

Chapter 221 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent laughs a little at my impudent question. “No,” he says. “I didn’t know Jerome was gay – I had no idea. Honestly, Fay, I thought he was into you. I’d heard him talk about girls before – just locker room kind of things with the other guys in the alley - which could very well be a defense mechanism in this kind of work, but,” he sighs, “when Ivan casually dropped that Daniel and Jerome were together?” He shakes his head, still baffled. “It was a shock.”

“Kent,” I say quietly and then I lift myself up, turning and slinging one leg over his lap so that I’m straddling him and able to look him in the face, looping my hands casually around his neck. Kent rests his hands on my hips, looking at me seriously. “Is it possible...” I hesitate now, still putting together my thoughts.

“What, Fay?” he asks, encouraging.

“Well,” I say, looking into his deep green eyes. “Is it possible that even though you are the one who noticed Jerome...that someone...placed him there? On purpose? So that you could notice him?”

Kent’s hands momentarily tighten on my hips as he realizes what I’m saying. Then they loosen, a deep breath coming with them. “Yes,” Kent whispers, nodding. “It is...I mean, I hadn’t considered it before, but it is...possible.”

My heart sinks then, because I...I don’t want to be asking these questions, and I feel guilty even considering it. “Jerome has been so good to me, Kent,” I say quietly. “He has always been on my side. He believed me about the baby even before you and Daniel did – took my word for it. And I entrusted him with so much on the day we left – I had him go get you over anyone else –”

Kent laughs a little here, and I frown at him.

“Did you know anyone else who could ride, Fay?” he asks, dubious.

“Well I can ride, Kent,” I say, looking at him with wide eyes, a little offended. “I could have gone and –”

He laughs harder at this. “Fay, you’re four months pregnant and have only gone riding in the ring –”

“Not true!” I protest, a little offended. “I rode around...the pastures...”

Kent shakes his head at me then, taking my face between his palms with a little sigh. “All right,” he concedes, though I can tell he didn’t mean it. “You could have done it too. You’re very capable.”

I narrow my eyes at him, knowing that he’s pandering to me, and his face breaks into a wide grin. But I move on, dismissing it. “Either way,” I say, shaking my head a little and obliging him to drop his hands. “What I’m trying to say is that I didn’t just choose Jerome because he was my only choice. I really do trust him, Kent.”

He nods slowly to me, returning his hands to my hips and slowly beginning to slide them up and down the sides of my body. “I’m sensing a ‘but’ is coming, Fay,” he murmurs, looking at me seriously again.

I nod. “But,” I say, and then I sigh. “Kent, I can’t get it out of my head, how he reacted. Something in my gut is telling me to push here – to get to the bottom of it. Do you...do you think I’m being paranoid? Should I forget about it? I trust him and I love him – he is like family to me.”

Kent sighs and stops petting me, instead wrapping his arms loosely around me and pulling me forward so that I lean against his chest. “Even if you are being paranoid, Fay,” he murmurs into my hair. “That’s your job now. You’re in charge – you have to follow these instincts, get to the bottom of everything. If Jerome comes out clean, it will only make you trust him more for passing your test, though he – and Daniel – might resent you asking these questions.”

I sigh, hating that idea – I love them so much, I don’t want them disappointed.

I’m quiet for a long moment, nestled against Kent, thinking. And then I come up with a great idea.

“Well,” I say, my voice soft and bright now. “Can you do it for me?”

“What?” Kent asks, his arms tightening a little.

“You can ask,” I say, sitting up a little and grinning at him, my face close to his. “And not tell him I asked you to. Come on, isn’t this a perk I get for carrying your child? Just a little favor?”

Kent growls, his eyes narrowing. “You can’t use that for everything, Fay,” he murmurs.

“Sure I can,” I say, my grin growing now. Kent laughs a little and I press a quick kiss to his mouth.

“This is dangerous,” he sighs. “This is precisely why I didn’t let myself get close to women – I don’t want to be obliged to do your dirty work –”

“Ohhh,” I say, dismissive, “it isn’t dirty work, Kent! Just, you know, a little chat.”

He snarls now, playfully, his arms tightening as he twists me to the side so that I'm laying back in his arms and he looms over me, which I know he prefers. I bite my lip as I look up at my sexy mafia boss, because I like it too. Very, very much.

"I'm done having your prescribed chats," he growls, bringing his face close to mine.

"Fine," I say, starting to run my fingers through his hair. "Just – you know, whenever you have a minute. Have a little chat with Jerome, please, and see where it takes you. And don't tell him I'm behind it."

"And what do I get," Kent murmurs, dipping his head and kissing my jaw, and then my neck. "In return for this favor?"

But I don't bother to answer as my back arches, pressing me closer against him. Kent lifts his head and a little moan slips from my lips before I press my mouth to his.

Because, quite frankly, we both know that Kent's going to give me whatever I want.

And that I have my own very particular ways of thanking him.

Later that evening, before dinner, I walk around the ship looking for Jerome. A big smile breaks onto my face when I find him, finally, out on the deck with Daniel by his side, quietly chatting and watching the sunset.

But when Daniel turns to me with a frown on his face, my smile drops away and I bite my lip, suddenly worried.

"Ignore him," Jerome says, laughing. "He's feeling extra defensive because someone got him morning drunk, and then someone else kept him going all day."

"You better 'poligize to 'Romey," Daniel says, pointing a finger at me.

I burst into laughter then, quickly crossing and wrapping my arms around Daniel's waist. "That's what I came to do!" I promise, grinning up at him. "But, um, do I owe you an apology too?"

"Yup," Daniel says, giving me an exaggerated nod. "You made me have a really weird talk with my dad. About Johnny Depp."

"What?" I ask, baffled but pleased.

"I'll fill you in," Jerome sighs, putting a hand out to me, which I take. "Danny," he says, nodding towards the lounge chairs, "go lay down for a second. I'll be over in a little bit."

Daniel narrows his eyes at Jerome now. "Don't boss me 'round," he mutters, but he does as Jerome suggests, walking over to the lounge chairs and flopping down in one, closing his eyes peacefully.

“Where’s Janeen?” I ask, smiling a little, my eyes still on Daniel, who I’m pretty sure is already almost asleep. “Is she in just as bad shape?”

“Worse,” Jerome says, laughing. “She went to bed an hour ago.”

“Oh my god,” I say, shaking my head. “They’re going to regret it tomorrow.”

“I know,” Jerome says, giving my hand a little squeeze. “Which is a shame, because tomorrow we’ll reach Europe. And they’ll be all hungover.”

“Really?” I ask, my eyes going wide as I look up at him. “So soon?”

“It’s been a long time at sea, Fay,” Jerome says, grinning at me. “I mean, I know you’ve been distracted, but yeah, we’re really almost there.”

“But we’re not…” I frown, confused.

“Yes,” Jerome says, confirming my thoughts. “We still have to pass into the Mediterranean and get to where we’re going but,” he shrugs, pleased, “we should start to be able to see land, which will be exciting after,” he gestures out towards the expanse of blue Atlantic stretching out before us, “days of nothing.”

“Aw,” I say, turning towards the sea and leaning against the rail, admiring it. “I’ll kind of miss it. It’s been peaceful.”

“It’s been dull,” Jerome says, turning with me. “I can’t wait to see Europe – something new.”

I nod and grin up at him before my expression drops into something more serious. “I’m sorry, Jerome,” I say, taking a step closer to him. “Really, I am. It wasn’t right for me to –”

“Nah, Fay,” he says, shaking his head at me and dropping my hand to wrap his arm warmly around my shoulders. “I over-reacted. I was too sensitive. I know I upset you, and I’m sorry. Me and you – we didn’t say anything we’re not willing to take back, right? We’re good?”

“We are,” I insist, suddenly feeling a little bad for urging Kent to ask Jerome more questions. But…well, I don’t really intend to tell Kent not to do it. So, I guess it’s just a guilt I’m going to live with. “We really are, Jerome. I love you and I trust you, I don’t want you to ever doubt that.”

“Me neither, Fay,” he says, resting his head against mine. “Let’s move on from it, right? Focus on the future.”

“On the future,” I say, looking out at sea and admiring the way the sunlight dances across the water. “Which, apparently starts tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow it starts,” Jerome confirms, nodding. “But the next day? That’s the big one.”

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Early in the morning two days later, before the sun even comes up, I roll over in bed and kiss Kent gently on the shoulder.

“Kent,” I whisper, loud enough that I know it will wake him. “Kent, wake up.”

He blinks a little, frowning, and then presses his eyes further shut. “No,” he grumbles, turning away from me.

“Kent!” I say, laughing and placing a hand on his shoulder to gently shake him. “Come on! I want to go up and see it!”

“No, go away,” he mumbles. “I hate you. Let me sleep.” He turns over onto his stomach and buries his face in his pillow.

This just makes me laugh harder. I sit up now, eagerly grabbing his arm and trying to pull him back over and wake him up. “Kent!” I hiss. “You have to! If I go up alone I’m going to be seduced by a sailor, or kidnapped, or –”

“Good,” he mutters. “Then I’ll get some sleep.”

I smack him on the arm then, but I’m still laughing because I know that if any of that was a reality? Kent would be wide away, his fist already cocked.

