

Chapter 241 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent stands up straight, jostling me a little as he his biceps tense and he holds me protectively to his chest. “Who the hell is that?”

My eyes go wide as I look at our bedroom door, as if whoever rang is standing right outside of it. All of the delicious sensations slip from me in a second, replaced by sudden fear. “I didn’t even know we had a doorbell.”

“We don’t,” Kent murmurs, gently putting me on my feet, his eyes still on the door. “It’s technically the gate bell –“

We hear a murmuring of words from the living room and then a slow curse before a long beep.

Kent curses too before grabbing the sheets off the bed and wrapping them hastily around his waist. Then, he strides for the window.

“Don’t open that!” I shriek, seeing him reach for the blinds. He ignores me, pulling the blinds open and I shriek again, clutching the fluffy towel to my chest. But then I lean to the side, peering curiously beyond Kent to see...

A silver car – a fancy one – making its way down the drive and pulling in front of the house.

“Kent?” I ask, anxious. “Do you know who it is?”

He ignores me still, which makes me purse my lips, but then I see him flinch back as whoever it is climbs out of the car. “Shit,” he says once, under his breath. And then he’s suddenly moving, letting the blinds fall and moving instantly to my side. “Let’s go,” he says, grabbing me by the waist and marching me over to the closet, letting the sheets fall from his waist.

“Who is it!?” I gasp, desperate, trying to look back.

“Just go, Fay,” he growls, pushing me rather roughly into the closet and moving to the boxes where my clothes are kept but which I haven’t yet unpacked. He rips through them.

“Kent!” I demand, stomping my foot. “Tell me right now! Who the hell is here!”

“Daniel’s cousin,” Kent says, sending me a glare over my shoulder. “Giovanni.”

“Gio!?” I ask, my eyes going wide. “But he...”

“Let me guess,” Kent growls, standing and tossing whatever he was looking for at me – I catch it and am confused to see that it’s...a black swimsuit. “You drove home, and didn’t bother to look behind to see who was following?”

I look up from the swimsuit, my jaw falling open.

Because...

Yup. That’s exactly what we did.

“Amateurs,” he mutters, moving swiftly to his own set of clothes – most of which are, of course, neatly unpacked, folded, and put away in orderly fashion. “Put that on, Fay,” he barks, beginning to pull on his own set of clothes.

“Why do I get a bathing suit?” I grumble, even as I pull it on.

“Because you’re all wet,” he replies, not bothering to look at me as he buttons his slacks. “Get a robe, too.”

Confused, but – well, having learned my lesson – I obey, pulling the swimsuit hastily over my body and then grabbing a pretty green-and-blue floral robe that isn’t precisely made for the pool but...

Well. Whatever. I don’t even know what’s going on, so I’m not going to be picky about fashion choices right now. As I pull it on I hear voices faintly out in the living room, joyful greetings in Italian.

“Let’s go,” Kent says, making me jump a little as he’s suddenly at my side, grabbing my arm.

“Kent!” I hiss, looking between him and the door. “Gio’s obviously going to know what’s going on if we both come out of the master bedroom soaking wet!”

“I know,” Kent growls, pulling me towards our little balcony terrace instead of the main door. And then my eyes go wide as I start to figure it out. “Which is why you’re going to come in from the back door, having just gone for a swim –“

Half of me marvels at how fast Kent thinks, but the other half is distracted by the six-foot drop from the terrace to the ground below.

“Kent!” I squeak, putting my weight into my heels. But he just lifts me into his arms, having no time for my protests. “There’s no way! I’m going to break a leg!”

“No, you’re not,” he growls, carrying me over to the edge of the terrace.

“Are you going to throw me off!?” I say in a frantic half-whisper, half-shriek.

Kent pauses at the edge of the terrace, glaring down at me in his arms. I stare up at him with wide, scared eyes. “Seriously, Fay? Do you seriously think I’m going to throw you off the balcony?”

“Things are happening very fast right now, Kent!” I snap in reply.

He just huffs a quick sigh and shakes his head at me, lifting me over the edge of the terrace and then helping me find my footing on the tiny ledge on the other side. Then, holding my hands, he gives me a set of crisp orders that I obey without hesitation. Before I know it I’m leaning backwards over the six foot drop, my eyes wide with terror, my hands held firmly in Kent’s.

“Okay,” he says, looking into my eyes. “I’m going to lower you down now, and then drop you the final few feet to the –“

“WHAT!?”

