

Chapter 211 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

And then I feel guilty for making him feel guilty – and it's all a terrible spiral –

“Oh no,” I murmur, tears slipping down my cheeks as I take his face between my palms. “We can't live like this Kent – with both of us feeling like we've asked too much of each other without giving enough –“

He laughs, then, shaking his head. “I know that you're right,” he says, “but I...don't know how to ever stop feeling that way. What you've done, Fay –“

“It wasn't even really that big a deal –“

“It was –“

“I just...made my dad give me a bunch of companies, one of which was a shipping industry, and made my husband learn how to smuggle things – honestly, after I figured that out the rest was very easy – I did it all from my kitchen –“

He laughs then, tugging me closer and pressing a kiss to my hair. “You're underplaying it, Fay,” he sighs. “Which is fine with me, because I know you, but if you ever want anyone else in this world to respect you, you'll have to find a way to let them see the cold calculation behind those moves. Which I'm very aware is there.”

I sniff a little, my tears coming to an end, and consider what he says. “Um...do I want people in this world to respect me?” I ask, quiet, wondering what he's thinking.

“I suppose that's up to you,” Kent replies, his voice even. “They'll certainly know your name now that this is done. You own what, all of Alden's legitimate ventures? And have passed the illegitimate to Fiona? People will be aware of who you are, and will be following your moves. It's up to you to decide what you want to do with that.”

“Kent?” I ask, leaning back now and brushing at my cheeks with my hand to get the last of the tears away. “What do you want me to do with that?”

He just slowly shakes his head at me, unwilling to answer. “It's not for me to decide,” he says softly.

I scoff now, frustrated, and push him on the shoulder. “Yes it is,” I growl. “We're in this together – all of this. I'm not going to just make decisions and drag you along with them –“

“And I’m not just going to seize control of the power that you built for yourself and do what I want with it – “

“Even if that’s what I want you to do?” I ask, my eyes wide.

“Fay,” Kent says quietly, turning his head to the side. “Is that what you want me to do? Is that why you did all of this – to give me my position in the criminal world back?”

I take a moment to consider his words.

“No,” I whisper, holding his gaze, letting him see the truth of it. “That’s not why I did this. But if you want it, I’ll give it to you.”

He hangs his head a little, clearly torn. And I run my fingers through his hair, feeling guilty again, wanting to fix it but knowing...well, that I’ve got to let him have his own time, don’t I? To sort through everything he is feeling as well.

“I have to talk to Daniel,” I say quietly, leaning my head on his shoulder and continuing to run my thumb over the short hairs over his ear. “I need to see where he’s standing too, before we make plans to move forward.”

“Daniel?” Kent asks, looking up at me, a little confused. “What does he have to do with it?”

“He’s my husband, Kent,” I say, grinning a little and looking at him with wide eyes. “My other half? The father of my child? He should have a say –“

Kent growls then, tugging me possessively closer. “Stop saying things like that,” he murmurs, bending over me and bringing his face close to mine. “Making me jealous of my own damn kid, even if you’re kidding –“

“I’m not kidding!” I laugh, though I am teasing him, enjoying seeing him jealous. “Our wedding was legit –“

“Was not,” Kent mutters, leaning me further backwards now so that I’m horizontal again, so that he can move his shoulders and loom over me, intimidating and powerful and just...incredibly sexy.

“Sorry, Kent, it was,” I sigh, allowing my hand to curl around the back of his neck. “But, luckily, I am willing to cheat on him, if the tempting party is good looking enough –“

“Cheat on him,” Kent huffs, laughing a little, “ridiculous –“

“The bonds of marriage are very important to me, Kent! I –“

But I don’t get any further, because Kent seals his mouth to mine, shutting me up like he can’t stand to hear any of it. And then he takes his time showing me precisely how much I belong to

him, wiping the thought of any other men – or anything except him at all, frankly – neatly from my mind.

My hunger comes back to me in full force a little later, after I get out of the shower. I move immediately to the little tray of food, looking around the room and a little surprised to see that Kent isn't there. But I find a little note, letting me know he's gone up on deck to get fresh air and that I should come join when I'm ready.

I smile, pleased at the prospect, and then grab half a sandwich from the tray as I hurry to dress myself and get ready. I head out the door a few minutes later, my hair still damp and a couple more sandwiches wrapped in a napkin tucked under my arm. But I don't head immediately up to the deck – instead, I take a little detour, heading downstairs to see the horses.

Because the poor horses – Daniel assured me that they would be fine, that horses are shipped across the Atlantic like this all the time, and that the container in which they're living has plenty of fresh air – it even has portholes that open out onto the sea –

But still, something about it just feels...so wrong.

But would it have been any better to leave poor Heathcliff behind?

I sigh when I reach the door to the horses' container, pulling it open.

But I'm further shocked when I see someone already standing there.

"Daniel!" I say, laughing with surprise.

He turns and smiles at me, one hand in his pocket. "Oh hey," he says, a genuine smile of pleasure lighting his face. "I didn't think you were coming out of the cabin maybe...ever."

"Well that would have been my preference," I mutter, moving to his side and wrapping an arm around his waist in a hug. "But your dad wanted fresh air."

"You can't blame him for that," Daniel sighs, dropping a kiss to the top of my head. "Cooped up in prison for so long. Probably wants to see the sky."

"I'm sure he saw the sky, Daniel," I say, rolling my eyes and passing him my little bundle of sandwiches. "He wasn't locked up in a cell beneath the ground like the Count of Monte Cristo or anything. What are you doing here?"

"Just checking on them," Daniel says, raising his chin towards the horses as I take another bite of my sandwich and move over to Heathcliff, who eagerly reaches his nose out towards me.

"I'm surprised," I reply, beginning to pet Heathcliff's face and feeding him a piece of my bread. "Considering you hate horses."

“Just because I don’t want to be around them doesn’t mean I want to see them suffer. And considering that I didn’t think you were going to come around any time soon,” he shrugs. “I thought I’d do the right thing.”

“Well you’re very sweet,” I say, turning to grin at him as I move to Butterfly’s side, petting her as well. “I won’t tell anyone, because you’re supposed to be a very tough Mafia husband now. But...well, those who need to know already know.”

Daniel laughs and follows me, shying away a bit when Heathcliff reaches out his nose to lip at the sleeve of Daniel’s sweatshirt, wanting more bread. I laugh when I see it.

“So,” Daniel says, his voice slow and serious now. I turn to him, curious. He doesn’t usually talk in that voice, but when he does it means he’s been thinking about something. A lot. “On the subject of mafia husbands...what’s the next move for us, little wife?”

I sigh, turning my attention back to Butterfly as I consider his words. “Are you asking me because you really want to know what I think?” I ask quietly. “Or because you’re looking for an opportunity to tell me what you want?”

“Fay,” he says quietly. “I want to do what we planned.”

I look up at him, worried. “It was never a full plan, Daniel,” I say, my voice even and serious now. “It was always an idea. And Kent? He’s...”

“He’s going to hate it,” Daniel finishes for me, heaving a deep sigh.

Chapter 212 – Husband and Wife Stuff

Chapter 212 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I glance anxiously towards the door. “I still think it’s the best plan, Daniel,” I say quietly.

“Are you sure that the end result is even what he wants?” Daniel asks, his voice tight. “And Fay – is it what you want?”

I hesitate now, honestly not knowing. Because I just tried to talk to Kent about all of this before my shower and...

Well. We got a little distracted. Which generally I don’t mind, but now that I have a moment alone with Daniel to discuss it? A moment that we’re probably not going to have a lot of for the rest of our time on this boat, unless we keep meeting by chance for secret horse-side rendezvous?

“See?” Daniel says, watching me as he crosses his arms across his chest and leans against the wall. “You don’t even know if it’s what you want.”

“It is,” I sigh, sure of it in my own heart as I grab a curry cob out of the bin against the wall and begin to idly brush Butterfly, mostly to have something to do while my mind turns. “I’m sure of that, Daniel. I just...I don’t know what he wants.”

“Does that matter?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I snap, turning my face to glare at him now. “Of course it does.”

“It didn’t matter when you did the rest of this,” Daniel points out, nodding his head to incorporate the whole boat, the escape plan. “If you had told him about it, he would have told you not to. That it was too dangerous. That you putting yourself in danger isn’t what he wanted.”

“That’s different,” I sigh, shaking my head. “Now we’re...together, literally and figuratively. I had to do what I did to get him back to our side. And now...we should make decisions together. Right?”

A soft smirk comes to Daniel’s face. “Sure,” he says, “...except when you know that Kent won’t let you do the thing you really want to do.”

“I know,” I moan, my hands dropping to my side as I heave a deep sigh. “Am I a bad girlfriend? I don’t even want to tell him because I know he’s going to shut it down in an instant. Even though it’s the best choice – the only choice –“

“Well, you may be his girlfriend,” Daniel says, skirting around the horses to come to my side. “But you’re my wife. So. I think I still get some priorities there.”

“You’re the best husband a girl could ask for,” I say, meaning it in my own way and grinning up at him. “Always so supportive of my insane ideas that might get us killed.”

“Well, it helps that my boyfriend really likes your insane ideas. You keep life spicy for him in ways that I cannot.”

“Oh, Daniel,” I say, my face falling a little bit sarcastically as I look up at him. “You’re having trouble keeping things spicy for Jerome? Oh, you poor thing...”

He laughs then, realizing what I’m doing and gives me a little push that doesn’t move me very far. “The levels of spice in my relationship with my boyfriend are none of your business, wife –“

“Come on! Just like, two details! You never tell me anything!”

