what I see. If last time I was the Mafia princess, tonight I am dressed as the Femme Fatale. The woman who can wreck it all if she wants, and walk away laughing.

“You look as if you could breathe fire,” Fiona says approvingly, passion in her words.

“Do you really think so?” I ask, turning to look at her.

“Baby Fay,” she says, shaking her head at me with a little pity in her eyes. “Our innocent little baby. You really have no idea what you’ve got going on, do you?”

I frown at her, not understanding.

“You could have them all in the palm of your hand,” she whispers to me, holding out her own in front of my face to demonstrate. “With just one look. You could bring them all to their knees.”

I snap my head back to the mirror, wondering if it’s true. Thinking, suddenly – perversely, I know – of Kent on his knees before me. And what I’d make him do if I had him there.

## Chapter 28 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Fiona gives me a tart little smack on the butt then, breaking my reverie and laughing as she hurries over to the jewelry box waiting on my vanity. I give her a weird look and cover my ass with my hands. “What is with people today,” I murmur.

She laughs again as she comes over to me, standing behind me so that she can hook the diamond solitaire around my neck on its slim silver chain.

“You got the ring?” she asks, smacking her gum.

“Oh, yeah,” I murmur, walking swiftly over to my bedside drawer and pulling it open. I reach towards the back, fishing it out and pushing it swiftly onto my left hand.

When I look at Fiona, she’s crossing her arms and shaking her head at me.

“A million-dollar diamond,” she says, “and you shove it in your bedside drawer?”

“Um,” I say, biting my lip in response. I hadn’t even thought about it. I look around, wondering where else I should have put it –

“Nevermind,” she says, laughing at me more.

“Fiona,” I say, taking in her vintage Juicy velour sweatsuit. “Won’t you please come? I’ll feel so much better with you there.”

“Ah, baby Fay,” she says, coming to take my arm and give me a smile. “You’ll be fine. I’ve got a headache, is all – I’ll be more comfortable here.”

I frown at her, knowing that something’s up. But, she knows more about this world than I do. If she doesn’t want to go, I’m not going to push her.

“Okay,” I say, sighing as I headed for the door.

“Wait wait!” she calls, unzipping a garment bag and revealing a gorgeous mink stole.

“Oh my god,” I say, walking back towards it. “It’s beautiful –“

“Yeah,” she says, admiring it. “Vintage. You lucky girl.”

Smiling she goes to wrap it around my shoulders.

“Wait,” I say, not wanting to touch it. “Is it...like real? Were those alive?”

“What are you,” she scolds, “some kind of tree hugger?”

“It’s wrong,” I protest, staring at it. “I feel so bad, thinking about those little animals –“

“Baby,” she says, taking my face in her hands. “It’s vintage. These minks died over sixty years ago. No new minks died so you could look fabulous.”

I hesitate, my eyes taking it in. It is so beautiful.

“Come on,” she says, wrapping it around me before I can say anything, tucking my hands into the little pockets at the bottom which help me keep it around my shoulders. “It would be an insult to these little minks, to leave them in the closet for another sixty years. Take them out! Let the world admire them!”

Laughing, I head out of the room and down the stairs, brushing my face against the wrap, enjoying the feel of the soft fur against my cheek.

I stop though, halfway down, when I see Kent at the bottom standing with his arms crossed, his feet apart. Staring at me.

Shy, suddenly, I hunch my shoulders up towards my ears, clutching the mink close against my chest, pressing my thighs and knees together. I’m abruptly very aware of the shortness of my skirt. I don’t break eye contact though. Instead, I bite my bottom lip hoping – ridiculously – that I look okay.

I swear I hear him growl as his brow lowers, his eyes locked on mine.

“Fay!” Daniel calls, joining his father at the bottom of the stairs. “Wow, you look stunning.” He gives me a big smile and I start to move again, focusing on him as I come to his side.