Kent sighs, turning over and looking up at me. “You’re really not going to let me get out of this, are you?”

Grinning, I shake my head and bounce a little, eager to go. I don’t want to miss it.

He sighs and sits up then, taking my face in his hands. “You should let an old man sleep, Fay,” he murmurs quietly, shaking his head at me. “We need our rest.”

“You shouldn’t have got a girlfriend more than half your age, Kent,” I counter, smiling at him, “if you couldn’t keep up. Now let’s go!”

I lean forward, pressing a quick kiss to his lips before jumping out of bed and heading for the bathroom. I hear his groan behind me as he pulls himself out of bed as well, but I ignore it, because I’m not going to let him guilt me into missing this.

We can sleep the rest of our lives away – but this? It’s once in a lifetime.

I lean against the doorframe of the bathroom as I watch Kent pull a sweatshirt on, a little sad to see his chest and abs disappear from sight. Then I quickly move back into the bathroom, spitting out the toothpaste and rising my brush.

When I come back to the door, Kent is fully dressed and kneeling down by my own suitcase, quickly choosing something for me to wear. I smile to see it, glad to see the old habit coming back.

He looks up at me then, maybe hearing or sensing me. “What?” he asks, confused as to why I’m just standing here.

“Nothing,” I say, smiling at him. “Just like looking at ya.”

He smirks a little and tosses some soft clothing at me as he stands. Luckily, I catch it. “Get dressed,” he murmurs as we swap places, “before I drag you back to bed and make you forget all about this.”

I laugh as Kent closes the bathroom door, well aware that he could probably do just that. But the fact that he doesn’t?

I sigh as I get changed, pleased that my man is so nice and caters to my early-morning whims.

A few minutes later, as cleaned up and polished as we’re going to get, Kent and I leave the cabin and I almost clap my hands with eagerness. Our captain told us last night at dinner that if we got up early we’d be treated to an especially unique sight. I absolutely can’t wait.

Kent, however, is determined to be grumpy. He pulls back when I grab his hand and try to drag him forward. “Slow, Fay,” he growls, giving me a glare. “You’ve got me up at this ridiculous hour, the least you can do is walk at a normal pace.”

“We’re going to miss it,” I whine, tugging more at his hand and Kent sighs and walks just a little faster for my sake.

But we get to the stairs soon enough, and make our way up them, me tugging at his hand the whole time. Kent doesn’t say anything and doesn’t go any faster despite my efforts, but the little smile on his mouth lets me know that he’s pleased too. He likes to see me happy.

When we finally do make our way to the bow of the ship, I’m pleased to see that the sun hasn’t risen yet and is just a hazy purple glow on the horizon. The stars are still out, as I’d hoped they’d be, shining bright against the blue-black sky.

Even more pleasing is the sight of two other figures leaning against the rail, looking out into the dark.

“Oh good,” Daniel says sarcastically, turning towards us as he hears the door open. “Someone else has joined us for this insanity.”

I laugh, because his voice is just as bitter and exhausted as his dad’s.

“Did we miss it?” I gasp, hurrying over to Daniel and Jerome, pulling Kent with me.

“We didn’t,” Jerome says, opening an arm to me. I drop Kent’s hand and go to Jerome, hugging him around the waist and grinning up at him. “You’re just in time.”

“I’m glad you got Daniel up,” I whisper, grinning up at Jerome. “Did he fight you on it? Kent did.”

“I basically had to throw a glass of cold water on him to get him up,” Jerome says, laughing down into my face. “They’re lucky to have us romantics in their lives, aren’t they?”

“They are,” I say on a sigh, laughing a little.

“We are deeply unlucky,” Kent corrects, wrapping a hand around my arm and giving it a little tug, a silent request that I come back to him. Jerome kindly releases me from my hug and I stand on my tiptoes to give Daniel a kiss on the cheek as he mumbles some half-hearted morning greetings.

Then, I stand in front of Kent at the rail at the front of the ship, leaning back against him and smiling as the wind tugs at my hair. Kent wraps his arms around me, keeping me warm, and rests his chin on my head as we both look towards the horizon, waiting.

And as we wait, I realize that in this moment I am again just...perfectly happy. Here, with Kent, and two other people that I love, about to start on an amazing adventure? With my little baby growing in my stomach?

“Doesn’t get any better than this,” I sigh, lifting my hands to curl my fingers around Kent’s forearms, wanting to have my hands on him, as I always do.

“Would be a little better with some coffee,” Kent mutters, but he drops a kiss on my hair letting me know he doesn’t mean it. “Though...well, it’s very beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I say, my face breaking into a grin as the sun starts to rise a little more now, revealing the sight that we’ve been waiting for.

Out ahead of us, black against the lightening sky, sitting dark beneath the hanging stars, the four of us catch our very first sight of our destination stretching out before us in the dawn.

“Wow,” I say completely undone by the spectacular sight as the island inches closer. I mean, I knew that it would be special – the captain promised us that it would - to see the land stretched out before us at dawn as we made our final approach.

But really, nothing prepared me for it – for the wide expanse of sea, and the way the land takes shape under the stars...

Kent takes a step forward, pressing his stomach closer against my back, pulling me tight against him. “All right,” he mutters, a little bitter at having been proved wrong. “You’re right. It was worth it.”

I laugh and snuggle back against him. “Say it again, Kent,” I whisper, my voice rich with joy.

He laughs softly too and lowers his mouth to my ear. “You were right, Fay,” he murmurs, and a shiver runs through me for more reasons than the words. But Kent takes a deep, contented breath and raises his head, looking out over mine to fasten his eyes on the place where we’re going.

A place he’s been many, many times before.

I glance over at Daniel and Jerome, who likewise stand having their own private conversation, their arms warm around each other.

And I smile because I am just...so, so incredibly excited to be here. To have given this moment to each of us.

“Welcome to Sicily, Fay,” Kent says, dropping another kiss to my hair. “Welcome home.”

And I smile, and shake my head a little in wonder.

“I can’t wait to see it, Kent,” I whisper. “You have to show me everything.”

“I will,” he says, nodding once in assurance.

And I look back at him, and tilt my chin up.

And Kent seals his promise with a kiss.

Chapter 223 – Disembark

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I’m practically vibrating with excitement and anxiety as we wait for the sailors to attach the plank that will allow us to disembark from the ship. Of course, we have to pass through an empty shipping container and exit through a secret back door that Daniel assured us will allow us to bypass security, so we don’t get to disembark the way I dreamed we would – out into the Italian sun, looking out over the land.

But, well. I suppose I can make do, if it means we won't be immediately arrested.

Daniel takes lead here, and I'm quite pleased to see him operating efficiently and with authority.

I am, however, also very distracted.

I glance back over my shoulder, worried about Heathcliff and if the sailors will get him off without scaring him –

And all of our luggage, will it go to the right place? Maybe I need to –

Kent just laughs, putting a warm hand on my shoulder. "Stop micromanaging it, Fay," he says, smiling down at me. "Everything is in order – you spent weeks ensuring all that. Now you either trust the system or you don't. Yes?"

I scowl at him a little. "You sound like me," I murmur, turning forward as Daniel and Jerome start to move.

"No," Kent says quietly as we walk forward too. "You stole that form me. Plagiarist."

I laugh a little, glancing over my shoulder again, but this time locking eyes with Janeen.

"Don't worry, we're coming!" she says, giving me a wide grin, her arm linked with dad's. Dad also nods to me with a smile, letting me know that he's all right and excited.

So, I take a deep breath and move forward, hoping to hell this all works.

To my pleasure, my father's lessons to Daniel seem to have paid off. Daniel shares a few words with a couple of Italian men who wave us forward, handing Daniel a booklet of papers in exchange for two separate envelopes which I assume hold a great deal of cash.

Once that's done everything is...simple. The Italians, money now in hand, wave us forward, not bothering to look us in our faces, perhaps not wanting to know who, precisely, they've just let into their country.

Then again, if what Daniel says is right, this sort of thing is pretty standard smuggling procedure. So maybe it's less about not wanting to know, and more about not actually caring because they do this sort of thing all the time. I shrug a little as Kent puts an arm around my shoulders, looking down into my face to see if I'm all right.

I guess the details of international smuggling is Daniel's expertise these days – and the less I know about it the better.

"Come on," Kent says as we pass through the massive port building and move through a back door into the bright, fresh Italian air. "Let's get started."

As with the start of our journey, everything is impossibly smooth, and if I hadn't put so much work into planning it all – even these past few days, putting details in order after Kent decided we would be safest and most comfortable in Sicily instead of elsewhere in Europe – I'd be suspicious that it's too easy.

But any suspicions I have fall to the wayside as we climb into a luxury passenger van that's waiting for us outside the port, the first in a line of vehicles that we've arranged to carry us and all of our goods to the home we've rented a few hours away, down the coast.

"Ohhh," Janeen says, grinning as she climbs into the van ahead of me. "Oh, this is nice – I've worked in a couple of these before for some bachelor parties – sometimes they have a pool at the back!"

I laugh as I step in after her, Kent's hand warmly in mine, surveying the plush van with way too much bench seating for the six of us. But, well. I wanted to be comfortable. "I guess it will do."