“Precisely,” he says, grinning and bending over to taunt me a little. “And I intend to keep it that way –“

“What’s all this?” Kent’s voice rings out from the doorway as he frowns and peers at the two of us laughing together at the far end of the shipping container, the two horses between us.

“Hey, dad,” Daniel calls, leaning back against the wall and smiling a little, clearly pleased to see his father but letting me decide what to say.

“Hi!” I call, waving to Kent with a big smile on my face, not wanting him to intuit that Daniel and I were talking about some pretty serious stuff a moment ago. It’s not that I want to keep things from him but...

But then I stop myself in my own thoughts because, actually, I very much do want to keep just this one last thing from him. Because I’ve got a decision to make, and I need to know, genuinely, what Kent wants from our life together before I make it.

“We were just checking on the horses,” I say cheerfully as Kent comes around Heathcliff and Butterfly, patting each of them gently on the way.

“All right,” Kent says, frowning a little and looking between us, perhaps intuiting that it’s a little bit strange for us to be checking on the horses together, especially as he knows Daniel has no fondness for the creatures. “Are you...finished?”

“Well, I’m never finished spending time with Heathcliff,” I say, putting the curry comb back in the bin. “But I can pick it up later. Why? Is something going on?”

“Not in particular,” he says. “Though everyone’s up on the deck. You should come up. It’s a nice day.”

Daniel and I look at each other, each giving a shrug, and then we both smile and nod to Kent.

I start to step forward but I hesitate when I see Kent frowning between us.

“You two,” he murmurs, more curious than angry or anything like that. “You’ve gotten even closer, haven’t you? In the past two months?”

I look up at Daniel, considering the question. “We were always close, Kent,” I reply as Daniel looks at me, probably considering the same.

“But yeah, I think we have,” Daniel finishes, looking back at his father. “Is that a problem for you?”

“No,” Kent says quickly, reaching an arm out for me. I move to his side, taking the final bite of my sandwich so my hands are free. “I just...hope you both saved a place for me.”

And I beam up at him then, realizing that Kent isn’t being suspicious – or at least, not wholly suspicious. He’s being vulnerable, and trying to show Daniel and I how he wants to be part of our lives, whatever they are and however changed they might be.

Kent laughs a little, looking down at me as I consider that this vulnerability – it must be intensely uncomfortable for him. “Don’t over-think it,” he murmurs, turning me towards the door.

“It’s nice!” I laugh, glancing at Daniel behind us, who is also smiling. “I like open-emotion Kent! He’s sweet!”

“No, I’m not,” Kent growls, taking a deep breath as the three of us pass out of the stable container and Daniel closes the door behind us. “I take it back. I want nothing to do with either of you – let’s go back to the way it was.”

“Sorry, pop,” Daniel sighs, clapping Kent on the shoulder as we make our way down the hall. “You opened that door. Now we know you’re a big softie. You can’t go back.”

Kent just sighs, shaking his head, but I can tell by the quirk at the corner of his lips that he likes it too. This new closeness, between all of us? He likes it very, very much.

There is indeed a sweet little gathering on the deck when the three of us emerge from below, and I grin to see my dad and my sister lounging on two of six comfortable-looking plush chairs that I bought and arranged to have set up before we even arrived.

I mean, it’s not that nice out here – it’s still the deck of a container ship and not at all a fancy yacht or a cruise ship or anything – the walls and the ground are all metal, painted white and grey. But still, seeing my family here sitting quietly in the sun, enjoying the breeze?

I have to admit, it’s very nice.

Intuiting my happiness, Kent gives me a squeeze around the shoulders and leads me over to another lounge chair. To my surprise, he sits down first and then grasps my hand, tugging me downward and pulling me back against him.

I settle against Kent a little tense, uneasy with the public display of affection that he’s never been willing to show before, which we worked for months to avoid.

“I know,” he murmurs in my ear as I lean back against his chest. “It’s weird, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I say, looking up at him and relieved to hear him acknowledge it. “Weird but...nice?”

“Weird but nice,” he agrees, kissing me on lightly on the side of the head before looking around at everyone. Janeen grins at us, intuiting the awkwardness and loving it, while my dad sighs and looks away for a second, perhaps still getting used to it.

Daniel, a little oblivious and still looking around, drops onto the lounge next to Kent and I. “Where’s Jerome?” he asks.

Chapter 213 – Ship Air

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“Jerome went to get snacks,” Janeen says with a contented sigh, leaning back against the pillows.

“Ohhhh, clever Jerome,” I say happily. “I knew he was useful.”

Just then Jerome does come around the corner, bearing a full tray of snacks that he places on a larger table between us. Cheerful conversation reigns then, with Jerome sitting next to Daniel on the lounge chair and handing around snacks and sodas for everyone. Jerome and Janeen get to talking then, asking Daniel questions about Europe and what they can expect the food like to be there. Daniel, having taken several trips – of which I am very jealous – fills them in on the snack situation of a variety of countries.

As they talk, I settle comfortably against Kent, enjoying the convivial atmosphere and not really feeling the need to add anything. It’s enough, I think, in this moment to just have those I love around me, safe and happy.

“It’s good,” Kent murmurs, his lips close to my ear so that our conversation is mostly private even though we’re sitting with everyone.

“It really is,” I say, sighing. He wraps his arms tighter around me, resting his forehead against my hair and inhaling a deep, contented breath that makes my heart sing with pleasure. Because I gave this to him, and I was happy to do it but...

Well, I want to give him even more.

But still, I have to know what he wants.

“Kent,” I say quietly, turning to look at him a little. He makes a soft sound low in his throat, encouraging me to continue. “What is it that you want next?” I ask, quiet.

He smirks, considering me. “Is that what you were talking to Daniel about?” he asks, “in your secret meeting with the horses?”

I scowl a little, frustrated at his implications even though...well, he’s kind of right. “Daniel and I met by chance, Kent –”

“It’s fine,” he laughs, shaking his head a little and letting me see that he’s fine with it. “You two are allowed to have conversations by yourself. I don’t need to be privy to everything.”

I smile here, because this is indeed a very different Kent than we’ve met before. But he’s showing us that he trusts us, which is a new side of Kent that I can really get on board with.

“Well?” I prod, pushing him back to my original question. “Do you know?”

“What are you asking me, Fay?” Kent says, leaning back a little so he can clearly see my face when I respond.

“I’m asking,” I continue, my hand going to stomach, “what you want our life to look like on the other side of this. Because we’re not going to live on a boat forever, are we?”

“We could,” he suggests, turning his head to the side and considering it, making me laugh.

“No,” I say, shaking my head vehemently. “I mean, as much as I love our little container ship home, I’m going to want to be on the ground. And I think Heathcliff does too.”

“All right,” Kent says, smiling at me. “So, what do you want that home to look like?”

Slowly, I shake my head, not letting him turn the tables like that. “No, Kent,” I say softly, staring into his face, forgetting for a little bit the family that sits around us, still chatting away and letting ourselves have our own conversation on the side. “I need to know from you. You’ve always been the master of your life – and as good as you’re being to me now, letting me take control and direct us in my own way...I know that you’ve got something in mind. And I want that – I want what you want.”

“Even if it’s different than what you want?” he asks quietly.

“It can’t be,” I reply, instant. I slip my hand into his. “I’ll go with you, Kent. What you choose is what we’ll do.”

He’s quiet for a moment, studying me carefully. “Are you asking me if I want to leave the criminal world? To stop being a mafia boss, and to do something else?”

Slowly, I nod, letting him know that that’s precisely what I’m asking. Because frankly, if he wants it back? He can have it. We have all the pieces here now, and a new alliance with Fiona that I know is loyal, and new, stronger ties to the Bianci family now, who believe they have a grandson on the way.

If he wants his world back? He can have it, stronger than ever. I mean, not without new challenges – Ivan is alive, and surely pissed – but...

Well, it is stronger now, isn’t it? I can give him that.

But what Kent says next? It doesn’t surprise me at all.

“I want out, Fay,” he says quietly, reaching forward to tuck a strand of my still-drying hair behind my ear. “That was always the plan – to go legit, to turn away from the criminal and to cut the ties as much as I can, especially now with the baby on the way. I want to build a safer,

simpler life. Does that...is that what you want? Is that even possible, after everything you've put in motion?"

A little smile starts on my face then and I nod, eager. "Yes," I say. "It's possible, Kent. It's very possible. And I think it's right – it's what I want most too."

He smiles at me for a moment, I think relieved to be on the same page – to be making the decision together that what we both want, most of all, is to leave this world in which he was so successful. To start again somewhere else.

And then I sigh with happiness, settling back against him and biting my lip, a warm well of happiness building in me. Kent sighs, settling his arms loosely around me as I tuck my head under his chin and close my eyes, pleased.

"So," I say, curious. "What will you do now that you're not a mafia boss?"

"What do you mean?" he asks, his voice light and a little idle.

"For a job," I reply. A moment passes, and then he laughs. "What!" I protest, laughing too. "You're going to need a job, Kent. All of your accounts are locked down, and it was expensive, funding Fiona's takeover – and keeping Daniel well supplied with his clothes and his books –"

"I know," Kent replies, groaning a little, "he's so lavish – keeping Daniel in the life to which he is accustomed is like supporting three girlfriends at once –"

"Hey!" Daniel snaps, drawing both of our attention to him. "I heard that!"

I laugh and wave a lazy hand in his direction. "Accept the truth, Daniel – you're high maintenance."