“Thanks,” I say, giving him a little punch on his shoulder. “You look pretty cute yourself.”

He gives me a charming, bashful smile, and I’m reminded again just how good-looking my fiancé is. Both of our faces turn to Kent, though, as he snorts at us, shaking his head.

“Come on,” he says, nodding towards the door. “The cars are waiting.”

With that, we head out of the house. On our way to meet my entire family.

I whistle a little as we walk into the ballroom at the country club, impressed. This place has a grand, old-fashioned kind of charm, with freshly buffed fine oak floors, brass chandeliers, and sweeping views of the golf greens all along the southern wall.

As soon as we enter, a waiter comes up to offer us champagne. Kent doesn't make eye contact with him, merely saying "whiskey, neat," and surveying the guests. However, Daniel is more polite, nodding and smiling as he takes two glasses from the tray, passing one to me.

We only get a few steps into the room before we are bombarded with attention.

"Is this her?" A plump woman says, hurrying over and reaching out a hand to take mine. "Is this our darling lost Fay?"

"Um," I say, smiling at her, pleased at the warm reception but already a little overwhelmed. "Hello –"

"Yes," Kent says, stepping forward, not letting the woman pull me away. "This is Fay. We're so pleased to be here, Rosemary."

The woman pauses, giving him a warm smile. "Well of course, we're always glad to see you, Kent," she says, her eyes darting between us.

"Rosemary is your aunt," Kent tells me, accepting the glass of whiskey that the waiter is quick to bring back. He takes a sip, looking to me, apparently allowing me to continue the conversation.

I open my mouth, wondering what to say, but Rosemary picks it up for me. "We remember you from when you were a baby, of course," she says, gushing, waving several people over from a nearby table.

I blink in surprise – but of course, they would have known me. Of course I had biological aunts, and uncles, and cousins – people who loved me as a child. I just had really never thought of it before.

It seems like I meet hundreds of people that night – the large Italian family I never knew that I had. Everyone wants to say hello, pressing my hand, telling memories they had of me, welcoming me.

People from Daniel's side are here too – fewer, of course, but several cousins with the same dark hair and green eyes. I'm pleased to meet them all, but I admit that I'm surprised that Kent stays at my side the entire time – sometimes interceding with the answer to a question before I can provide it, sometimes guiding me towards or away from a certain person with a little tap from his hand on my lower back.

He doesn't interfere, quite – but he is a constant presence during the evening.

As we work our way across the floor, I see that we're heading – ever so subtly – towards my father and his wife at the front of the room. The children are there – Romulus stands on a chair to wave at me before his mother tugs him down.

“Um,” I say, hesitating a little. “I think I’d like to...visit the bathroom,” I say, “before I take that on.”

“Of course,” Kent says, turning with me, putting a hand on my back to show me the way.

“Dad,” Daniel says, his face frustrated as he steps in front of us. “I’ll take her,” he says, shaking his head. “You’ve been kind of hovering all night –“

“Nonsense,” Kent says, frowning at him and nudging me forward. As a trio, we head towards the alcove with the little restroom sign. Daniel pushes the point further.

“Seriously, dad,” he murmurs, “you can go, I’ll stay by her side – I can handle this -“

“No, you can’t Daniel,” his father snaps, taking an aggressive step towards him, cutting me off in my path. “You have no idea what the politics are in this room – who it might be dangerous for her to talk to – who is out for blood, who could be a possible friend.”

Daniel’s face twists, angry. “And whose fault is that, dad?” he asks, his voice hurt and stubborn. “You never involve me in these conversations, you never –“

“It’s your fault, Daniel,” Kent snarls, Daniel falling silent. “It’s your fault. Before tonight you’ve never been interested in the family business – always more interested in college, and books, and whatever the hell it is you do all day. And tonight, because she’s here –“he throws out a hand towards me, “what, suddenly you know what you’re doing in this world? Suddenly you’re a boss, a Don, in the business?”