Kent laughs and urges me towards the back, saying a few words to the driver in Italian as a couple of our suitcases are loaded into the van along with us – just the personal stuff which we wanted to keep by us. The rest – all of our possessions, clothes, even all the baby stuff Natalia bought for me – will all be delivered later, along with the horses.

When we're ready, Kent comes to the back of the van and sits next to me, my dad and Janeen on the other side of us.

Daniel and Jerome sit on either side of the benches that stretch along the length of the van, grinning with excitement.

"Ready?" Kent asks, looking around. When we all nod, he whistles to the driver, who pulls away.

"When does it get pretty?" Janeen asks, peering out the window and frowning at the port. "Europe is supposed to be gorgeous."

"It already is pretty," Kent insists, frowning at her, defensive. "Did you not smell that fresh air? See that clear sky?"

Janeen turns to look at Kent, a little baffled. "You mean the fresh air that smelled like diesel fuel and fish? Is that what I have to look forward to here?"

Kent clicks his tongue and turns away from Janeen, wrapping an arm around my shoulders while he waves a dismissive hand in her direction, a very Italian gesture. I laugh, leaning against him and turning eagerly towards the window.

Because...well, Janeen is right for the moment, but I don't need to agree with her out loud. Still, I'm excited to see what all the fuss is about too.

Daniel and Jerome chatter happily with my dad, Daniel telling about his own memories of coming here as a child and a teenager. I am happy to let them fill the air with their noise so that I can sit quietly, looking out the window and taking in this new land, my new home.

And as we leave the port, and drive south along the coast...

I am...absolutely not disappointed.

My lips part in surprise and awe as we begin to drive down the long highway that borders the coast because it's just...god, it's actually so gorgeous that it threatens to take my breath away. The hills are rocky and rough, and the trees and shrubs are a rich sage-green, clinging to the dry soil with a coarse determination.

And the sky – it stretches above, such a rich, vibrant blue...

When the sea again comes into view, crashing below us, so close to the highway that I get a little vertigo looking down, my mouth is fully open in surprise. I lean away from Kent, my head turning, trying to take it all in.

He laughs behind me, and I can tell he's delighted as the rest of the van goes quiet, everyone beginning to look out the windows and take in the incredible sights around us.

"Wow," I say, my eyes wide as I press my hands eagerly against the window. "Kent, you weren't kidding, it's...it's so incredibly beautiful here..."

"This is just the start," he says, pleased and a little smug, as if he somehow takes credit for the beauty of the land. And I smile but I don't tease him, knowing it's only because he loves it. Kent's an American – he was born there, he made his fortune there, raised his first child there – but I know that in so many ways? Sicily is his home.

I grin at him over my shoulder, so excited to learn about this place that I feel I could burst with it.

"I know," he murmurs, nodding to me and wrapping an arm around my waist, pulling me back against him. "I feel exactly the same way."

I snuggle back against Kent, an excited smile on my lips. "I'm so glad we broke you out of prison," I sigh, again buzzing with excitement.

Kent just bursts into laughter, and I smile again, happy to hear him laugh at my side.

Chapter 224 – The New House

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Janeen, hearing my words to Kent, of course chimes in.

“I mean, we could have done all of this without him,” Janeen points out, and I can hear the smirk in her voice.

“Not with this much class,” Kent returns calmly, making me laugh. And with that he snaps his fingers, getting Daniel’s attention. “Check that cooler, kid,” he says, and I turn to see Kent lifting his chin towards the covered top of a drink well that is probably filled with booze during parties.

Curious, Daniel flips back the lid and whistles at what he sees. A smile breaks onto his face as he reaches in and produces a chilled bottle of what I can only assume is very expensive champagne.

“Wow, dad,” Daniel says, raising his eyes at Kent. “Sure you don’t want to drink this in a place where it’s so likely to get spilled?”

“It’s worth it,” Kent says, laughing as Jerome moves to the other side of the van and peeks into the second drink well, smiling as he produces six champagne flutes. He hands them out and we all talk happily as Daniel pops the champagne and begins to fill all of our glasses.

He only fills mine halfway and raises an eyebrow at me, asking if I want more, but I shake my head, only wanting a sip.

Well, wanting more than a sip, but determined to let this drink be ceremonial.

“We’ll get you a whole bottle for yourself,” Kent murmurs to me as I lean back against him as Daniel fills his glass, “once the bell pepper is born.”

“Two bottles,” I say, trying to pout but failing because I’m just so incredibly happy.

“You got it,” Kent replies, and I can hear in his voice how excited he is.

Then we all raise our glasses in a toast, clinking them together and exchanging happy words.

“To fresh starts,” Daniel says, grinning around.

“And Italy,” Jerome adds. “Our new home.”

“More specifically, Italian men,” Janeen contributes quite seriously, making us all laugh.

“Should we tell her now?” Daniel asks, wrinkling his nose at Jerome.

Janeen sits up straight, looking around and Jerome groans. “No, I don’t think you should ever tell her,” Jerome says, shaking his head. “It’s too mean.”

“Tell me what!?” Janeen insists, her eyes wide.

“That –“

“Enough, finish the toast,” Kent interrupts, his voice cheerful but demanding.

“To family,” dad says, and my heart melts to hear him say it. “Old and new, together. And, those members soon to come,” he says, smiling at me especially and nodding down at my stomach.

Everyone smiles at this and we all raise our glasses again. “Family,” we say, and then we drink, and I savor the way the bubbles taste on my tongue.

Kent softly kisses my cheek and I turn my face up, pressing my own kiss to his jaw as Janeen leans forward.

“Seriously,” she says, her eyes narrowed at Daniel and Jerome. “Tell me.”

And, grinning, Jerome informs her that it wasn’t that the sailors on the ship were simply resistant to her numerous charms – but that they were under Daniel’s orders the entire time to leave her explicitly alone.

“You,” she says, glaring hard at Daniel and grabbing the bottle of champagne out of his hand, “are a traitor, sir,” she says, leaning back and pouring herself another glass as the rest of us laugh. “And after I threw you such a beautiful wedding reception!”

“Janeen,” Daniel says, leaning forward and grinning at her. “Consider this my revenge for that wedding reception. I was hung over for three days.”

“So you thought I deserved ten days of torture on the ship!?”

“Yup,” Daniel says, grinning and leaning against Jerome. “Every damn minute.”

And as Janeen scowls at my husband, and our van moves swiftly down the coast, and I lean against Kent and sip slowly at the first and last half-glass of alcohol I’ll have my entire pregnancy, I look out the window and marvel at the beauty of this new land.

This new place, where me and my odd little family are going to make a new home.

And I just can’t wait to see what comes next.

“No wayyy,” I breathe when the van slows and pulls up to a beautiful old gate. I turn to look up at Kent, my eyes wide. “You’re kidding me.”

“I am not,” he murmurs, and he presses a hasty kiss to the side of my head before standing up from his seat at the back of the van and working his way forward to talk to the driver, giving him the code to get into the property.

“Is this our new house?” Janeen says as she takes Kent’s seat next to me, her eyes wide.

“That’s what he said!” I reply, laughing, and we both shake our heads at each other.

Because we could see the house on the way up the road – and the gorgeous fields next to it, and a glimpse of the pool beyond it, and the ocean beyond that –

And it was all just so incredibly fantastic that we had laughed, saying it would be nice to live in a place this beautiful.

So imagine our surprise when the van slowed, and then stopped at the entrance.

“Not half bad,” dad says, his arms crossed as he peers out the window as the gate swings open and the van begins to pull forward.

“Not regretting your choice to come Europe yet?” Jerome says to dad, smiling at him.

“Not a minute of it yet, kiddo,” he says, giving Jerome a wink.

I turn to Daniel, shaking my head in awe as the van pulls down a long dirt drive bordered with olive trees.

“Did you know about this?” I ask. Because while Kent allowed me to handle many of the details, he insisted on picking out the house we would be renting himself, and on keeping it a surprise.

“I knew a little,” Daniel says, working hard to hold back a smile.

“See?” Janeen says, giving him a little glare. “I told you he was a traitor.”

“True,” I say, giving him a shove on the shoulder. “Shame on you! Keeping secrets from your wife!”

“Oh, come on,” Daniel replies, laughing at us as the car makes its final turn in front of a gorgeous white stone villa. “How could we resist seeing the look on the Thompson sisters’ faces?”

“Well, I suppose that is true,” Janeen says, feigning a conceited tone of voice and lifting her chin while she brushes her long purple hair back over her shoulder. “We are devastatingly beautiful, and we would not deny you that opportunity.”

Daniel opens his mouth to retort – something playfully snide, I’m sure – but Kent doesn’t give him a chance, clapping his hands at the front of the van as it pulls to a stop.

“If you’re finished?” Kent says, raising a wry eyebrow at us as he slides his hands into the pockets of his slacks. “Perhaps you’d like to come and see the house?”

Biting my lip with excitement, I grab my sister's hand as I jump out of my seat and hurry to the front of the van. Janeen laughs as she comes with me, just as eager as I am to see our new home.

Nodding, fighting a bright smile, Kent opens the van door and steps out, reaching out a hand to help me hop down.

He doesn't let my hand go as I turn towards the house, but instead pulls me closer to him as my mouth falls open a little bit.

Because...it's the most gorgeous home I've ever seen in my life.