"See? I told you that you were," Jerome sighs, nudging Daniel with his shoulder as Daniel scoffs.

But I turn my attention back to Kent.

"See? You're going to have to get a job." I sigh, resting my head against him.

"And what do you think I should do?" he asks, already laughing a little.

"I think..." I say, considering. "Well, I think you'd make a very charming grocer –"

Kent laughs for real then, letting his head tip back with it. "What? Why?"

"Because," I say, turning to grin up at him a little. "You already know so much about the fruits and vegetables that are in season, and you would be very good at helping the little old ladies pick out a ripe pear. And you'd look very handsome in one of those green aprons –"

He laughs harder now, perhaps picturing it, as I am.

“But,” I continue, frowning a little now. “Honestly, all those bored housewives around, coming to see you and weave their European wiles – I don’t think I like the idea as much anymore.”

“Well I like it even better,” he says, making me give him a little glare. “European housewives chasing after me doesn’t sound so bad –“

I smack him on the chest now. “No groceries for you,” I murmur, shaking my head and resting it against him. “In fact, no grocery shopping at all. We’ll send Janeen. We’ll find you something else, all alone. At night. Maybe a grave digger or something.”

Kent laughs more now, making me smile, and I catch a little glimpse of my dad, who is smiling at me as well. Because while I think he had doubts about me and Kent before, he never saw us like this – saw the way we are together, the way I make Kent laugh, the way that he transforms into a softer, kinder man when I’m at his side.

I give my dad a little wink, and he gives me a nod, and then I turn my attention back to Kent.

“Seriously, Fay,” Kent says, his voice still happy but more deliberate now. “You know that’s not necessary, right?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I don’t – I’m not going to need a job –“

“Why not? The money – it really is mostly gone, Kent. It was not cheap doing...all of this.”

“And what of your new industries?” Kent asks, raising an eyebrow. “Do you plan to run them into the ground, never making another cent from them?”

“Well Kent,” I say, pressing a demure hand to my breast. “Those are my companies, and my profits. The question was not what I was going to do for work, but you were going to do.”

He laughs again now, pleased, but he shakes his head. “Fay,” he sighs. “If you think that I don’t have other accounts in Switzerland, that the American government can’t touch...”

“Really?” I ask, my eyes going wide as I turn to stare at him, actually shocked. “Are you serious, Kent?”

“Of course I’m serious,” he says, shaking his head at me, a coy and self-pleased smile on his face now. “Did you like it better? When you thought I was broke?”

“No,” I say, my eyes wide as I shake my head and then start to laugh. “This is way better. Seriously, though,” I press. “Are we like, rich? How much do we have in the accounts?”

“Um, Fay,” he says, leaning forward and teasing me, “I think we just established that this is my money, in my accounts —“

I click my tongue and swat at him, which makes him laugh and grab my hand before it can smack him, pulling me again against his chest, where he likes me. “It’s enough, Fay,” he murmurs in my ear. “Enough to keep us safe. To buy a little farm, maybe start a vineyard. I had one before, and it did well. We could try it again. Do you think you’d like that?”

“I think I’d like that,” I murmur, pleased, because suddenly the image comes to me of a little child running in the summer sun through the grape vines, free and easy, with Kent and I following behind. “I think I’d like that very much.”

“Good,” Kent sighs, tilting his head back and closing his eyes. “Then that’s a good enough place to start.”

And I settle my head against him, pleased.

But I don’t close my own eyes just yet.

Instead, I look for Daniel, and find him already looking at me. Then, subtly, I nod, just once, letting him know that our plans are going forward.

Daniel nods back to me, understanding, before he turns his attention back to Jerome and the rest of our little group.

And I do close my eyes, pleased and at rest. Because now that I know Kent wants the same thing Daniel and I want?

I know just how to get it.

Chapter 214 – Ginger Tea

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We all stay outside until the sun starts to go down, which happens sooner than I thought it would – but then again, Kent and I did wake up around 1:00, so I suppose I shouldn’t be as surprised as I am.

Janeen gets to her feet first, stretching. “Well,” she says, putting on an affected British accent that I know she uses when she’s feeling fancy, “shall we dress for dinner?”

“What’s on the menu tonight?” Daniel asks, smiling up at her but not getting to his feet yet.

She shrugs. “I don’t know. Whatever the chef can whip up with hot dogs and wonder bread, I guess.”

Kent audibly sighs behind me, making me laugh.

“Not tickling your taste buds, Kent?” Janeen asks, turning to him with a wide, teasing grin.

“Who put Fay in charge of stocking the ship with food?” he murmurs, shaking his head.

“Hey!” I protest, spinning to glare at him and pointing an accusatory finger at Daniel. “Your son was in charge of that! I accept no blame for this!”

Everyone laughs and turns to Daniel, my dad in particular raising an eyebrow in inquiry, though I know he doesn’t really care much about what he gets for dinner as long as there’s meat and bread involved. Dad’s not picky.

“What!” Daniel says, looking around a little sheepishly. “My job trained me to smuggle, not to plan menus. I had no idea I was supposed to hire a chef or something – I figured what the crew eats will be fine for us for ten days.”

“You took the time to make sure the liquor cabinet was liberally stocked, though,” Jerome says, grinning at him.

“Well,” Daniel says loftily, getting to his feet. “Some things are priorities.”

Jerome gets up too then, and so does my dad, but when I move to get up Kent’s fingers put light pressure on my arm, asking me to stay behind. I pause for a moment and then lean back as Janeen turns to us while the other three head for the door into the ship.

“Not coming?” Janeen asks, looking between Kent and I.

“I think we’re going to stay out here for a second longer,” I say, giving her a soft smile.

“Okay,” she replies with a shrug. “Cook wants us at dinner in half an hour – he told me this morning and says he’s not keeping it hot for us. Can I get you anything?”

“Um,” I say, hesitant, not wanting to put her out of her way –

Janeen just tilts her head at me, giving me a big smile. “Just ask, Fay. You’re giving me a new life in Europe, so I can get you something from inside the ship. Once. I think that’s a fair trade.”

“Could you bring me some of that tea I like? With the ginger in it?” I bite my lip, eager. The baby’s been good all day, but I’m feeling a slight bit of nausea come over me now.

“You got it,” she replies, giving me a wink. Then she, too, disappears through the door and into the ship.

“Baby giving you trouble?” Kent asks, rubbing a hand up and down my arm.

“I think so,” I sigh, half turning to him and rubbing a hand up and down my belly. “The ship has been so steady all day – and I really do feel better when I’m out here and can see the horizon. But something just started up, so I think the little turnip is upset.”

“Turnip?” he asks, his voice derisive.

“Yeah,” I say, smiling a little at him, ignoring his disdain. “About 17 weeks today, so. The baby’s about the size of a turnip.”

“Really,” Kent murmurs, looking down at my stomach. “And what was it before?”

“An avocado,” I reply quietly, smiling.

Kent frowns and looks up at me. “Fay,” he says, shaking his head. “An avocado is bigger than a turnip –“

“It is?” I ask, frowning in turn.

He bursts out laughing at me, shaking his head. “Where did you get these baby sizes?”

“From the internet,” I sigh, leaning back against him. “I don’t know. I like thinking of the baby as something more than an ‘it,’ which is what we’ve been falling back on since we don’t know the gender. And I refuse to take a side in the Prince or Princess debate so,” I shrug, “avocado/turnip it is.”

“Well,” Kent murmurs, nudging my ear with his nose, “we could just name the baby, and have it done with. Then you wouldn’t have to rely on vegetables, which I know you hate anyway.”

I stick out my tongue a little, admitting it, and I can feel his laughter reverberate in his chest.

The door opens again and Janeen comes out with a little tea tray with a mismatched set of pot and cups. To my surprise, Kent gets up and takes it from her, thanking her.

“I added a few little cookies,” Janeen says to me with a smile, pointing to them. “As I know it is time for your sixth feeding of the day, Fay.”

“Every time you do something nice you don’t have to say something mean, Janeen,” I say, scooting back on the lounge chair so that I can lean against the backrest. “We get it. You’re tough.”

“Well, I gotta do something to keep my reputation up,” she calls, waving over her shoulder as she steps back into the ship.

Kent places the tray between us, sitting down on the far end of the lounge chair and creating a cute little table between us. Then, as I watch, he pours me a cup of the ginger tea and skips the sugar cubes in their little bowl, instead reaching for the little pot of honey and spooning a dallop into my cup before stirring.

“How did you know I took it like that?” I ask, grinning and wrapping my arms around my knees as I watch him.

“You like honey,” he murmurs, his attention still on the tray as he opens the packet of cookies and puts a few out on a plate. “I noticed. Plus, ginger and honey is good together.” Carefully, he lifts the saucer holding the teacup and hands it to me. “It’d be better if there was a little lemon to add too, but,” he shrugs. “We can trick you into eating fruits and vegetables when we get to land.”

“Really? Lemon?” I say, curious and taking a sip of my tea, enjoying the way the warmth runs down my throat. And, in particular, the view of my handsome mafia boyfriend over the rim of the cup.

“Mmhmm,” he hums in affirmation, moving the tray to the ground and scooting closer to me. “And turmeric, which is good for your mind.”

“Where did you learn to be so healthy?” I ask, smiling at him.

“In Italy,” he says seriously, meeting my eye. “We lived on a great deal of land and mostly ate things that grew right outside our back door. It was a better way of life than living in an American city.”

“I like the city,” I murmur, gazing at him a little. “I’ve never lived anywhere else.”

“You’ll like the country too,” he replies, his eyes drifting down to my lips a little.