Daniel frowns at his father, crossing his arms across his chest, clearly hurt. “I can handle myself,” he says, still angry but a little cowed. He knows, deep down, that his father has a point.

Kent opens his mouth to speak again but I push past him, eager to get away. “Um, I’m going to go to the bathroom,” I say, looking over my shoulder at them. “While you two...sort this out.” They ignore me, turning to continue the argument even in my absence.

When I come out of the bathroom a few minutes later, Kent is still standing there, but Daniel is not.

“Where did he go?” I ask, looking around for him.

“He went to cool off,” Kent murmurs, his arms crossed. I can tell he’s still pissed, but he’s putting on a controlled front for everyone in the room.

Just then, a waiter at the front of the room rings a gong. I jump and blink a little at the noise, surprised. What the hell does that mean?

Apparently, everyone else knows, because they start to filter away towards tables. The waiter scurries over to us, bowing a little. “If you would please, sir, miss,” he says, gesturing towards the head table. “Just this way.”

Kent nods and we follow him to a long rectangular table with just three seats left. I watch as the waiter pulls out the furthest chair, gesturing towards it with a smile and looking directly at me.

I glance back at Kent, who gives me a smirk. I narrow my eyes at him a little, knowing that he’s not going to be of any help.

With that, I sigh, thanking the waiter and sinking into the chair seated directly next to Tristin, my new wicked stepmother.

## Chapter 29 – Something in the Air

# Chapter 29 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Tristin turns her eyes to me as soon as I am seated, the baby in her lap looking up at me curiously. “Hello, Fay,” she says, her face cold. But hey, at least she’s talking to me.

“Hi,” I say, giving her as bright a smile as I can manage. Romulus peaks around her to give me a happy wave, which I return.

My father, on Romulus’ other side, turns to me as well. “We wanted to apologize, Fay, as a family. For the events at our house yesterday.”

“Oh, please,” I say, waving a hand to dismiss it. “Don’t worry about it. I understand that it’s...awkward. That I’m sort of a new addition, and that I screwed up some of your plans. I’m...sorry about that, by the way.” I look into Tristin’s face as I say it.

“Not a new addition, Fay,” my father says, looking at me steadily. “A love one returned to us after a long parting.”

“Yes,” Tristin says, her voice low and rehearsed. “You are a member of this family.” Her eyes flick to Kent and Daniel then, and I wonder why.

The rest of the dinner proceeds a little blandly. The food is good, the chitchat a little dull. I get a lot of family history, then, with Alden showing me pictures of my grandparents and telling me about their journey to America from Italy.

I look at the old photos curiously, trying to see pieces of my features in their faces. I’ve never really considered, before, that I’m actually Italian. I never thought much about my ethnicity, but

with my red hair and pale skin, Italian had never popped into my mind. I glance quickly at Kent and Daniel – with their dark skin, thick black hair, and roman noses, they look Italian.

“Thank you so much for showing me these,” I say to Alden, handing the pictures back to him. “I’m learning so much about myself these days.”

“And you have so much more to learn,” he says, giving me a warm smile, which I return.

The party goes quite late, with everyone drinking and chatting. At some point, a DJ comes out and begins playing the oldies that this crowd apparently favors – lots of Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin. It’s not a bad time, overall – even Daniel is laughing and chatting around.

Only Kent seems to be having a poor time – or, at least, not a good one. He’s very stern, always glancing around the room, looking over everyone who comes to say hello. I purse my lips, considering him as he looks critically over an old woman who introduced herself as my great aunt. Does he ever have a good time?

Kent feels me watching him and turns his attention to me, raising his eyebrow.

I shrug at him and shimmy my shoulders, encouraging him, without words, to try to loosen up and have a good time. He smirks at me and then looks away, continuing his surveillance.

Too serious, I think, getting up to get another drink. Kent stands to go with me, but I put out a hand to stop him.