“Fay,” he growls, his hands tightening on mine as he glares at me hard now. “We have about ten seconds to do this –“

“You are not dropping me off this balcony –“

“Hey,” he snaps, shaking his head sharply at me and holding my gaze. “Do you trust me or not?”

And then I take a very deep breath and glare back at him...because, god damn it, I do, but I very much wish I didn’t right now.

But I nod, once, the expression on my face clearly communicating that he’s going to pay for this later.

And, damn him, but Kent smirks before leaning forward to yank me close enough to kiss me once before again holding his hands further out. “Just dangle, Fay,” he murmurs. “I’ll lower you, and then...it will be like, three feet...”

I can’t help another little shriek of fear as I press my eyes shut and do as he says, dangling from his hands, clinging to him as he lowers me –

But then, quite suddenly – his hands are gone, and I give another little shriek as I plummet to the ground –

Or, well, fall three feet. As he said.

My feet hit first and I tumble back onto my ass, rolling back a little on my back just a little bit onto some soft grass. I gasp a little, because I landed right on my tailbone, but...

I open my eyes, assessing myself and realizing that I’m completely fine. I scowl a little, feeling a little stupid as I get to my feet and look upward but...

Kent's already gone.

So, I pull myself together, dusting grass off my robe and rubbing my ass, and then I make my way around to the pool, marveling at the fact that less than five minutes ago Kent and I were having a perfectly delicious shower and heading to the bed for a little more...

"Fucking Gio," I mutter, stepping onto the smooth flagstones next to the pool and running my fingers through my hair, trying to put it in some kind of order as I climb the steps.

When I finally get to the door of the house, I see that most of my family is already gathered in the living room, greeting our not-so-welcome guest. Kent, for some reason I can't discern, isn't there yet even though he had a much shorter distance to cross than me. Where the hell is he? Janeen sees me first, turning towards me in shock.

"Fay," she says, frowning in confusion. "How the hell did you –"

"Gio!" I say, interrupting her cheerfully and moving across the room.

Janeen figures it out in a moment, shutting her mouth and starting to grin a little as she realizes that something more complicated is afoot here than just a cousin's visit.

Gio turns and smiles at me, looking me over with interest. "Fay," he says, holding a hand out to me. When I take it, he pulls me close and gives me a set of twin kisses on my cheeks. "I was just being introduced to your lovely family."

"Well," I say, stepping quickly to Daniel's side and wrapping an arm around his waist. "I was just taking a dip in the pool. So refreshing, on a day like this." Dad and Jerome look at me like I'm a little crazy, still not putting it together, but they know enough now to intuit something is up. Like the good soldiers they are, they keep their mouths shut.

"Really," Gio says, grinning a little. "I would think it was rather cold."

I open my mouth to reply as Daniel wraps an arm around my shoulder, but before I can the door to the master bedroom opens up and Kent steps through.

Gio's grin deepens as he turns towards Kent and I watch him carefully. I'm a little disappointed to see that Gio doesn't look surprised at all - he just shakes his head a little, moving quickly to his uncle with open arms.

"My Uncle," he says, laughing as Kent returns his smile and wraps his nephew in a warm hug. "I wondered if I'd see you here."

"Yup," Kent replies, letting Gio go and patting his cheek fondly before ruffling his hair. "Looks like the cat's out of the bag on this one. I'm home."

"For good, I hope," Gio says, stepping away and seeming genuinely pleased to see his uncle.

“That depends,” Kent says, sliding his hands into his pockets and studying his nephew. “On who sent you, and why.”

Chapter 242 – Playing House

Chapter 242 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Gio laughs warmly and tilts his head to the side, giving Kent a self-deprecating grin that makes me blink in surprise at how damn charming it is. I shoot a glance at Janeen and smirk inwardly to see one side of her mouth pulling up, looking him up and down like a hungry cat. Clearly, his charm is not lost on her, though Kent continues to stare at his nephew with a stony expression.

“Oh, Zio,” Gio says, continuing to smile as he spreads his hands wide. “You cannot blame me for this. Honestly, Daniel shows up unannounced with his new bride, who makes a fascinating offer, and you expect nonno to what...just let them go? Of course he sent me behind!”

“So, what?” Kent asks, slipping his hands into his pockets. “You’re here as his spy?”

“I am here,” Gio says, looking around at all of us with a warmth in his expression that’s kind of incredible in the face of Kent’s withering glare, “as your nephew. I want to hear more of your life, I want to catch up with my favorite cousin!” Gio claps Daniel on the shoulder, and I can tell that Daniel can’t help the smile that breaks out onto his face.

But Kent just raises an eyebrow.