“I’ll like living where you are,” I say back, smiling. Then I glance down at my stomach again, where I feel the baby giving a few little fluttering taps. “I think the baby likes it too.”

“Really?” he asks, looking down at my stomach, interested. “Is it...”

“Turnip is moving,” I say, laughing a little and moving my hand to my stomach. “I can feel it.”

Kent gives me a little glare. “Please,” he says, shaking his head. “We’re not calling the baby Turnip. Not even for a week.”

I laugh at this, grinning at him. “Well, Bell Pepper is next! Which is cuter!” I turn my smile down at my stomach then, running a fond hand over it. “Little baby Pepper.”

“That is better,” Kent murmurs, and then he surprises me by bending over and resting his weight on his elbows, bringing his face quite close to my stomach as if he’s studying it carefully, trying

to figure out the baby growing inside. “Though I think I’d rather not name the kid after anything edible.”

I bite my lip a little at how cute it is, to see my gigantic mafia boss thinking about our tiny turnip-sized baby. Softly, I lift my hand from my stomach and start to run it through his hair.

“Well,” I say, trying not to sound over-eager. “What names do you like?”

Chapter 215 – Intensity

Chapter 215 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“I don’t know,” Kent says, contemplative, starting to get up.

“No,” I say, slipping my hand to his shoulder and keeping him there. “Um...I think the baby likes you there. Wants to hear you.”

I don’t know if it’s even possible for that to be true – I think the baby is too young to hear anything outside my body – but since Kent has been speaking so close to my stomach there has been an increase in the fluttering and taps. I mean – it’s probably just chance – but...well, what’s the harm?

“Really?” Kent asks, intrigued, turning his attention back to the baby. “Can the baby...tell?”

“I don’t know,” I laugh. “But I can feel baby moving more right now – and the same thing happened when Daniel used to imitate you –“

“What?” Kent says, sitting up straight in surprise now, which makes me burst out laughing.

Because of course he doesn’t know, does he?

I’m still laughing while Kent crosses his arms over his chest, shaking his head at me. “Tell me,” he demands, “now.” But the crinkles at the side of his eyes lets me know he’s not without humor.

“It’s just something we used to do in the beach house,” I confess, still laughing and leaning comfortably back against the chair, “to see if we could get the baby to move. Daniel used to like, make his voice deeper, and say Kent-ish things to the baby.” I grin, remembering. “He’s very good at it.”

Kent growls a little, swinging his head to glare at the door, which just makes me laugh again. “What would he say?”

“All sorts of things,” I say, shrugging and studying Kent’s handsome profile. “About how to cook pasta and keep your minions in order. And sometimes he’d speak in Italian, which the baby really liked.” I shrug a little, smiling as Kent looks back at me. “I think he just did it to make me laugh but it was nice.”

My smile only deepens when I see a line between Kent’s brows and a stern set to his lips because – oh my god, I think to myself, he’s actually jealous!

Kent shakes his head then, I think honesty a little frustrated, and lowers himself again to peer at my stomach.

“Listen, kid,” he grumbles, reaching out a hand to gently stroke the swell of my belly. “You’ve only got one dad, all right? And I sound like this. Don’t fall for the imposters, especially not your brother Daniel. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.” I cover my mouth so that my laugh doesn’t spill out, not wanting to interrupt.

Kent looks up at me then, a small smile on his lips. I nod eagerly, letting him know that it’s working – which is true! The baby flutters again, responding. Honestly, it’s probably the ginger tea or my own happiness or chance more than it is anything to do with the baby hearing Kent but...

When Kent lowers his voice a little and begins speaking in Italian to the baby, having what looks like a very serious chat?

I can only shake my head a little bit, my eyes lined with tears. Because it’s just so cute – and everything I’ve wanted for weeks now –

Kent glances up at me and laughs a little, sitting up. “I think the kid’s got the picture,” he murmurs, moving up on the chair and reaching for me. I move forward and drape my legs over his lap while he wraps an arm over my shoulders.

“You’ve got to quit crying, Fay,” Kent sighs, wiping away the two little tears that slip down my cheeks. “It’s all good things from here on out.”

“And you,” I say, sniffing a little and taking another sip of my cooling tea, “are going to have to get used to the fact that I cry for many things, not all of them sad and bad. So. You’ll just have to learn how to put up with it.”

Kent murmurs something noncommittal and I just wrinkle my nose at him, happy to be at odds on this. Because honestly I’m never going to change, and I wouldn’t want to, so it’s much more his problem than mine.

“So,” he sighs, leaning his head against mine. “Back to that question of names. Any that you like?”

“Well, I was thinking Ginger,” I say, nodding down at the tea. “But you said nothing edible. So, that’s out.”

He laughs at this. “I wasn’t going to let you name our kid after a fictional horse anyway.”

I gasp and look up at him. “How did you know that?”

Kent rolls his eyes at me. “I’ve read Black Beauty, Fay,” he says, “and I’ve met you.”

“You’ve read Black Beauty!?”

“I have a kid!” he laughs, spreading out his hand. “And I was one, once! I’ve read all kids of children’s books. Probably more than you.”

“Fat chance,” I murmur, snuggling closer to him and sipping tea as he tightens his arm around me. “Okay, then, what do you like?”

“Honestly,” he says, his voice low and considering. “I don’t really know. I haven’t thought about it.”

“Really?” I ask, curious. “All those months in jail with nothing to do but think, and you never pondered baby names?”

He sighs and is quiet for a moment, making me go a bit still.

“Should I not have said that?” I ask quietly.

“No,” he replies, instant, shaking his head. “It’s just...it wasn’t that easy, Fay, on my side of it. You were out here making determined plans that at least by the end you were fairly certain were going to work out. But me? I had...no idea what was happening. And honestly, it looked like the best case scenario was going to be you and Daniel running away to Europe and raising this kid by yourselves, as far away from me as you could get. And had you chosen that...it would have been a good life. I wouldn’t have blamed you.”

I’m quiet now too for a moment, leaning over to put my mostly-empty cup of tea back onto the tray at our side.

“I wish you’d have given me more credit, Kent,” I say quietly as I sit up straight. “I was...never going to let that happen. You mean so much more to me than that.”

“Fay,” he sighs, cupping my cheek with one hand and shaking his head at me. “I would never have expected that of you. We had barely just started being – whatever we were to each other – and you’re so young –“

My anger is sudden and vivid. “Don’t you dare pull that on me, Kent,” I snap, pulling my face from his hand and glaring at him. “Are you seriously trying to pretend that this?” I say, gesturing

between us with my hand, “this thing between us is anything less than it is because it’s new, and because I’m young? Because if –“

“I’m not,” he growls, frustrated himself now and putting his hand back in its place on my cheek, making me look at him. “But I wouldn’t blame you if you’d decided to cut your losses and run. It would have been the easier path – I would have understood.”

“Well, I’d never have been able to forgive myself, Kent,” I say, raising my chin and looking him directly in the eye. “And it would have been a great shame and a waste – because I’m never going to feel this way about anyone else – ever again. And I’m sorry if you’re mad about it because I’m young, and you think I’m naïve, but I know my heart, all right? And I’d do it all again – a thousand times - if it meant that I get to live this life with you at my side.”

A familiar fire lights between us, as it always does when we argue.

And part of me grabs onto it, because I know this is the place where our relationship was forged, where Kent and I come together.

And also because I know these arguments really only end one way.

The idea of it curls within me and my stomach tightens, eager.

Chapter 216 – Can’t Help It

Chapter 216 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent stares at me for a long moment, steady and serious, before he slips his hand from my cheek to my neck, pulling me to him and kissing me, hard and fast like he can’t help it. My mouth opens to him in an instant and I reach for him, wrapping my hands in his shirt and using my leverage there to pull him close.

The kiss is desperate for a moment as we both consider how close it was – that possibility of losing each other, of me having to raise this baby without him.

But now that we’re here, and we have another chance?

There’s no way in hell that we’re letting anyone take this from us. Never again.

Kent breaks the kiss after a long moment, resting his forehead against mine and staring down into my eyes. “I love you, Fay,” he whispers, and a thrill runs through me to hear it.

“I know,” I murmur, my breath coming hard as I force myself to loosen my grip on his shirt.

He leans in again, moving his mouth to mine, eager to continue, but I put a hand on his chest, very aware that we're indecently close to getting caught in a very compromising position here on this very public deck.

I lean back a little, willing myself into a little more self-control, taking a deep breath.

"So," I say, wracking my mind looking for a safe subject of conversation that isn't going to make me want to tear his clothes off any more than I already do. But...I don't come up with much.

What were we even talking about before?

My brain goes fuzzy as I stare at him, this impossibly good-looking man, with his full lips –

And god, that body that I know is hidden under these unassuming clothes, thick with muscles and so tall and broad –

I lick my lips a little, my eyes drifting from his mouth downward, doing my very...very best to reign myself in.

I flick my eyes back up to Kent's face to find him staring seriously at me, his stillness and silence communicating that he's thinking precisely, precisely what I am right now. But I smirk, smiling, because dinner is in half an hour. And while that's probably enough time...

Well. We've got the rest of our lives for that, don't we? Besides, it will be fun to make him wait.

At least, fun for me.

I smirk a little, leaning forward and placing an innocent hand on his thigh, pretending I don't know what I'm doing. "So, Kent," I say idly, trying again to come up with some small talk to distract him. "How do you feel about –"

"No," he snaps, shaking his head and grabbing me suddenly around the shoulders and under the knees, standing up in an instant with me already in his arms. "Absolutely not, Fay," he growls. "This is ridiculous."