"Is this...seriously, we're going to live here?" I ask, my voice faint and my eyes wide.

"For now," Kent says, and I can tell by his voice that he's happy and proud. "Longer, if you like it. What do you think?"

I grin as I look up at my handsome mafia boss. I open my mouth to reply, to tell him that I absolutely love it, but before I can I gasp when someone sweeps me bodily off my feet.

"What!" I shriek, kicking my legs. "Daniel, put me down!"

"No way," he says, laughing and moving forward to the giant wooden door to the house, an entry which looks like it's probably two hundred years old and lovingly cared for. "I have to carry my bride over the threshold to our new home!"

"Isn't that my job?" Kent growls, and I look over my shoulder and laugh to see him glaring at his son.

"Still my wife, dad!" Daniel says, teasing, as Jerome opens the front door and bows, waving us in.

Kent sighs and turns up his hands as he sees me laugh, but then as a family we all move forward and step into our home.

I eagerly wrap my arms around Daniel's neck as we move through the door, because I can't wait to see inside.

Chapter 225 – House of Dreams

Chapter 225 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

The villa is a place of dreams.

Daniel puts me down pretty much the moment we come inside and my shoes click against beautiful white tiles of the floor. Kent immediately takes Daniel's place at my side, wrapping an arm around my waist and leading me through the house as if he's been here a thousand times before, even though I know he's only seen it online.

The entire place is gigantic and clearly very, very old. As we walk, our family spreading out into the house and marveling at all its different pieces, Kent tells me that it's a four-hundred-year-old farm house that's been lovingly restored with all modern amenities. We have the farmlands around the house as well, some of which have been leased out to local famers, but some of which – including a small barn – has been set aside for Butterfly and Heathcliff.

My heart soars a little, thinking about how nice it will be to have Heathcliff in the building next door, but all of these happy emotions are wiped from me and replaced with awe the moment Kent and I move through the cool, dark living room to a balcony that looks over not only the pool below, but a stretch of field beyond, and then the ocean beyond that, which stretches as far as the eye can see.

"Oh...oh my god," I say, my hands immediately going to my mouth as I step into the sun and move to the edge of the terrace, which has a set of wide stairs leading down to the pool.

I shake my head a little, completely at a loss for words. The wind tangles in my hair and I lift my nose a little, because I can smell the sea...

"Do you like it?" Kent murmurs, following me to the balustrade.

I look up to see him smiling down at me and I nod eagerly, my eyes shining. But my throat is thick with emotion, because...

Well, because it's the most beautiful, perfect house I've ever seen in my entire life. And I can't believe I get to live here – with Kent! And Daniel! And Janeen and my dad and Jerome and everyone I love –

"Oh, Fay," Kent sighs when he sees my tears start, but he laughs and wraps his arms around me. "Didn't we talk about crying so much?"

"I just like it a lot!" I squeak, wrapping my arms around his waist as I bury my face against his chest. "It's so beautiful! I'm overwhelmed!"

"American girls," he murmurs, holding me close. "Never get to see a damn beautiful thing in their lives and go to pieces at the first sight of a pretty landscape."

"Hey," I say, immediately defensive and lifting my head to glare at him a little. "One, America is very pretty, so don't be condescending. And two, this is more than just a pretty landscape Kent," I say, shaking my head at him. "This is incredible – the kind of house people dream about."

“Well,” he murmurs, stroking my face and smiling down at me. “I needed something to match you.”

And I blush, and he smiles and laughs at me, and I swat him away, a little embarrassed.

“This is amazing!” Janeen shouts, dashing out onto the terrace. “Wait, is that the ocean!? And a pool!?”

She looks at Kent wide-eyed, clearly impressed.

“Janeen, didn’t you just live in a beach house for months?” he asks, shaking his head at her but smiling nonetheless.

“Yeah,” she says, spreading her hands out as if it’s obvious. “But it didn’t have a pool too!”

And with that she turns and hurries down the stairs, pulling off her top as she goes and discarding it on her way to the pool in just her bra.

“That was an oversight, Kent,” I say with a sigh, resting my head against his chest as my sister strips off her pants and leaps eagerly into the pool in her underwear. “The beach house really should have had a pool.”

“Well, I’m so sorry to have disappointed,” he murmurs, sarcastic. “Considering I bought it for you, and didn’t know you were going to move your sister into it.”

“Yes well, luckily you were able to make it up to us with this one,” I say with a sigh, patting him on the chest. Then I grin and look up at him. “Hey, is there a bedroom?”

He smiles at me a little darkly and pulls me tighter against his side. “No,” he murmurs. “I figured we’d sleep in hammocks beneath the trees.”

“I mean,” I say, laughing, “I do think that sounds amazing. But...”

“Come on,” he says, turning me into the house as Jerome and Daniel come out onto the terrace, curious to see where all the splashing sounds are coming from. As we cross the living room and head to a hall on the left, I wave to my dad, who is in the large and open chef’s kitchen on the other side of the great room that makes up the center of the house.

“Not a bad spot, Lippert!” my dad calls. “Hey, is there wifi here? I wanted to watch the Yankees game...”

“Code’s on the counter!” Kent replies over his shoulder, waving, his attention clearly elsewhere.

The hallway is short but dark, and it ends in another ancient wooden door. I bite my lip and look up at Kent, my stomach turning over in anticipation.

Because I know my man has taste. So whatever's beyond this door? It's going to be nice.

"You know," I say as he reaches out a hand for the doorknob. "Janeen took the master in the beach house, so –"

"She what?" he says, going still and glaring down at me. "Fay, that's your house –"

I laugh up at him. "She lived there!"

"It was yours –"

"Anyway," I say, rolling my eyes and moving on. "She's going to be jealous if my bedroom here is better than hers. She's always had the bigger room. She's going to try and make me swap."

Kent growls low in his chest as he shakes his head at me, his hand moving again for the handle. "Well, Janeen's just going to have to learn to deal with her jealousy," he says, pushing the door open. "Because she's going to have to fight me for it."

I laugh as we take a step forward, about to tell him that Janeen might enjoy that fight, but all words drop from my mind the moment I start to look around. My jaw again falls open – I'm going to have to stop doing that – as I leave Kent's side and step further into the room, turning to take everything in – the gigantic white bed, the cool tiled floors – the amazing ancient hearth on one wall with logs stacked and ready for a fire – the wall of windows on the opposite side, and our own private balcony beyond!?

"Ohhh my god," I say, continuing to turn, and then dashing off to explore the huge bathroom with a soaking tub and a shower big enough for...well, I was going to say for two, but honestly it could fit five. Then I dash off to the insanely big closet with a vanity already inside of it – and I gasp to see that there's even a little coffee bar installed just next to it that looks just like the one Kent had in his old bedroom –

"Kent!" I shriek, hurrying back into the main room where he's standing, smiling and waiting for me to finish my explorations. "Did you – did you do all this!? Did you make them build me a coffee bar!?"

"I had some requests that the landlord was happy to agree too when properly incentivized," he says, coming to my side. "But I hate to inform you that that is my coffee bar, Fay."

"Yeah right," I murmur, wrapping my arms around his waist and shaking my head up at him. "Kent, this is amazing."

"You like it?" he says, taking my face in his hands, pleased.

"I love it," I reply, beaming at him. "How long can we live here?"

“As long as you want,” he says, giving a little shrug. “It’s a rental, but...if you love it, Fay, we can stay forever.”

I bite my lip, eager. “So,” I say quietly. “This could be...the baby’s first home, if we want it to be?”

Kent smile deepens as he looks at me tenderly, holding me close and stroking my hair. “Try it out for a bit, Fay,” he murmurs. “You don’t have to decide now. We can keep this, or build something new. But this is the first place you’ve been in Europe – you should look around a bit before you decide.”

“Yes, but you’ve been around,” I say, wrapping my hands in his shirt and pulling him closer. “And you picked this one, which means it’s probably good.”

“I still want you to decide for yourself,” he says, dipping his head lower so his face is close to mine. “And we have to see how much Heathcliff likes it,” he murmurs.

“Yes,” I whisper, wrapping one hand around the back of Kent’s neck and letting my fingers slide through the short hair at the base of his head. “Very important, what Heathcliff thinks –“

But I don’t get any further, because Kent closes the distance between us, pressing his mouth to mine and kissing me with all the happiness that’s running through him now, a joy that I know echoes in my own heart. Quickly Kent dips, sliding his hands down the length of my body until his fingers curl around the back of my thighs. He lifting me with a jerk so that my legs wrap around his waist.

I moan a little as Kent pulls me hard against him, slanting my mouth over his and deepening the kiss as my breath starts to come faster. One of his hands moves to my ass and he groans as he squeezes me there.

“Take me to bed, Kent,” I pant, pulling my face from his just long enough to get the words out. “Right now.”

He does as I say, carrying me swiftly through the room – our bedroom, in our new home – and falling back onto the bed, taking me with him.

Chapter 226 – Poolside Chats

Chapter 226 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Late that afternoon I’m laying out by the pool, catching the last rays of the sun. Kent is in the kitchen cooking dinner for all of us. I offered to help but he shooed me out immediately,

grumbling something in Italian about me being useless in the kitchen – or at least, that’s what Daniel interpreted for me.