“Really,” I say. “I’m just going to the bar for a glass of wine.” I indicate the alcove in the wall where the bar is stationed, only a few feet away. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

He hesitates and then settles back in his chair. “I’ll be right here,” he says. I nod and briskly step away.

A younger set of people are standing by the bar chatting. They raise their glasses to me as I sidle up.

“Welcome to the family, cousin,” a tall guy with closely-cut black hair and broad shoulders says to me. “We’ve missed you.”

“Really?” I ask, nodding to the bartender who hands me a glass of wine. “Um, are we really cousins?”

“Sure,” he says, laughing. “I’m Michael, this is Chris,” he says, indicating the slightly smaller version of himself next to him, “and our sister Amy.”

“Oh,” I say, raising my brows. “Wow, it’s really nice to meet you.”



“Not quite cousins,” Amy says, leaning in familiarly to talk to me. Her words are just a little bit slurred – not sloppy, but I can tell she’s had a couple of drinks. “We’re second cousins! Your dad is our mom’s cousin, which means,” she screws up her face in thought, thinking, “we have great-grandparents in common.”

“Wow,” I say, taking a sip from my glass. “Um, my family – I mean, the family I was adopted into – we didn’t pay a lot of attention to that sort of thing. So to find out I have great-grandparents and second cousins all in one day…” I raise my eyebrows in emphasis and they laugh, nodding.

“Yeah,” Michael says. “It must be a lot, to go from nothing into a big Italian family like this.”

“We remember you, though!” Amy says with a big smile. “Because you were our little redheaded Baby Fay –“

I blink, suddenly, at the way she says that. Baby Fay – only one other person calls me that –

“We used to play with you at family parties,” she continues, “like I remember one summer, our other sister Fiona –“

“Hey,” Michael says sharply then, nudging her with his elbow.

“Oops,” Amy says, lifting her fingers to her mouth. She rushes to continue, then, trying to move the conversation on. “Yeah, anyway, I remember you when you were so little on the slip-n-slide –“

“Wait,” I say, putting out a hand to stop her. “Fiona? Is that –“

Suddenly, though, Kent is by my side. “Fay?” He asks, looking sternly at my new cousins. “Did you have some trouble getting your drink?”

Michael, Chris, and Amy stare at Kent, maybe a little star-struck. “Kent,” I say, gesturing towards them. “These are my cousins –“

“Come on,” he says, ignoring them and taking me by the arm. I look back at them and grimace a little, shrugging as I let him pull me away. They all give me a little wave. As I walk away I see Michael say something sharp to Amy, who cringes.

“What’s the big deal,” I murmur to Kent when we’re out of earshot. “They were nice –“

“I don’t know them,” Kent says, bringing me back to the table. “And if I don’t know them, they’re a liability.” He glances back at them and shakes his head. “We can’t take risks like that, Fay.”

I sigh at him. “Kent, if I’m going to come to these things to meet my family, you have to let me, you know. Meet my family.”

He just glares at me and turns away to survey the room again.

People are starting to filter out, I notice – it's definitely a smaller crowd than it was before. Even when I glance at our table, I notice that my father and stepmother are gone, which seems a little odd.

Daniel sees me looking for them. “A problem with the baby,” he says, shrugging. “They all left a minute ago.”

Kent stiffens next to me, though, and I turn my eyes to him. He's looking very closely at the people left in the room now, who have, indeed, grown a little quiet. There are very few children left, mostly men in suits standing quietly at pairs.

Looking, largely, at us.

Kent reaches out a hand then and just as he grips my arm –

BAM –

The sound resonates through me and I can't help my little yell of surprise – god damnit, it sounds like a firework has gone off in the room –

BAM BAM BAM –

The sounds echo throughout the space and suddenly Kent has thrown himself over me, blocking me with his body, pushing me towards the far wall –

Daniel is next to us as an instant, crouching down, pulling me away with him –

I hear a few more pops and bangs and then the room starts to fill with a grey fog –

“Was that,” I gasp, trying to see around Kent, who blocks me, “was that gunfire –“

Kent he ignores me, turning to Daniel. “Smoke grenades!” he yells, looking around to our left and our right, trying to see the source, “you know what to do –“

Daniel turns to me, taking my hand and looking me seriously in the face. “We're under attack, Fay!” he yells. “We've got to RUN!”