He's already well on his way to the door by the time I gasp my surprise and then start to laugh, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling myself close to him. Somehow he gets the door open and is already striding down the stairs. "What!" I protest. "I wasn't doing anything –"

"You seriously think," he growls, striding down the corridor to our cabin, "that I spend two months in jail thinking about you and we're going to spend our first full day together chatting on the sun deck?" He's angry now – honestly, anyone else would probably think him a little dangerous, but seeing Kent like this? It just sends a little thrill down my spine and lights a fire in my core.

Kent practically kicks the door to our cabin open and then slams it shut behind us.

“Fuck that, Fay,” he mutters, tossing me laughing onto the bed and before he pulls off his shirt. “Absolutely not.”

And then Kent climbs on top of me, and again seals his mouth to me.

And we are very, very late for dinner.

Janeen grins at me broadly when Kent and I finally do get to the dinner table, resting her elbow against the table and eagerly propping her chin in her palm. “Heyyy Fayyy,” she says, blinking innocently. “We saved you some supper. Did you lose track of time?”

I blush a little, shaking my head at her, but Kent doesn’t raise to her bait at all as he sits down at the table and nods a hello to everyone. He looks completely nonplussed by our activities this past hour, though I am...well, I can’t keep the smile off my face.

I love Kent for many reasons, but our physical connection? It’s...definitely not at the bottom of the list.

I sigh happily, reaching for a dish of macaroni and cheese in the center of the table, suddenly ravenous.

Janeen just laughs at me, shaking her head, while my dad flips through a book of old sea stories he has propped on the table, clearly not wanting to know.

Daniel, in on the joke, wraps an arm around my shoulder and gives me a kiss on the head. “Ah, my faithful little wife!” he says, grinning at me as I spoon cheesy noodles onto my plate. “I’ve missed you. What on earth have you been getting up to without me by your side?”

Kent, reaching for a dish of broiled fish, sends Daniel a little glare but doesn’t say anything, letting it pass. Daniel’s grin broadens at this and I laugh, considering that Kent letting him get away with a cheeky mark at his expense is probably a new experience.

“Well, I, for one,” Jerome says, raising a half-drunk glass of whiskey in my direction, “did not miss you, Fay, as Janeen and I have a chance at Scrabble when we can gang up on Daniel together.”

“You say this like it’s a good thing,” Janeen chimes in, rolling her eyes. “As if we hadn’t already lost by agreeing to play Scrabble anyway.”

“Hey!” Daniel protests but Janeen glares, pointing a fork in his direction.

“Next time we’re playing strip poker, as I suggested,” she murmurs before stabbing a bite of potato with her fork and lifting it to her mouth.

I laugh at this as Kent and I fill our plates, and then dinner devolves into the usual chaotic chatter that I got used to in our weeks at the beach house together, an atmosphere that fills me with joy.

This, honestly, feels quite like my element – sitting with people who love each other very dearly, chatting and teasing, sharing a meal.

Quietly, and I hope privately, I watch Kent from the corner of my eye, seeing how he takes it. Because as much as I love this, I know that it's very different from the home that he built for himself over the years. Even though he always had Daniel in his house, Kent's mansion...well, it never really felt like a home, did it? He always had barriers up, rules and restrictions that made it very difficult to have these kinds of connections.

Silently, I wonder why he did that, or if it was even his choice.

And if it was...my stomach turns over, because...will our new life together mean that I have to give this up? Because I desperately don't want to. But if Kent prefers something quieter –

Suddenly, Kent turns his head and meets my eyes, huffing a little laugh. “Will you stop staring at me?” His words are low, whispered, just for me. The family around us keeps talking, either not noticing or giving us our space.

“What?” I ask, blinking. And then I blush, realizing that I was staring at him.

“It's fine,” he says, smiling at me and slipping a hand onto my thigh, giving it a little squeeze. “It's good, Fay. It really is. I like it,” he says, gesturing around the table. “Stop worrying about me.”

“It's just...different,” I say, shrugging and hoping he understands. “Than anything you had.”

“It's better,” he murmurs, leaning a little towards me. “It's what I would have had – I just...honestly, I don't think I knew how to create anything like this. You're...better at social stuff than me.”

“What?” I say, turning my head, a little confused. “Kent, you throw beautiful parties –”

He waves a hand, shaking his head. “Real social stuff, Fay. Between people who love each other? That's all so much harder than picking a venue and the right drinks to be served. And I want it – I really do. All right?”

“All right,” I say, smiling and running my fingers briefly through his hair before sighing happily and turning back to the table, hoping that he's not faking enthusiasm for my sake. Because I love my obnoxious, loud, funny family – and if he doesn't? Honestly, he's just going to have to get used to it.

Chapter 217 – Across the Atlantic

Chapter 217 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I'm perfectly happy to let our days pass as a strange mix of shared, noisy meals together book ended by a great deal of time alone with Kent. The two of us spend the spare hours between meals in our cabin or out on the sun deck, talking quietly about our plans, or about nothing. It's precisely what I wanted – just time to reconnect, to decompress from the stress of planning the perfectly-timed execution of several felonies, to recommit ourselves to each other.

But after about a week of begin pretty much constantly at each other's side, I turn over in bed one morning and nudge Kent on the shoulder with my fingers.

"You have to talk to Daniel, you know," I murmur, frowning at him.

"What?" he asks, frowning down at me over the reading glasses I picked out for him. He's already awake, letting me sleep in a bit while he enjoys a cup of coffee and reading some international news on a tablet. I think I surprised him by being awake.

"Seriously," I say, yawning and reaching for his coffee. "You have to talk to him –"

"You won't even like this," Kent mutters, pulling the coffee out of my reach and making me scowl. "There's no sugar or cream –"

"Little baby Bell Pepper wants the caffeine –"

He rolls his eyes. "Well, tell Pepper to get her own," he says, making me laugh. So I sigh and pull myself out of bed, wrapping myself in my ratty robe and heading for the French press, which is waiting with my own cup of coffee still in it.

"I'm serious, though," I say, pouring my cup and adding my sugar and cream before coming back to bed and curling up at Kent's side, resting my head on his shoulder. "You have to talk to him."

"Why?" he asks, looking at me, confused. "Is there...is something wrong?"

"No," I say, shaking my head. "But you haven't talked to him."

"I have too talked to him! I've –"

"Not one-on-one," I insist, knowing that I'm right. "You've been avoiding it."

Kent scoffs but I look up at him, raising my eyebrows and calling his bluff. "Fine," he sighs. "Maybe a little."

"Why though?" I ask, confused. "You and Daniel love each other – we all know you do. But you two never sit and talk."

“Because we never have,” Kent sighs, flicking off his tablet and putting it down on the bed, wrapping an arm around me. “It’s...different with us. We’ve had twenty-plus years of not speaking to each other about anything...significant. About how we feel or what we think. It’s a difficult pattern to unlearn.”

“Well, you do those things with me,” I point out. “It’s not like you can’t talk about your feelings.”

“I barely tell you my feelings, Fay,” he murmurs, growling a bit, and I smile because I like it when he’s disgruntled. At least, when he deserves to be. “You just...intuit them.”

“Yes, I’m very intuitive,” I murmur, pressing a kiss to his shoulder. Then I sit up straight. “Well, I’m very sick, and I want my sister, and I want to be alone.” I quip, clearly lying.

“What?” he asks, confused.

“I want you to bring my sister to me so she can nurse me to health, and I want you to leave me alone while she does,” I say, flicking a hand at him in dismissal. “So, go away. I need girl time.”

“Fay,” he groans, shaking his head.

“Go!” I say, shoving him a little and laughing. “Honestly, Kent, I’m sick of you – we haven’t left each other’s side in a week –“

“It’s going to be longer than that when we’re married –“ he growls, moving closer to me, intent on staying.

“Oh, it is not,” I sigh, pulling away and pointing at the door. “Besides, that’s impossible, I’m already married. Now go speak with my husband, your son! Send Janeen here when you find her.”

Kent grumbles, dissatisfied, and glares at me the whole time that he gets dressed. I ignore him, opening his tablet and continuing to read his article where he left off.

“Mine,” he says, snatching the tablet out of my hands.

“Rude,” I say with a tsk, crossing my arms and glaring at him.

“Two hours,” he says, heading for the door. “Then I’m coming back.”

“Bye, baby!” I call as he opens the door. “Talk to your kid! Bond!”

Kent grumbles something noncommittal as he slips out the door.

I spend the next ten minutes pulling myself together, getting changed out of my nightgown and putting on some comfortable clothes. Though honestly, I don't know why I bother – I'm probably just going to end up back in bed. The seas and the baby are not going easy on me today.

As I comb my hair in the bathroom mirror, I hear a little knock at the door and turn, surprised.

Because...Janeen probably wouldn't knock if she knew Kent wasn't here. She'd probably just barge right in, as she's done my whole life.

Frowning, I move to the door and pull it open, my mouth opening in a surprised smile when I see Jerome standing there, leaning against the doorway with one hand behind his back.

"Janeen said she wouldn't be beckoned like a puppy," he says, twisting his lips a little in apology. "I hope you will accept me as a replacement."

I laugh, grabbing his arm and pulling him inside. "Even better," I say, grinning at him. "She's in a foul mood, all cooped up on this ship, anyway. What snacks did you bring me?"

Jerome's smile grows. "What makes you think I brought you snacks?" he asks, cagy.