But hey, who am I to protest when my boyfriend wants to make a delicious feast for the family and forbids me from doing anything?

I sigh happily, closing my eyes and tilting back my head, enjoying the feeling of the sun on my face.

“Soooo,” Janeen says, and I smile when I hear her flop onto the lounge chair next to mine. “Did you have a nice afternoon, Fay?”

I turn to see her grinning at me wickedly. Because Kent and I? We stayed in that bedroom for several hours and pretty much let everyone else deal with the thousand things that were delivered – all of our luggage, what looked like a truck load of groceries from the nearby town, the horses – everything.

It was a little chaotic when we finally emerged, but...well. I don’t think anything can kill my mood today.

“I had a lovely afternoon, Janeen,” I say, sighing again.

“Ugh, I’m so jealous,” she mutters, crossing her arms and frowning out over the pool towards the ocean.

“Janeen,” I say, laughing and shaking my head at her, “you spent the afternoon floating in a pool by the sea. Daniel said you didn’t even help with the deliveries –“

“Well, I don’t know how to unload a horse!”

“I’m not blaming you!” I say, still laughing. “It’s just – how can you be jealous? Everyone else in the world would be jealous of your day, and you find something to complain about?”

“I’m not complaining, Fay,” she says with a little sigh. “If Daniel had just let me loose on the sailors, this wouldn’t be a problem. Let’s blame him.”

“Fine by me,” I say, leaning my head back.

“So,” she says, grinning at me. “Do you like the house? Are you happy here?”

“I am,” I say, content, though I look off into the distance a bit.

“What,” she says, giving my shoulder a little shove. “I know that expression. What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing,” I say with a little sigh, turning back to her. But Janeen just narrows her eyes and gives me a dirty look, letting me know that she’s not going to give in until I tell her. So I sigh and begin. “I mean, I maybe just wonder why Kent picked Sicily,” I say with a little shrug. “It...is awfully close to the Bianci’s.”

“Does that mess with your plans?” she asks.

“Maybe a little,” I say, giving a small frown.

“Why?” she says, totally curious now. Because while Daniel, obviously, is in on everything...I haven’t shared this part with Janeen yet. I bite my lip a little, desperately wanting someone to talk to about it but not sure how much I should let her in.

“Seriously, Fay,” she says, rolling her eyes. “What reason do you have not to trust me anymore? You know I’m not going to tell anyone.”

“We just,” I say, hesitating a little, “we haven’t told Kent yet, Janeen –“

“Whaaaat,” she gasps, leaning close to me. “What the hell are you and Daniel cooking up?”

I sigh and shake my head, thinking it was a mistake to bring her in on it. “Just forget it, Janeen –“

“You can tell me anything, Fay,” she says, her voice more serious than it usually – or ever – is. She reaches out and places gentle fingers on my arm. “I’m on your side, with everything. I mean, I guess I’m fully in this family now, but you are my main priority. So, if you need me to listen while you talk shit on Kent, or keep something from him? You know I’m your girl.”

“I know,” I say, placing my hand over hers. “But it’s really not like that, Janeen. I shouldn’t have said anything at all. I’m not doing anything against Kent – it’s just...Daniel and I have something planned that he would probably rather us not do.”

“Really,” she says, her eyes flaring a little with pleasure at the intrigue. She grins at me. “He’s going to kill you.”

I laugh a little. “No, he’s not. He’s just...going to be really mad for a few days. But it will all work out.” I sigh, trying to force myself to feel easier about it. But it doesn’t really work.

“Okay,” she says, drawing her hand away and looking at me seriously. “But if you need to talk...” she points at her chest, “me first, right? Because gossip is my drug when sex isn’t available. Which it hasn’t been. For weeks.”

And I laugh at my sister while I nod, genuinely grateful for her honest offer. My sister smiles back at me.

We’re quiet for a few moments.

“Seriously, Fay,” she says, and I look over at her again, surprised to see her studying me with genuine curiosity. “What do you and Kent do when you’re alone?”

I blink at my sister for a moment, shocked at the abrupt change in subject. And then raise my eyebrow, because...I mean, I thought it was pretty obvious.

Janeen bursts out laughing, tilting her head back towards the sky.

I push myself up on my lounge chair a little and turn to her, not getting it. “I don’t get what you’re asking, Janeen,” I say, honestly a little confused at this point.

She turns to me too, lowering her voice a little. “You were in there for hours, Fay,” she says. “And while I’m sure you get Lippert going, I know that you weren’t fucking the whole time. So? What do you guys like...talk about?”

I blink a little at her, confused. “We talk about all sorts of things,” I say, frowning.

“And is he like...interesting?” She cocks her head to the side, genuinely asking.

“Janeen!” I say, starting to get a little mad now, and confused. “Of course he’s interesting!”

“Is he!” She looks over her shoulder at the house, shaking her head a little. “I mean, he’s hot, Fay, don’t get me wrong – I’m sure the sex is insane - but I honestly don’t get you two as a pair. Like you guys just disappear together for hours on end – on that boat, and today in that house –“

I lean over to swat my sister on the arm. “You’re being so mean, Janeen –“

“I am not!” she says, leaning away from me so I can’t hit her. “I’m just trying to understand! I mean, the physical stuff I get, Fay! But seriously,” she shakes her head at me now, “on paper? You two seem like you have nothing in common. Besides being like, really good at crime, apparently.”

I roll my eyes at her now, crossing my arms over my chest, a little offended. “Are you saying that Kent is boring?”

“Well?” she says, grimacing a little. “He’s not like...fun, Fay.”

“Yes he is,” I grumble defensively, frowning.

“I’m sure he’s fun in bed,” she says, rolling her eyes at me. “But seriously, I’m not trying to be a bitch! Just, can you explain it? So that I can understand a little better? You two clearly have chemistry, I’m just trying to comprehend it.”

I look over my own shoulder now, towards the house where Kent is inside cooking, realizing that...well, that Janeen’s kind of right. On paper? Kent and I don’t make sense at all.

Chapter 227 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I frown a little as I realize that it's kind of true – Kent and I don't really make sense.

I mean, we don't have any mutual hobbies, we had completely different life paths until fate forced us together, and hell – we're even from different generations.

But Kent and I? We work.

It's just...I guess a little ineffable.

"I don't know," I say, pondering aloud, and as I look back at my sister I'm gratified that she's actually listening, not trying to prove a point or tease me or something. "I see what you mean, but we just...I think we're like puzzle pieces, or the opposite sides of magnets, or something," I say, giving a little shrug. "Opposite attracts and all that. Plus, on the inside, I think we're may more alike than you think."

"Well," she says, nodding, "I can understand that. But like, he's interesting and stuff? He has things to say?"

"Janeen!" I sigh, again reaching out to smack her. "Of course he is! Why do you think he's so boring?"

"Because he kind of is!" she says, leaning away from me in her chair and laughing apologetically. "I mean, he's all quiet and brooding! He doesn't say much! And again, I see how that's hot – I would hit it – I just..." she shrugs and sighs. "Make it make sense to me, Fay."

"He has other sides that you don't see, Janeen," I say, crossing my arms and rolling my eyes at her. "He likes books, and has all sorts of interesting perspectives, and he's actually really funny -"

"That is impossible –"

"You are being such a bitch!"

"I'm just speaking truth!" she says, laughing and putting her hands up.

"Well, it's not like you make it so easy for him to open up around you," I say, accusing.

Janeen's jaw drops open a little and she puts an offended hand on her chest, though part of me can see that she likes it. Janeen – she's a tough sister, but she's never shut me down for standing up to her.

"I have been nothing but nice to Kent Lippert," she objects.

"Yes, but you tease him, and you laugh at him, and you've never sat down and even tried to have a real conversation with him," I point out, and her eyebrows go up as she realizes that I'm right. "And I'm well aware that Kent doesn't precisely invite that –"

"And that he's always wrapped up in you," she points out.

"Well, who wouldn't be," I say, flipping my hair over my shoulder as I try to bring some humor to the situation. It works, and Janeen grins at me. "But seriously, Janeen," I say, leaning forward. "Can you give the man some credit? He's a person, but he's been running a serious criminal organization for years. He was having panic attacks when I met him, probably from repressing fifteen years of emotion and having no one to talk to about it. Is it impossible for you to consider that maybe his instinct is to shut people out? That maybe he hasn't opened up to anyone in years, and that he's trying?"

Janeen's mouth opens a little in surprise as she realizes that I could, at least possibly, be right.

"Wow," she says, leaning back in her chair. "Psychology Fay, coming through for the win."

"As clever as she is beautiful," I hear a voice say behind us.

I go still because...

But as I turn and look up, I let out a woosh of air.

Because it's just Daniel.

He bursts out laughing at me. "Don't worry, you're safe, Fay," he says, though he takes a very Kent-like stance with his arms over his chest and his weight on his back foot. "I won't tell dad that you're revealing his deepest darkest secret – that he's actually a human underneath it all."

"You'd better not," I say, shaking my head at him.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Janeen says, grinning at Daniel. But then she turns to me. "But point taken. I can see how I've been...less than fair."

"And considering he's the reason you haven't paid rent in six months," I say, raising my eyebrow at her. "Maybe you should go a little easier on him."