Chapter 30 – Flee

## Chapter 30 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Daniel grabs me by the hand, pulling me to the south side of the room where a terrace balcony runs. Kent is close behind us, providing cover. There's a door there at the corner of the room and I'm filled with relief when I see it – but suddenly, a man jumps in front of it –

A man all in black, wearing a ski mask –

I stop short and start to pull Daniel back, but my act is disrupted when I hear a BANG at my ear and scream again, clutching the side of my face.

The man in front of us falls and Daniel bolts forward, dragging me with him, I turn slightly to look behind at Kent and see a gun in his hand –

What the – how the hell did he –

“Go, Fay!” he yells at me, clearly frustrated at my delay.

I nod and turn my attention back to Daniel, who reaches the door and pushes it open, pushing me against the wall.

Kent darts out, quickly scanning – then I hear more noise, see his finger pulse again as he shoots –

There are screams, thumps – I hardly have any time to process anything as Kent yells “clear!” and Daniel pulls me through the door. We run ahead of Kent then as he follows closely behind, watching our backs.

All of a sudden, I realize that there are bodies that we're stepping over – there's blood on the ground – one of the men on the ground moans, reaching for his gun and I skitter away. Before he can reach it, though, we're beyond him.

Panic is rocketing through me, so much that I can't think, can only act – can only follow Daniel wherever he's leading me –

We run to the end of the terrace and wait for Kent to pass us. He goes down the stairs first, expertly sweeping the area, firing efficiently at the threats he sees. Daniel looks anxiously behind us, but no one comes through the door –

“Clear!” Kent shouts up and we start down the stairs. “Fucking hurry, Daniel!” he shouts, and I almost stumble in my haste.

When we get to the bottom there is a moment of quiet where we huddle together with Kent.

“Listen to me,” Kent says, his eyes darting between us. “I don't know who did it, but this is a setup, targeted at us. They want one of us – maybe all of us –” his eyes shift to me, “Maybe just Fay. So we have got to get out of here, fast.”

Daniel and I nod and I feel my panic subside just a very little bit under Kent's expert command. I trust him to know what to do.

His eyes sweep over me then, lighting on my stilettos. "Get those fucking things off your feet," he says and I hurry to pull them off, standing barefoot on the cement at the bottom of the stairs. Then, he looks around once more.

"We're going to make a run for it," he says, gesturing a hand out towards the golf course spreading out before us. "Across the greens, into the darkness. Head for the trees, and then keep going. When I say go, you two run." He looks us in the eyes then. "Whatever you do. Don't. Look. Back."

I start to tremble, a little, and he steps close to me, taking my face sternly between his fingers. "Do not fall apart on me now, Fay," he growls. "Cry at home, if you must. Never on the battlefield."

I nod quickly, working to do as he says – pull myself together – and then he crouches down, ready to cover us as we go. "One," he says, and Daniel and I crouch forward.

"Two," we get ready, and then there's a long pause...I almost look back, when suddenly –

"THREE!" Daniel launches into an all-out sprint, my hand in his. I work hard to keep up, but he's faster, more athletic than me –

Still, I push myself, willing my legs to whirl, to push, to run as fast as I can.

I hear the sound of gunshots ringing out behind us, of footsteps –

At some point, something tugs on the back of my dress but then it's gone –

When we reach the treeline I look back, just a moment, and see that there's a body behind me – what tried to grab me –

Kent is about halfway behind us, running too, squeezing off live fire as he goes at dark forms chasing him from the club –

Suddenly, though, he stumbles, grabbing his arm –

"Daniel!" I shout, slowing, trying to turn back –

"Come on, Fay!" Daniel yells, gripping my hand harder and yanking me forward.