"Um, probably the fact that you did," I say, rolling my eyes and quickly reaching behind him, grabbing for the bag of popcorn in his hand. He just laughs and willingly gives it up, following me when I head to the bed and cheerfully sit down, my legs crossed.

"So," I say, pulling open the bag and starting to eat. "Are you as bored as Janeen?"

"Nah," Jerome says, sitting down on the bed and then laying himself out on his side, propping himself on his arm. I offer him the bag of popcorn but he shakes his head, leaving it all to me. "Janeen is just stir crazy because there are no men on this ship who she can flirt with. I, alternately, am on a 10-day cruise with my boyfriend. I have plenty to do."

I laugh at this, shaking my head in wonder. "I mean, how does Janeen not have anyone to flirt with?" I ask, confused.

"Well," Jerome says, holding up his fingers as he counts people off, "gay, gay, dad, and ridiculously obsessed with you," he points out, shrugging. "So, pickings are slim."

I roll my eyes, because obviously that's not what I meant. "Jerome, there are like thirty other men on this ship. And Janeen's hot! Surely one of them is hungry for some company."

"Well," Jerome says, smirking a little. "I think Daniel had something to do with that."

"What?" I ask, my eyes going wide.

Jerome laughs, shaking his head. "Yeah, he told them day one to keep their hands off the one with the purple hair or else they'd lose their jobs."

“Just Janeen!?” I gasp, a little appalled that I wasn’t included in the ban.

“Well, there was no need to include you,” Jerome says, smirking, “considering you’ve got your gigantic baby daddy at your side at all times. No one even has a chance to hit on you.”

“Wait,” I say, turning my head at him now. “Why did Daniel do that to Janeen? Are the sailors like...bad guys? Everyone has been so nice...”

“Nah,” Jerome says, grinning deeply now. “He just wanted to see her spin her wheels. She’s been throwing herself with more and more desperation at the crew, who want nothing to do with her – he’s getting a kick out of it –“

I throw my head back and laugh when I hear this, delighted. But then I shake my head, bringing my gaze back to my friend. “No, that’s mean – poor Janeen, she loves a sailor.” I unfold my leg and give him a little kick. “Tell him to take it back – let the poor girl run free.”

Jerome shrugs and nods. “I’ll do my best,” he says, shaking his head.

“Who knew,” I say thoughtfully, munching on more popcorn. “Ivan had the gall to warn me about you, but the whole time Daniel was the devious one.”

I’m still laughing a little and reaching for another handful of popcorn before I realize that Jerome has gone silent. Confused, I let the popcorn fall from my fingers and move my eyes to my friend, a little surprised to see him laying perfectly still on his bed, his face worried.

“What?” Jerome asks.

“Huh?” I ask in response, not understanding.

“What did you just say?” Jerome asks, sitting up and looking at me carefully.

I shake my head at him, still not getting it. “About Daniel being devious? I’m sorry, Jerome – you know I don’t really think that –“

“No,” he interrupts, peering at me closely. “About Ivan. Warning you about me. What did he say?”

Chapter 218 – A Question of Trust

Chapter 218 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Um,” I say, sitting up straight, my hands darting anxiously to play with my hair as they rarely do anymore. “I don’t really remember, Jerome –“

“Yes, you do, Fay,” he says, frowning at me and pushing. “I know you do. Seriously, just tell me.”

I take a deep breath then, looking at him seriously now. “He said that I should watch out for you. That he had done his research on you, and that you were shady and...” I bite my lip now, not wanting to say more.

Jerome just narrows his eyes at me and raises his chin once, urging me forward.

I heave a sigh. “Jerome, he said you were grasping and that you always move towards the most powerful person you can. That you’d worked your way up from the streets and were now...conveniently shackled up with the heir to the Lippert fortune.”

Jerome leans towards me now. “What else,” he says softly, intuiting that I’m leaving something out.

I shake my head at him then, sighing as I drop my eyes and my hands start to braid my hair. “He asked me if I thought you were actually gay.”

“What?” Jerome gasps, offended and appalled.

“I didn’t listen to him!” I say instantly, whipping my wide eyes up to him now, begging him to believe me. “Obviously I didn’t listen! I trust you, Jerome! Our entire fate was in your hands, you could have turned Kent in in half a second!”

Jerome groans then, covering his face with his hands and flopping back on the bed. “Yeah,” he grumbles sarcastically, “but why would I do that when I’ve got this amaaaazing gravy train taking me to Europe! If I turned in Kent, I’d lose my meal ticket and I wouldn’t get to go on this luxury cruise!”

“Jerome,” I groan, scooting closer to him and putting a hand on his stomach. “That is not what I think! It was just a joke!”

He keeps his face covered. “If it’s not what you think, Fay,” he murmurs, “then why am I just hearing about it now?”

“Because it was stupid! And Ivan was just grasping at straws, trying to convince me that you and Daniel weren’t really on my side!”

“That’s precisely right, Fay!” Jerome says, sliding his hands from his face and glaring at me now. “I don’t know why you even listened to that guy! At all! You gave him way too much freedom in that house –“

“We needed him!” I insist, my eyebrows going up, shocked that I even have to defend myself on this point. “You know we needed him to trust us, Jerome!”

“Did you need to go that far with him, Fay?” Jerome snaps, sitting up now and glaring at me. “Did you really need to let him into your inner circle to get him to trust you that much? I mean, does Kent even know that you kissed him?”

I blink at Jerome now, my eyes going wide that he’d throw that in my face.

But then I get mad. Because who the hell is Jerome to throw that in my face?

“Yes, Jerome, I did tell Kent that, and he understood why I did it.” I say quietly, leaning in to glare at him now. “Though we’re both very confused about why you hit on me so much before I found out you were dating Daniel!”

Jerome’s mouth falls open all of a sudden, and I don’t know whether it’s in shock or because he wants to throw something else at me, when suddenly the door opens.

“What’s going on in here?” Janeen asks, frowning as she comes into the room. “Are you guys...actually fighting?”

Jerome and I both turn to stare at her, going silent. But then Jerome snaps his mouth shut. “It’s nothing,” he says, not looking at me as he gets up off the bed and heads for the door. “Forget it.”

Janeen just watches him with wide eyes as he pushes past her, not even looking at me once before he heads down the hall. Janeen stares after him before she turns her eyes to me.

“Seriously, Fay,” she says, staring at me. “What the hell was that?”

And I groan and fall back on the bed, covering my face with my hands. “Honestly, Janeen? I have no idea.”

Kent sighs as he leans against the doorframe of the little dining room, which the six of them frequently use during the day as a kind of living room. There’s no place to comfortably relax except the table, and Kent can’t decide if he’s lucky or unlucky that Daniel’s the only one sitting there today, reading a book and drinking a cup of coffee.

Sighing again, Kent knocks on the open door next to him to get his kid’s attention. Daniel looks up with surprise that turns a little into chagrin, but then back to surprise when he sees the bottle of whiskey in his dad’s hand.

“What’s that for?” Daniel asks, confused, nodding towards the liquor. “It’s not even noon.”

“Yeah, well,” Kent says, walking to the table and sitting next to Daniel, putting the bottle between them. “I have a feeling we’re going to need it.”

“Uh-oh,” Daniel says, looking at the bottle instead of at his dad. “Are we...talking?”

“Yup,” Kent says on a deep exhale. “She’s making me.”

Daniel laughs at that, looking up at Kent now. “She’s not wrong, you know. We need to.”

“I’m aware, kid,” Kent replies, wrapping a hand around the neck of the bottle and pointing it towards his son. “So, do you want this in your coffee? Or...”

Daniel scoffs and starts to rise. “Don’t be ridiculous, dad,” he murmurs, moving towards the kitchen. “I’ll get us fresh glasses and ice.”

“Atta boy,” Kent sighs, smiling as he watches his kid pass through the door.

When Daniel returns with the promised glasses, Kent pours and they both drink deeply in silence. There is just...so much that they’ve left unsaid for years. It’s difficult for both of them to even know where to begin, so used are they to dancing around the important subjects that they’ve left lying between them.

But as the whiskey begins to loosen their lips and the minutes tick past, it gets easier. Daniel starts by telling Kent how glad he is to have him back and confessing, guiltily, that he actually suggested they leave him in jail. Kent sighs, assuring him that he doesn’t blame him for that, which lifts the first of many weights off of Daniel’s shoulders. From there, the conversation really begins.

And it turns, as perhaps was always necessary, to Lenai.

“We never talk about her, dad,” Daniel says quietly, looking down into his second glass of whiskey. “I always...wanted to. But...I feel like we can’t.”

Kent looses a long breath then, covering his face with his hand, shame running through him. “That’s my fault, Daniel, and I’m sorry for it. I didn’t...know what to say. Your mom was...she was always so much more in touch with you, with how you were feeling. I didn’t know how to handle you when you were upset – and it’s not an excuse, it’s my fault. But when you cried? God, Daniel, it broke my damn heart, and all I knew how to do was run away before I went to pieces too.”

Daniel briskly wipes at his cheeks and Kent pretends not to see, but then he catches himself and forces himself to look at his son, to witness his emotions, to watch him cry. And he has to clench his jaw so tight that he swears his teeth will crack, because the sight of it...

But to Kent’s shock, Daniel just laughs at him. “You know you can do it too, dad,” he murmurs. “You won’t dissolve like a pillar of salt if you let loose a few tears.”

Kent smirks a little, grateful for Daniel’s sense of humor. “You sure about that?”