Janeen laughs at me, nodding in agreement as Daniel gestures back towards the house. "Dinner's ready," he says, "if you ladies would be willing to come back in."

My stomach audibly grumbles as I stand up and Daniel grins at me as I wrap my arm in his, Janeen coming to his other side.

“I take that as an eager yes?” he says, grinning at me as we walk up the stairs.

“As long as there’s garlic bread,” I say, lifting my nose towards the house, where the smell of butter and garlic and rosemary wafts out. “I am in.”

“Garlic bread,” he says, nodding, “and probably three different other kinds of bread too. Dad went a little overboard –“

“Daniel!” I hear Kent call – shout, really – from inside the house. “Come on, we don’t have all night!”

Daniel hurries his pace, trying to take me with him, but I just drop his arm. He turns to me, confused, but I wave him forward. “He’s yelling at you, not me!” I say, raising my hands. “I’m not getting in on this.”

Daniel smirks but hurries into the house as Janeen comes to my side, taking Daniel’s place and putting her arm through mine as we come to the door. We stop there for a moment, watching the men bustle around the big kitchen. Daniel and Jerome hustle back and forth from the kitchen to the long dining table on the far end of it, packing it with enough food for what looks like twelve people, not six.

Kent looks up from his place over the stove and I smile a little to see the apron, folded in half, tied around his waist. His own lips lift up at the corners when his eyes fall on me, and he nods a little and then turns away, concentrating on the gravy. Dad is likewise helping, though at a less frantic pace than Daniel and Jerome, calmly slicing cheese and carefully arranging it on a board with fruit and honey and toasted bread.

“At least he can cook,” Janeen murmurs, leaning close to me so our shoulders touch. “I get that, with the puzzle-piece thing. Because you can’t even make a pop tart.”

“I can too,” I grumble, frowning at her.

She grins at me, shaking her head. “You are a takeout queen,” she says, laughing. But then she turns her eyes back to Kent. “But, I get it, a little more now. Thanks for explaining it, Fay, and I’m sorry if I was a bitch.”

“You can’t help it,” I say with a sigh, making her laugh again. “It’s your base state.”

“Seriously though,” she mumbles, her eyes now fastened on Kent, watching him work. “Your man is fucking hot –“

“Janeen!”

“Those shoulders, and he can cook? Does he ever do it with his shirt off, speaking Italian?”

“Ew!” I hit her again.

“Seriously, I would climb him like a tree –“

“You’re being so gross –“

“I’m sorry, Fay,” she says, turning to grin at me. “But if you ever die, I’m going for it – right after the funeral –“

“I am done with you!” I say, shoving her away from me but laughing despite myself as I stride into the kitchen to stand at Kent’s side. “Until you get your own man, I am done having conversations with you! About anything! Full stop!”

Janeen, cracking up, makes her way into the dining room, stopping to kiss dad on the cheek as she goes. Then she starts to pour wine into everyone’s glasses, pitching in as Kent looks down at me with a smirk.

“Nice of you,” he murmurs as he stirs the red sauce that bubbles in a big silver pot, “to arrange for me to have some comfort in my grief, if I ever lose you –“

I blush beet red, my hands going to my mouth. “You heard her!?”

“She wasn’t being quiet, Fay,” he says, laughing and wrapping an arm around me. “She was kidding, teasing you –“

“She’d better have been,” I growl, wrapping my arms around his waist possessively. “Or I’ll haunt her ass –“

Kent laughs at this, really laughs, and drops his wooden spoon in the sauce to wrap his arms around me, tugging me close and giving me a kiss when I turn my face up to him. “Go to the table,” he says when he breaks away, nudging me with his nose. “Dinner’s almost ready.”

“I want to help!” I protest.

“Never,” he says, letting me loose and giving me a little swat on the ass as I sigh and move around the kitchen island, heading for my seat.

Chapter 228 – Presents

Chapter 228 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Scowling a bit – honestly, I’m not as much of a disaster in the kitchen as any of them imply – I settle in next to Janeen. She leans over and gives me a big smacking kiss on the cheek and I laugh, but even as I shove her away we both know that all is forgiven. Nothing to forgive, really – I’m used to my weird, chronically inappropriate sister. At least she always keeps it interesting.

Family dinner goes off without a hitch and I’m absolutely thrilled to see it. Now that we’re comfortably settled in our own beautiful space, things start to really feel...well, normal. It’s not that it’s precisely as it was either in Kent’s mansion or in the beach house. Instead, it’s something totally new.

But, luckily, the laughter has stayed.

As we eat, the wine flows and our little family starts to find its pace. People really start to open up, Kent and Daniel telling stories of their lives in Italy and what we can expect here as they pass around the food, explaining what everything is. And even though I can’t eat half of it – the cured meats and unpasteurized cheese are devastatingly off-limits – I’m stuffed with food before we even get halfway through all the courses Kent has prepared.

Things slow as we fill up and different people take turns with the conversation. Jerome finds a way in somehow, telling us about his years on the rodeo circuit and working briefly moving cattle out west. Janeen seems keenly interested in this and we all find space to tease her about it, knowing that her interest isn’t really in Jerome’s life but instead all the cowboys he worked with.

“We’ve got to get you to town, Janeen,” Daniel says, twirling some pasta onto his fork. “I think you’re going to like what you find here.”

“Yes, please,” she groans, slumping in her seat. “Can we go tonight?”

“I think it’s good for you,” dad says, smirking at her. “You haven’t been this starved for romantic company since you were twelve, Janeen,” he says. “You’d think it gave you a little time for introspection. I think you should take a few more days, really think about the meaning of life and the source of happiness.” He waves a vague hand. “All that.”

“I hate introspection,” Janeen grumbles, glaring down at her plate and taking a big bite of focaccia. “And the source of happiness is a man – or preferably two – taking me –”

“All right,” Kent says, holding up his hands and laughing. “I’m not sure we need all the details, Janeen.”

She glares at him a little, but I see a grin starting on her face. “I’m not sure I need to get any lectures from you on this subject, Kent.”

He scoffs a little, but grins too. “I am very discreet, Janeen. Always have been.”

“Oh please,” she says, rolling her eyes. “It’s like you actually think that the walls on that boat were thick –”

My jaw drops and I blush horribly as I realize what she just said.

But to his credit, Kent just laughs and points his fork at her. “You’d better be careful, Janeen,” he says with a smirk, completely unphased even though I’m so red that I cover my face with my hands. Daniel kicks my foot under the table and I can hear him laughing at me, but I just shake my head and refuse to look at anyone.

“Really, Kent?” she says, grinning and leaning forward into the challenge. “And why should I?”

“Because,” he says, taking a little sip of his wine. “If you’re not, I’m not going to give you your present.”

I uncover my face a little, surprised and interested now. I glance at Janeen, who is suddenly beaming.

“Present?” she says, sitting up straight and perky. “What present?”

“It’s outside,” Kent says calmly, but I can see that he’s working hard to keep the smile from his face.

“What!?” Janeen says, jumping up from her seat and turning gleefully towards the front door. Curious, we all stand up with her, but Janeen beats us all to the front door, pulling it open and gasping loudly, her hands flying to her mouth.

“What is it?” Daniel asks, Jerome at his side as he too dashes for the door. And then Daniel’s eyes go wide too as he sees whatever it is. “No way!” he shouts, laughing and turning to his dad in amazement. “Are you serious!?”

Kent gives a casual shrug as he comes to my side and we walk to the door, following my dad as Janeen, Jerome, and Daniel all fly out the front door towards whatever’s there. I’m dying to know, but my desire to be next to Kent beats out even my curiosity, which is saying something.

But I give my own gasp as we finally get there and I see what’s waiting outside.

Four very, very flashy cars are lined up outside the house – two of them, the black and the blue ones, look very sporty and fast. Though the white convertible sedan and the silver SUV are more practical, one can tell at a glance that they’re expensive. And considering that I know Kent’s taste in cars? I’d guess very expensive.

“Dad, this is insane,” Daniel says, laughing and going to the blue car and pulling the door open. “A Maserati!? Amazing.”

Kent shrugs, but I can tell he is pleased. Dad, standing on Kent’s other side, whistles his approval.

“Wait, wait!” Janeen calls out, hustling to Daniel’s side and smacking him on the arm before he can climb into the car. “He said the present was for me – how do you know this one isn’t mine?”

“Because it’s mine,” Daniel says, dismissing her and climbing into the driver’s seat, clearly excited. Jerome bends over next to Daniel, peering into the car and beginning to chatter boy-talk about how fast it can go or whatever.

Janeen scowls and turns to Kent as the arbiter. Kent just laughs and shrugs, “Nah, the kids right, Janeen,” he says, his smile deepening. “The black one’s for you.”

And Janeen stares at him for a second as if she doesn’t believe it and then her gaze whips to the little black sports car – clearly a vintage classic, not a new model – and she stares at it for a moment before shrieking in joy and dashing for Kent. I step aside quickly as Janeen throws herself in Kent’s arms, laughing and mumbling her thanks and excitement a little incoherently.

“You’re welcome,” Kent says, pulling away from her.

“Can I take it out for a test run!?” she asks, turning eagerly towards the car.

“You can do whatever you want with it,” he says, and she gasps with joy, “as soon as you show me you can capably drive a stick shift.”