"But your dad –"

"He told us to go! Don't turn back!"

I hesitate, but the decision is made for me as Daniel's hand pulls me forward, locked around mine. I follow him, my breath coming fast and sharp in my chest, an ache rising in my muscles as I push, push.

As we go, it gets quieter. We run through a small set of woods, across the soft green grass of some golfing greens – even through and over a tiny creek that stands in our way as we head towards another set of trees – this one larger, a copse of pine.

When we're under their boughs, I fall to my knees.

"Please," I pant, putting my hands down on the ground as well, ignoring the spikes of old dry needles that press into my palms and legs. "Please, Daniel –" I say, sucking air into my lungs "I just need – just one minute –"

"Okay," he says, crouching down next to me, looking around warily. "I think...I think we may be okay for now – we may have lost them –"

I nod, agreeing, but not really knowing whether or not he's right. I concentrate on the ground, on getting air back into my lungs, the sweet feel of it bringing clarity to my thoughts, to my panicked emotions.

"What was that," I ask, looking up at Daniel with worry and horror on my face. He's much calmer than me, both physically and mentally. "How are you so okay – have you done this before?!"

He shrugs. "Once or twice," he says, putting a hand on my shoulder. "It doesn't get...better. But you stop being so shocked, after your first time."

I laugh ruefully, then, realizing that Daniel means that this won't be the last time this happens to him, or to me. This is part of the life.

I open my mouth to ask more when a dark figure comes into sight. Both Daniel and I scramble back –

"It's fine," the figure says, coming forward and stretching out a hand. My fear subsides when I recognize Kent's voice.

"Dad," Daniel says, rushing over to him. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Kent growls, but I can see that he's clutching his left arm with his right hand. Daniel bends down to look at it but Kent flinches away. "Seriously, it's not deep," he murmurs. "The phone is in my pocket," he says next, nodding down at his suitcoat. "Get it out, text Carlos. Drop a pin to let him know our location and tell him to meet us."

Daniel nods, taking the phone out of his father's pocket and following his instructions. As he does, Kent turns his eyes to me. "Are you all right, Fay? You're not hurt?"

I shake my head no, but then realize that I'm trembling all over. He watches me closely. "Um," I say, trying and failing to put a smile on my face. "I'm really okay? I don't know why..." I look down to survey my shaking limbs, "I don't know why I'm shaking?"

"You're in shock," Kent murmurs, coming closer to me and going down on one knee so that we're face to face. He looks me in the eye. "I need you to take a deep breath, Fay," he says. I open my mouth to protest – I don't know why – but he interrupts.

"No," he says sharply. "No arguments. Just look at me."

I do. I lock eyes with him, taking in his serious face, his steely control. The gun still clenched in his left hand.

God damnit, I start to shake harder.

"With me, Fay," he says, holding my gaze, speaking softly. "One," he says, taking a deep breath in. I do the same, pulling as much air into my lungs as I can. When he exhales, I exhale.

Then, again. "Two," he says, taking another deep breath. I do the same.

We continue like that for a while, until count fifteen, when Daniel interrupts.

"Okay," he says. "Carlos is here –" he points into the darkness beyond the grove of trees. "About five hundred feet that way, there's a road. Carlos is on it. He says it's clear."

"Let's go then," Kent says, standing up. I stand up with him. He breaks my gaze for a moment to hold out the gun to Daniel, who hesitates and takes it. Then, with his free hand – slick with blood, I notice – he takes mine.

Kent nods to me. I nod back. And then the three of us quietly walk through the night, Daniel running point, Kent walking quietly next to me.

I look down at our joined hands, then, as we head towards the car that will take us home to safety and wonder, passingly, why it is Kent who holding my hand right now. And not Daniel.