“Nope,” Daniel says, sniffing and shaking his head, meeting his father’s eyes again. “We just...mourned so separately for her, dad. I never felt like I could talk to you about it. Never felt like you wanted to talk.”

“I don’t want you to ever think I forget about her, Daniel,” Kent says, his jaw again tight. “Or that it didn’t mean something to me when we lost her, just because...we didn’t, and we don’t, talk about her.”

“I don’t think that –“

“No,” Kent says, shaking his head and taking another big sip of his drink. “Let me say this. Because it’s important – your mom was an incredible person, and a wonderful mom, and a good wife. She was my partner in everything. She is singularly responsible for anything good I ever did, and any good traits that either of us have come directly from her. But we married and had you so young, and it was such a...a stressful time in our lives.”

Kent’s words fade out and he shakes his head, remembering it – the stress of having to go out and complete whatever task the Bianci’s sent him to do, licking whatever boots he could to get a foot in this underworld, trying to restart the Lippert crime organization to pay the Bianci’s back for...for saving him, for raising him.

And in doing so, selling his soul to the Bianci family.

And god damn it, selling Daniel to them as well – the grandchild they desperately wanted, that Lenai wanted as well.

“I was...so fucking scared, Daniel,” Kent murmurs, raising his eyes to meet his son’s. “When you were born? I was terrified of how much I already loved you, of...not being able to build a good enough life for you. Of someone hurting you, of using you against me?” he shakes his head, looking down at the table, unable to bear the memory of it.

“God, dad,” Daniel murmurs, and Kent looks up to see his son wiping tears off his face again. “You could have told me. I thought you...didn’t like me.”

Kent scoffs, shaking his head again. “I love you, Daniel. You’re everything to me. Seeing you happy, these past few days, laughing with Jerome and Fay? Safe?” He sighs, looking down. “Fay gave you everything I always wanted.”

Daniel and Kent take a long time then, sharing memories of Lenai, of Daniel’s childhood, some of which Kent doesn’t remember. But some things are vivid, and some are the same – the grief and heartache they both felt as she grew sicker, the disconnection they felt when she died. The shared desire that they both had to reach out to each other, though neither knew how.

It is a long, difficult chat, dredging up mountains of memories that both had neatly stored away.

But the whiskey does its work, loosening their tongues, giving them courage to ask the difficult questions that have been on their minds for years.

And so finally, as Daniel pour their third glasses, he draws himself together and speaks the one that's been in his heart for months now.

"Did you love mom?" Daniel asks, taking a deep breath. "The way that you love Fay?"

Chapter 219 – Father and Son

Chapter 219 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Slowly, Kent raises his head and meets his son's gaze, but he doesn't say anything.

Daniel lets out his breath slowly, beginning to nod.

"I don't want to lie," Kent says softly. "Or to undermine what I had with your mom. She was...my partner and my wife. I treasured her, and loved her deeply, but we were...playing roles that her father picked out for us. We were a very strong match as far as a mafia marriage went, but there was never, between us..."

"I get it," Daniel says, raising his eyebrows. "I mean, it's going to sound weird but...is it kind of how I feel about Fay?"

Kent pauses in shock but then laughs, raising his eyebrows as he considers the possibility. "I mean, I was actually attracted to your mother, Daniel – she was a beautiful woman –"

"Okay, yeah," Daniel concedes, "but beyond that. A deep friendship and dedication? Fay – if we were actually going to raise this baby together, we'd be good at it. We'd be a good match – and we love each other. But between us..."

Kent nods, considering that perhaps Daniel does understand it more than he thought he could. Fay and Daniel, after all, were likewise an arranged match between two old mafia families from the start.

"Well," Daniel says, taking a deep sip of his whiskey. "You should probably tell Fay all of this too."

"What?" Kent asks, his brows knitting together. "Why?"

"She thinks mom was your one true love," Daniel says, shrugging and filling Kent's glass too. "She's said it to me, I think more than once."

Kent groans, looking down into his glass before taking a big swig. “Damn it,” he murmurs. “I wanted to be done with difficult conversations for the day.”

“That one won’t be so bad,” Daniel says, leaning back in his chair. “Fay’s easy to talk to.”

Kent pauses before lifting an eyebrow at his son. “Are you implying that I’m difficult to talk to, Daniel?”

“Oh, no, dad,” Daniel says sarcastically, rolling his eyes. “You’re just the most terrifying person on the planet –“

Kent laughs then, shaking his head and taking another sip before sliding his glass onto the table. “All right,” he says, smirking at Daniel now, finally ready to face the other elephant in the room. “So. How’s Jerome doing?”

“Oh my god,” Daniel mumbles, looking at the glass of whiskey resting in his hand. “I’m not sure there’s enough whiskey in the world for this conversation.”

“Nope!” Kent says, leaning forward and smacking his son on the shoulder. “I’m all liquored up now. Let’s get it all out in the open, kid.”

Daniel sighs, shaking his head and still not looking up at his dad for a long time. Kent waits, trying to be patient. When Daniel finally speaks, his words come out shakier than he thought they would. “Did you know already? That I’m gay, before you found out about Jerome?”

Kent lets his hand slide from Daniel’s shoulder then as he sits back in his chair, studying his son seriously. “I did,” he replies, his words as simple and honest as he can make them.

Daniel stills for a moment and then looks up a bit, but not yet enough to meet his father’s eyes. “How long?”

Kent hesitates for a second and then speaks softly. “Since you were a kid, Daniel. Your mom knew too.”

“What?” Daniel breathes, his eyes going wide.

Slowly, Kent nods. “She saw it first. That you really liked the Pirates of the Caribbean movies, and not for the girl in all the corsets and lace.”

Daniel snaps his head up, his jaw open, staring at his father. “Are you...are you serious?”

Kent starts to laugh then, shrugging. “I mean, was she wrong?”

“No,” Daniel says in shock, leaning back in his chair and sliding a hand down the length of his face just as his father does, mildly appalled at the idea of his parents having this conversation when he was a kid.

Kent laughs harder now, shrugging apologetically.

“Did she...did she care?” Daniel asks. And then, “...do you?”

“She didn’t,” Kent says quickly, his words a promise. “And I don’t. We were...worried for you, because we knew the world you were going to grow up in wasn’t going to be kind to you if that’s the way you felt and who you loved. And because we knew you had to marry a woman no matter what arrangement you came to with her. We talked and decided not to talk to you about it until you were older, until you came to us. Which in retrospect...was a mistake.”

“It’s not your fault,” Daniel says, pursing his lips. “I...I get it.”

“You shouldn’t have to get it, kid,” Kent says, raising his eyebrows. “It was my job. I should have been a better dad.”

“Well, you’ve got another chance now,” Daniel says, raising his brows at his dad and giving him a little smile. “With the new baby.”

“To fuck it up in all new ways,” Kent groans, tilting his head back and letting out yet another deep sigh.

Kent feels a touch on his knee and brings his head back up, surprised to see Daniel leaning forward. “You didn’t fuck it up, dad,” Daniel says softly. “You did your best. We all have regrets. I forgive you for it.”

The words...they pierce Kent in a way he didn’t think was possible. And despite desperately clenching his jaw, the tears fill his eyes anyway. But Kent forces himself to unclench his jaw and lets the tears flow – just a little bit, not too much. Just a couple, to loosen the pressure.

“All right,” Daniel says, laughing a little and leaning back in his chair as he shakes his head in awe. “I think that’s enough therapy for one day. Seriously, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you cry – not once in my life.”

“Well, don’t get used to it,” Kent mutters, wiping at his face. But then he looks seriously at his son. “But I’m glad we talked. That we can do more of.”

Seriously Daniel nods, raising his glass. “To more chats, and less tears.”

Smiling, Kent raises his and clinks it with his sons. Then he shakes out his shoulders and inhales deeply, pleased to be on steadier ground with his kid, who he really does love so, so much more than Daniel can guess.

Still.

He needs a break.

And maybe a bit of a laugh.

“So,” Kent says, smirking a little. “Which pirate had you glued to the screen, Orlando Bloom or Johnny Depp?”

“Nope!” Daniel says, turning beet red and laughing anxiously. “None of this!”

“Come on, Daniel,” Kent says, leaning forward and grinning, teasing. “We’re close now, we’re open with our emotional lives, like the Thompsons are. We have these chats!”

“We do not!”

“Fine,” Kent says, laughing and getting to his feet. “I’ll make Fay ask, and then she’ll tell me.”

“That works!” Daniel says, pouring himself more whiskey. “I think you and I...we might still need a Fay buffer on some subjects.”

“A role I’m sure she’ll be glad to play,” Kent says, turning for the door and waving over his shoulder. “Love you, kid! Good chat!”

“Good chat, dad,” Daniel says back, a happy smile on his lips. “Love you too.”

Kent wonders if he’s hit his two-hour limit as he works his way back to his cabin, blinking a little to clear his head from all the whiskey. Honestly, he had more to drink than he thought he did. But...well, considering that there’s nothing else to do all day besides lay in bed with his gorgeous girl...

Kent smirks to himself, thinking it’s not so bad.

“Ohhh,” he hears someone say, and looks up to see Janeen smiling wickedly at him as she comes down the hall in the opposite direction. “Are we day drinking?” she asks, eager. “Did I miss it?”

“Daniel’s still going,” Kent says, pointing down the hall towards the dining room. “Though I am tapping out.”

“What a baby,” Janeen sighs, and Kent laughs, shaking his head. This girl – she’s got guts, that’s for sure. He supposes he knows now where Fay got it from. Kent gives Janeen a little wave and continues on his way down the hall.