Janeen’s face falls instantly and she scowls at him. “I can drive stick!” she protests, stepping away and crossing her arms.

“Like I said,” Kent says, grinning and leaning down a little to look her in the eye, “you can have the keys when you show me you can drive stick.”

She narrows her eyes at him again but then her joy overtakes her and she dashes over to the little car. Dad goes with her, admiring it and starting to chat with Janeen about all of the details he thinks she should know about that I know she’ll forget in an instant.

I step closer, wrapping my arm around his. “This was so nice of you Kent,” I say, watching my sister with glee, but then –

I look at the cars again, and start to count, and realize...

“Hey,” I continue, frowning up at him. “Where’s mine?”

“You don’t need a car, Fay,” Kent says, laughing a little as he looks down at me.

“Yes, I do!” I protest.

“I’ll drive you wherever you need to go,” Kent says, “or Jerome will, in the sedan –“

I squeak in protest and smack him on the shoulder. “I want a real car! One for me! If Janeen gets one, I should get one -”

“Fay,” Kent says, smirking at me and shaking his head. “You haven’t wanted to drive yourself a single moment since you moved in –“

“It’s different now!”

“Fine,” he says, his smirk deepening. “Name one of those cars – a single one – and I’ll buy you whatever car you want tomorrow.”

And I hesitate, looking out over the cars because...

Damn it. Even though Daniel said the name of one of them thirty seconds ago...

I scowl, knowing I’ve been beat.

“Fine,” I say, pouting and leaning against him. “But you’re getting me one. As soon as I learn the names of these,” I say, pointing around at them.

“Any one you want,” he murmurs, pulling me close and kissing my head. “But honestly, Fay, don’t be offended – I just thought Janeen...”

He hesitates a little and I look up at him.

“Well,” he says, looking back down at me with a shrug. “She likes her independence, doesn’t she? And she’s been a good sport these past few weeks, but if we’re going to make her live in a farmhouse by the sea, she’s going to need a way to get around.”

“Well, why that one?” I ask, pondering it – because it’s certainly not a new car, even though I’m sure he didn’t buy her anything unsafe.

“Because,” he says quietly. “If your sister is going to be driving alone around this country, I want everyone who sees her to know that she comes from people who take care of her. People will think twice about messing with a girl in a vintage Porsche. A classic car for a classic girl,” he says with a determined nod. “It suits her. She deserves the best, and I want everyone who sees her to know it.”

I shake my head as I stare at Kent for a moment, because that is...so incredibly sweet and thoughtful. He smiles down at me, perhaps intuiting my thoughts.

“Don’t give me too much credit,” he murmurs, pulling me close again and tucking me under his chin as I wrap my arms around his waist. “I want this house empty as often as possible, so I can –“

“Stop it,” I mutter, smacking him lightly on the chest and blushing again to remember what Janeen said about the ship having thin walls. “Someone will hear you.”

“Precisely my point,” he murmurs, and then he laughs to see how red my cheeks are and he kisses me like he can’t help it. And I kiss him back, not caring who sees, because...well, because I guess he’s right.

They are just going to have to get used to it.

Because this man? I can’t keep my hands off him, and I have no intention of trying anytime soon.

Even though...well, even though I plan to betray him tomorrow.

But just a very tiny little bit.

Chapter 229 – A Very Tiny Betrayal

Chapter 229 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

We all stay up very late that night, gathered around a fire pit just off to the left of the pool. I’m curled up next to Kent, his arm around me on a little outdoor loveseat as my family laughs and chats around the fire. As the night grows darker and the stars start to come out, I find myself thinking about how grateful I am for Kent, who is so secretly thoughtful about details he never takes credit for.

For instance, this fire pit was ready to go, fully stocked with wood and lighter fluid, and even marshmallows and little sticks to roast them on, because I mentioned once – months ago – that I liked them. And everyone’s favorite drinks are already here on ice. I mean, he, Jerome, and Daniel were all easy – they all drink the same whiskey - but my dad’s American beer and Janeen’s rum and diet coke with lime? How the hell did he have that here, waiting for us?

So, I curl up closer to him, and his arm tightens around me, and a little ball of happiness in my chest just grows and grows.

But honestly, as my family celebrates with more drinks as the night passes, I’m a little grateful that I’m pregnant. Because even though I’m jealous and want to be celebrating alongside them in this particular way, I know that tomorrow I’m going to need my wits.

And Daniel, even though he’s drinking, is showing more restraint than he usually does. He meets my eyes at one point, giving me a little nod, letting me know that he understands that he has to keep it under control.

Because we are getting up early, and he's my driver.

But, despite that, the party goes long into the night with a lot of joy and laughter as we sit by our little farmhouse by the sea. Kent turns to me as I stifle my third yawn.

"Come on," he says, starting to stand up. "Let's get you to bed."

"No!" I protest, trying to hold him down with my weight even though I know it's not going to work. "I don't want to break up the party!"

"You're tired," he says, standing and bending to pick me up, but I swat his hands away and stand up myself, wanting to stretch my legs.

"Fine, fine," I sigh, but then I groan as the others start to get up too. "No!" I protest. "No, don't go to bed just because I am!"

"We're sleepy too, Fay," Dad says, leaning in to give me a kiss on the cheek. "You're not breaking anything up."

And I scowl, not really believing him, but I give in as Daniel pours some water on the fire and we all begin to troop into the house. When Kent moves away from me for a moment, cleaning some stuff up in the kitchen before we turn in, Daniel is instantly at my side.

"We still on?" Daniel asks, raising an eyebrow.

"5 am," I whisper with a little nod, brushing his arm with my hand. "I'll come to your room. You all ready?"

"Sure am," he says, and then without another word he strides away. Because we don't need to say anything else. We've been planning this for weeks.

I reach out a hand for Kent as he finishes up, and he takes it, and we walk quietly over to our room. To my surprise, Kent is more subdued than I've seen him before. We quietly go through the business of getting ready for bed – brushing teeth, me changing into pajamas and him stripping down to his underwear. But to my shock, Kent leaves his clothes in a heap on the floor before he moves to the bed. I stare at the clothes and then at his back as he walks away –

Because Kent? I have never seen him be messy before.

How much did he have to drink? Am I finally meeting drunk Kent?

Shrugging it off – because he seems fine, honestly, just super tired – I leave the clothes where they are and move to the bed myself. But again to my surprise, Kent is basically asleep when I get there. He pulls me close against him, my back to his front, but instead of moving his hands across my body like he usually does...

Kent just tucks his head against my shoulder and falls asleep.

“Wow,” I murmur, my eyebrows going up in surprise as well as – I’ll admit it – a little disappointment. But I shrug, not bothering to think about it much because I really am sleepy too.

And so I close my eyes, and fall asleep, knowing that the little watch Daniel secretly gave me is going to beep at 4:55 in the morning.

But also knowing that I’m going to be awake before it.

Because tomorrow is an important day, and mob bosses? We wake up before our alarms.

I prove myself correct a few hours later when my eyes sleepily open. But I’m awake almost instantly, my anxiety for the day immediately taking the reins. I lean over, my hand going to the wristwatch on the bedside table, and when I flip it over I see that it’s 4:46. Perfect. I hastily switch off the alarm function.

Moving slowly so as not to jostle him, I turn over to look at Kent. But as my eyes fall on him, I realize that being careful was completely unnecessary.

Kent continues to sleep more deeply than I think I’ve ever seen him sleep before. I mean, I swear that sometimes I’ve woken him up just by looking at him. But today?

Today, Kent’s mouth is a little open, his face pillowed against his own bicep, and he’s completely out.

I resist the urge to run my fingers through his hair and kiss his cheek, not wanting to tempt fate. Instead, I just sigh a little and slowly get out of bed, moving for the door the moment my feet touch the tiles. Our bedroom door gives a little creek when I pull it open, but when I look over my shoulder I realize that not even that woke him.

With a little shrug of gratitude for my good luck – honestly, I thought I’d have to be way sneakier than this – I hurry out of the room and pull the door shut behind me, grimacing a little at the click that sounds.

Then I hurry through the empty, quiet house, padding down the hall to the corridor where the rest of the bedrooms are. When I reach the first door on the left – the room I know is Daniel and Jerome’s – I’m pleased to see a light already on inside.

Slowly, I push open the door and peek in.

“Oh, thank god,” Daniel says, sighing when he sees me.

Quickly, I flit into the room and push the door shut, nodding when I see that he’s already dressed in his suit.

“Do you have my clothes?” I ask, moving to his side and giving him a hasty kiss on the cheek.

Daniel nods and gestures to where Jerome is, and I laugh a little to see him at the back of the room, using a steamer to get the final wrinkles out of the very simple, very chic, very expensive dress that Daniel and I spent quite a long time picking out for this occasion.

I move over to my friend, greeting him a hasty good morning.

“Morning, baby Fay,” he says, giving me a sleepy smile. Then he looks down at my belly and his smile deepens, “morning, Fay’s baby.”

I laugh, starting to pull off my pajamas as he finishes up and takes my dress off the hanger. When I’m in my underwear, Jerome helps me pull it over my head and zips me up as Daniel tosses a basic makeup set and hairbrush on the bed where I can see it.