“She’s upset, you know,” Janeen calls, and Kent turns back towards her with a frown.

“What?” he asks.

“Fay,” Janeen says, lifting her chin towards the cabin door. “She had a fight with Jerome. I don’t think it’s a big deal, just...warning you before you go in. She’s all worked up about it.”

Kent nods, grateful for the advice and waves to Janeen again as he continues towards the door. What on earth could this be about? Fay and Jerome – they’re tight. Hell, Jerome’s the first person Fay told she was pregnant.

When Kent presses the door open, his heart sinks to see her curled up on the bed, blankets wrapped around her even though the room isn’t cold.

“What happened?” Kent asks, shutting the door behind him and slipping his hands into his pockets, not wanting to move to the bed just yet if he has to leave the room to go punch someone.

Fay looks up at him with sad eyes. “How did you know?”

“I’m psychic,” he murmurs, not bothering to go into the details of meeting Janeen in the hall, knowing it will just be a distraction. It’s not important how he knows – he wants answers.

Fay studies him for a moment and then a tiny smile finds her lips. “You’re not psychic,” she says slowly, “you’re drunk.”

Kent laughs at that, unable to help it, hanging his head a little. “I’m not drunk. I don’t get drunk.”

“Come here,” she says, holding out her hands and he goes to her then, sitting on the bed. She takes his face in her hands and studies him. “Okay, now breathe on me, just a little bit –“

“What!?” he says, shocked, flinching back. “Fay – I’m not going to breathe on you –“

“Oh, come on,” she moans, slumping a little. “I miss the way it smells and could seriously use a drink right now – I don’t get to have one for like five more months at least –“

Kent mutters something about her being ridiculous and crawls across the bed to his side, leaning against the pillows and wrapping an arm around her waist to pull her tight against him.

“Tell me,” he orders, kissing her head and then taking a deep sniff of her hair, smiling at the familiar scent of her shampoo. God, he was gone for what, an hour? An hour and a half? And he had missed her. How had he survived two months?

But he’s distracted from the thought when Fay heaves a deep sigh. “I think we need to have a talk,” Kent,” she murmurs. “About Jerome.”

Chapter 220 – Jerome

Chapter 220 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent nods slowly, looking down at me, but his face doesn't register any surprise. "All right," he says, his voice even. "Where do we begin?"

I frown at this, a little – it's almost as if he was expecting this.

"Why aren't you more surprised by this?" I ask, pulling back a little. "Are you – do you have reasons to want to have a talk about Jerome too?"

Kent sighs and rolls his eyes a little. "I don't – Jerome's been nothing but loyal to me since the day I hired him. I just met Janeen in the hall on my way here – she briefed me. Don't read into it too much, Fay."

"Oh," I say, tilting my head to the side, relief running through me. Because the last – the absolute last thing I want right now is to have any more reasons to suspect Jerome. But seriously – the way Jerome responded to the idea that Ivan told me to be suspicious of him...

"What happened?" Kent asks seriously. Quickly, I tell him all of it – about Ivan telling me to watch out for Jerome and then Jerome's extreme reaction when I casually mentioned it. Kent listens carefully, his eyes on my face the whole time. I reach out and take his hand while I speak, inwardly a little pleased to see Kent slip into his boss role, assessing the situation.

It's much sexier than he probably knows.

But, well. We have other things to concentrate on right now.

"Don't you think, though?" I say, wrapping up. "That, I mean, if Jerome thought that it was ridiculous then wouldn't he have just laughed it off? I mean, it's Ivan of all people."

"Why is it ridiculous if Ivan says it?" Kent asks, frowning. "I mean, he's not stupid. He had us all fooled."

Slowly I shake my head, looking up at him. "He had us all fooled, Kent, but he...he really did think he was getting me on his side. And he was very eager to sow whatever discord he could between Daniel and Jerome and I – he was trying to separate us, to change my loyalties to his side."

"Again," Kent says, staring off into space and considering it. "It wasn't a bad tactic, if that's what he was doing. It's a system that many who seek control – particularly abusers - use. And especially if there was some truth behind it..."

"Are you suggesting Ivan was an abuser?" I ask, wrinkling my nose. Because...I mean, I think that pushes it a bit far, doesn't it?

"No," Kent says, smirking a little and smiling down at me. "Though it's interesting to see you defend him, Fay."

I roll my eyes, brushing it off. But I have to admit – as much as I’ve firmly chosen team Lippert? I don’t hate Ivan – I hope he finds his own peace and just leaves us the hell alone.

But something in me...well, it suggests that Ivan’s not done just yet. He’s too dogged for that. The idea curls in my stomach, but I move on from it, wanting to continue the conversation.

“So, what did you mean?” I ask.

“That those who seek control over people – abusers, cult leaders - will typically try to separate people from their loved ones in order to get them away from people who would tell them to get out of the situation.”

“Oh, you mean like how you made me cut ties with Janeen and my dad?” I ask, raising my eyebrows right back.

This makes Kent genuinely laugh, tilting his head back a little. He looks at me a little ruefully. “All right,” he says, “fair. But I’m not trying to separate you from them now, am I?” He tugs me a little closer, a bit of apology on his face. “I’ve repented.”

“No,” I say, smiling up at him. “You’ve been quite good lately, Kent. Maybe we should send you off to little two-month stints in jail more often. Reformed Kent is quite nice.”

He murmurs something dark about how he’d like to see me try before lowering his face to mine, seeking a kiss. But I put my hands on his chest, laughing and pulling my face away. “Pay attention!” I scold, pleased despite myself but wanting to have this talk. Kent, I know, especially after having a little morning whiskey, would be pleased to let us get distracted – but this is important to me.

“Right, right,” he sighs, settling back on the pillows but not moving his hand from the place where it has dipped low on my back, perilously close to my ass. I narrow my eyes at him, shaking my head and squaring my shoulders, hating that he’s making me be the responsible one right now.

“So, do you think that was it?” I ask. “That Ivan was just trying to sow discord? Or, do you think there’s anything about Jerome to be worried about?”

“Well,” Kent says, leaning back against the pillows and taking me with him a bit so that I’m nestled warmly against his side. He lets his eyes glaze, clearly thinking it through. “I think Ivan’s own motives for asking you to be suspicious of Jerome are certainly a factor.”

“And since you met Jerome – you have no reason to suspect him as anything but a loyal employee?” I ask, curious.

“Except for the fact that he was quietly sleeping with my son for months and deliberately keeping it a secret?” Kent asks, looking at me and turning his head dubiously.

I laugh, shaking my head at him. “I’ve lived with them, Kent. I – they’re in love with each other. I have no doubts about that – I don’t think they could have faked it this long, not with the way that they treat each other.”

“All right,” Kent says, nodding, taking my word for it. “Then no, I don’t have any suspicions.”

“Will you tell me?” I ask quietly, watching his face. “How you...found him, or whatever?”

Kent nods and then begins. “It was about two years ago,” he says quietly. “I saw him on the streets a couple of times. You have to understand – there’s pretty much two ways to get loyal guys on your team. The first is through...referrals, of a sort. If a guy on your team brings you his family? That’s the best. If he brings you a friend, or someone he met recently...it can be good, but not always great, because you don’t know what that new person’s motives are.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, curious, soaking this all up. Because while I now have proof that I am at least mildly criminally adept, I’ve never grown a team like Kent has. I find myself fascinated.

“You never know,” Kent says, “where that ‘friend’ came from – he could be a rival guy, or someone else’s man who just found a way in. You’ve got to be careful with that kind.”

“Like Fiona?” I ask quietly.

“Precisely like Fiona,” Kent says, sighing a little, I think still frustrated that she got by his radar for so many years. “I was introduced to her by a mutual friend; I should have been more suspicious, but...she did her work well, and her background check came out clean. But now that she’s your cousin and she’s killed for you, it’s different. You two are deeply tied and more likely to be loyal to each other. Yes?”

I nod, letting him know I understand. “So, is that how you met Jerome?” I ask, getting him back on track.

“No,” Kent says, shaking his head, frowning a little as he looks away. “Jerome was the third way, which is as good as family. I noticed him – he didn’t even introduce himself to me, or know I was watching.”

“Where?” I ask, my voice quiet, not wanting to interrupt.

“I met Jerome when he was hustling on the streets,” Kent says, smirking a little. “Stealing hubcaps off fancy cars and reselling them to parts dealers. Other things too – I noticed him a couple of times. He made a lot of money, but he didn’t blow it all on booze and girls or impressing his friends, and he wasn’t hooked on drugs, like so many of these young guys are. All of which suggest to me someone eager to work, and eager to rise. I liked that.”

I smile a little, recognizing Jerome in this description, loving him more from it. “So, when did you bring him on board?”

“I did it casually,” Kent replies, looking at me now. “A couple of small jobs, which he performed well. Then, when he passed any background checks we could pull on him, I had him shadow Marco for a while. Marco gave a good report, said he was hard working and eager. So,” Kent shrugs, “I put him on the payroll.”

“He moved up fast,” I say, raising my eyebrows, “if you soon had him driving me.”

“Maybe too fast,” Kent murmurs, considering it with a little frown. “But...he knew horses. So, if I was going to send you to the stables, I wanted you with someone who wasn’t going to be a total idiot there.”

I smile a little, remembering the early days getting to know Jerome, whom I had liked instantly. Even if Kent was glad to know Jerome could handle himself around horses – still, I wonder at him sending me away with a good-looking young guy – especially since I now know that Kent was into me basically from the start.

“Did you know Jerome was gay?” I ask, curious.