“Any changes to the plan?” I ask Daniel as I start to put on some simple makeup in their mirror.

“Nope,” he says, his voice tight. “Was it tough getting away from Kent this morning?”

“Not at all,” I say, finishing up my mascara. “Honestly, it was kind of crazy – he was like, sleeping sleeping.”

In the mirror I see Daniel smirk a little and I turn suddenly, staring at him. “What was that for?” I ask, narrowing my eyes.

“What?” he says, playing innocent.

But I just narrow my eyes even further.

“What,” he says, grinning and running a hand through his hair. “I might have given him...a mild sedative in his whiskey last night.”

“Daniel!” I gasp, appalled. “Why didn’t you tell me that!? I was so freaked out!”

Daniel openly laughs at me now. “Seriously, Fay? You’re going to yell at me now for keeping part of a plan from you, even though you openly benefitted from the plan and probably wouldn’t tell me to do any different after you saw the results?” He grins now, slipping his hands into his pockets. “The hypocrisy this morning is...very rich.”

I scowl at him, but I turn back to the mirror and run the brush over my hair before pinning it back away from my face. Because he’s absolutely right. Daniel did to me precisely what we’re doing to Kent, and I have no room to complain.

Jerome yawns as he carries a pair of pumps over to me when I’m finished with my hair and my face. I nod to him as I pull them on and then turn around for the boys. “Well?” I ask. “Do I pass?”

“My perfect pregnant wife,” Daniel murmurs, coming to wrap an arm around my waist and kiss me on the cheek. “Are you ready for this?”

“Not nearly,” I say, shaking my head up at him. “But, we’re doing it anyway.”

“Yup,” he says, kissing me on the forehead. Then he turns to Jerome. “You know your job?”

Jerome gives a lazy little salute, his eyes already on the bed. “Tell Kent nothing, don’t let him leave the house. Try not to get punched.”

“You’re not very good at that last part,” I consider, grimacing a little as I lean against Daniel.

“Only when you’re involved, Fay Lippert,” Jerome says, tossing me a glare as he flops back down onto the bed and gives us a thumbs-up. “Now go away so I can get some sleep.”

I hesitate, wanting to tell Jerome to go sleep out in the living room or something so he can be there when Kent wakes up –

“Don’t worry,” Jerome mumbles, sensing my anxiety. “You seriously think Kent is going to let anyone sleep the moment he realizes you’re gone?”

“True,” I say with a sigh. “Maybe slip another one of those sedatives in his breakfast...”

Daniel laughs and then turns me towards the door. “See ya, ‘Rome!” he says over his shoulder.

“Have fun! Don’t get killed!”

And then Jerome pulls the blanket up over his shoulders, and Daniel flicks off the light, and together my husband and I sneak out of the villa.

Chapter 230 – Bianci

Chapter 230 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Maserati,” I murmur as I slide into the front seat of Daniel’s new car, not forgetting Kent’s promise to buy me my own car if I can learn the names of the others.

“What?” Daniel asks as he turns the car on while I buckle my seatbelt.

“Nothing,” I sigh, looking at our dark villa, my eyes in particular on the windows to the master suite. No lights turn on with the sound of the engine, which I take as a good sign.

Daniel takes a deep breath, staring out the windshield for a long moment. “We’re sure we want to do this?” he asks, a little fear in his voice.

“We’re sure,” I say, letting no hesitation come into mine. Because I have thought this through a thousand times, and I know this is the best way to get us to our goal. The pieces have been in place for a long, long time – and now? It’s time to make our move.

“Kent’s going to kill us,” Daniel says on a sigh, but he starts to pull into the driveway anyway.

“You leave Kent to me,” I murmur, making Daniel laugh a little, I assume because he’s more than willing to do that. But, really, once we explain everything? I really do think that Kent will forgive us.

Especially if I have a little time to...persuade him.

“All right,” Daniel says as we pull off the property and hit the road in the dark of the Italian morning. “Here we go.”

We drive for a long, long time and I keep my eyes fastened on the countryside, delighted by it. Sicily is just so incredibly beautiful, even from the highways. Daniel and I don’t say much to each other, some light music that neither of us listen to filling up the quiet. Daniel doesn’t put anything into a GPS, apparently knowing where he’s going from memory.

I frown a little as we pull off the highway and he confidently makes turn after turn.

“Seriously?” I ask, frowning at him a little. “You just...remember where to go?”

“I learned how to drive here, Fay,” he says, sending me a little smirk. “I came every summer as a teenager. I know these roads like the backs of my hands.”

My eyes shift, then, to the literal backs of his hands, which are long and thin – one significant difference between him and his father, really. Kent’s hands are broader, but Daniels – while still large – look like they belong to a musician.

He must have gotten them from his mother.

“Still,” I say, trying to distract myself. “It’s an island, but it’s a big island. I can’t believe you remember how to get here.”

“Fay,” Daniel says, looking at me with a sigh. “On this island? All roads lead to this one house.”

And I gulp a little because...

Well, while Kent was a mafia boss in America, he was one of many, and he operated at least with the veneer of secrecy.

The people we're going to see today?

They're more like kings.

Daniel sighs again and reaches out a hand to take mine as we pull up to a set of gates. To my surprise, when Daniel rolls down his window he doesn't speak into a speaker. Instead, a guard comes forward, leaning down to speak with him.

Obviously, I don't understand a word of it. But still, the way that Daniel speaks to the man – with complete authority in his voice, almost dismissive...

I realize, quite suddenly, that if these people are kings?

Daniel is very much a long-lost prince, returning home.

The guard steps away for a moment, his eyebrows raised in surprise as he looks Daniel up and down, and then he speaks through a radio to someone presumably inside. A moment passes and then the guard nods to Daniel, pressing a button so that the gate swings forward. As Daniel pulls through the gate and starts down the tree-lined drive ahead of us, the road so long we can't yet see the house. I take a moment to look over at my husband as we drive, and then I look down at my stomach. Because if Daniel is a prince...

Then this baby, at least on paper? It's next in line, just after him.

And me? Well...

But all of these thoughts are wiped from my mind as the trees fall away and the largest, grandest house I have ever seen in my entire life rises before us. My mouth legitimately falls open as I stare up at what is honestly a palace made of yellow stone with a broad terra-cotta roof. Flowered vines crawl all over it, climbing walls covered in balconies and terraces and windows that are all thrown open to catch the fresh morning air.

I'm still gaping as Daniel pulls around a stone fountain and puts the car in park in front of the incredible structure that can barely be called a home. Kids run laughing out of a ground-level door, but they completely ignore us, heading for some kind of incredible garden to the left that's completely bursting with flowers.

Daniel's face is stern as he unbuckles his seatbelt, but he bursts into laughter when he glances at me and sees my expression.

"Well, Fay," he says, his face now bright with his smile. "Welcome to Villa Bianci. What do you think?"

I blink at him, completely stunned. "Um," I say, shaking my head a little in awe, "I think I married the right Lippert." Daniel laughs again at that and reaches out to put a fond hand on my shoulder.

“Seriously?” I continue, ducking my head so I can peer towards the top of the house. “This is where you spent your summers as a kid?”

“It is.” Daniel says, his voice soft, “But it’s also where Kent grew up.”

My mouth forms into an awed “o” as I realize that Daniel’s right – that Kent has so much history here. This is where he fell in love with Natalia, where he met Lenai...

And my heart wrenches suddenly with guilt to be here without him.

But before I have time to indulge that emotion, a familiar figure strides from the house with open arms. My face breaks into a grin.

“Nephew!” Alessi shouts, and I glance at Daniel to see a wide and genuine smile on his face as he opens his car door and begins to step out. I follow, eager to greet Daniel’s uncle because – well, because even as I recognize that Alessi was as much of a snake as Natalia, he was always nice to me. Or at least pretended to be. Like Ivan, I can’t help but like him at least a little.

Alessi and Daniel wrap each other in tight hugs, pounding each other’s backs as I climb out of the car and stand a little awkwardly to the side.

“How are you?” Alessi asks, speaking in English for my benefit. “We were so worried for you – we heard about the breakout, and then that you were missing, but nobody answered a phone or any email – we didn’t know –“

But before Daniel can answer Alessi breaks away from him, moving towards me and sweeping me up into a hug of my own that makes me laugh with joy. “Fay, it is so good to see you, safe and sound,” he murmurs, his words blurred against my hair as he fondly tucks his head close to mine. He steps back a little then, looking me up and down, his eyes in particular moving to my stomach. “And the baby, yes? The baby is well?”

“Baby’s doing great,” I say with a smile, running a fond hand over my stomach.

Alessi claps his hands together excitedly, apparently genuinely pleased to hear it. And why would he not be? That’s his first great-nephew or -niece, for all he knows. He’s got no real reason to doubt it.

“And your father,” Alessi says, his face dropping a little as he moves again to Daniel’s side. “How is he – where is he?” I study Alessi’s face, seeing genuine worry there – and I remember again that Kent is more than a brother-in-law to Alessi – that they were best friends their entire childhood.

My heart sinks again with guilt, because Kent – he really should be here.

But I clench my jaw and work to dismiss the feeling, knowing that it’s not going to do any good. This is chess, after all. There’s no room for stray emotions.