Gio turns his gaze back to Kent. “Am I going to be required to make a report back to my grandfather? Yes.” I blink a little at the blandness with which Gio admits that he’s a spy. “But,” Gio continues, his voice a little cagier now, “precisely what I report, and how much, is...” he shrugs here, nonchalant, “up to me. Is it not?”

My eyes move immediately at Kent’s because I, for one, am totally shocked at Gio’s interesting offer. I mean, what’s he playing at?

I see Kent’s eyebrows raise, reflecting my curiosity and surprise. “Well, Gio,” Kent says slowly, stepping forward and slipping his arm around his nephew’s shoulder. “I guess we can talk about all of that in the morning, can’t we? You’ll stay overnight, yes?”

“Of course!” Gio says, reaching down to pull a bottle of wine out of the bag at his feet. “I will not be going back on the road after drinking this, after all.” He hands the bottle to Kent, who smiles with genuine pleasure – which means it must be a rare vintage.

A vintage which I, of course, cannot taste. I scowl a little, jealous.

“Come in,” Kent says, smiling again at Gio and leading him towards the kitchen, scooping up the bag of wine on his way. “It’s a night for celebration! I’m glad to see you, kid.”

The ice officially broken, my family all moves towards the kitchen to make our guest – who is also Bianci’s spy – feel welcome. Daniel walks alongside Kent and Gio, and Dad likewise moves into the kitchen, peering into the bag of wine bottles that Gio brought as if he has any idea what the labels mean. Janeen quickly takes Daniel’s place at my side as I follow more slowly. Jerome falls in with us, not quite knowing his role in all of this just yet.

“So,” Janeen says, her voice soft, her eyes never leaving the Gio in the kitchen as Kent opens the bottle of wine and Daniel sets out glasses. “Tell me everything.”

“I don’t really know everything yet,” I reply quietly, slowing my pace and letting the loud chatter in the kitchen cover my words. “He’s a doctor –“

“A doctor,” she says, her smile deepening, like I just told her Christmas is tomorrow.

“Janeen,” Jerome scoffs, giving her shoulder a shrug, “you left a perfectly good doctor back in America.”

“Who?” she asks, frowning at him.

“The guy who switched our DNA sample?” I murmur, my hand going immediately to my stomach so she knows precisely who I mean.

“Oh!” she says, laughing now. “Dr. Banks. Yeah, he was a nice guy – asked me to marry him, actually - but come on, Jerome,” she says, glancing over at him and rolling her eyes. “He was no Italian Mafia prince with a car like that –“

“You have a vintage Porsche, Janeen,” Jerome points out with a scoff, “you don’t need another fancy car.”

They continue to bicker a little as we finally make our way to the kitchen, and as I lean on the counter Kent lifts his eyes to mine, raising his eyebrow just a little and flicking his eyes between Janeen and Jerome.

I give a little shrug, letting him know that I don’t have any idea how they were introduced to Gio before I came into the room. He scowls a little as he pours the wine, but luckily Gio makes it easy on us, turning and leaning on the counter to smile at Jerome and Janeen.

“Apologies, all of this family talk got in the way of introductions,” Gio says, turning to smile at Janeen and Jerome. “Fay’s father I met, but...”

Kent slides smoothly in here, taking control. “This is Janeen,” Kent says, handing her a glass of wine as she turns her mega-wat smile on Gio, “Fay’s sister. And this,” Kent says, handing a glass along to Jerome, “is Jerome. Janeen’s fiancé.”

Jerome falters just for a second as he takes the glass of wine, flashing his eyes to Kent as his face falls. I almost laugh in surprise but I hold myself back as Jerome recovers fast, smiling at Gio and slipping an arm around Janeen's shoulders. "Just happy to be along for the ride," he says, grinning and raising the glass in our guest's direction. "Nice to meet you, Gio. Thanks for bringing the wine."

Janeen's mouth pops open when she realizes what Kent has done, but her expression quickly turns into a scowl as she glances at Jerome before taking a big swig of her wine. I bite my lip a little to keep from laughing, because while it's clear that she understands her role in this little farce, it's also clear that she's not happy about it.

"So nice to meet you both," Gio murmurs, sipping his own glass of wine and looking carefully around at all of us. When his eyes meet mine his smile deepens and he holds my gaze. I stand up and hold his eyes, well aware that he realizes that something is off about our little family.

But I raise my chin, letting him know that I have no intention of letting him get the upper hand.

Gio grins and nods to me as Kent begins to pull food out of the refrigerator, letting a cutting board clatter loudly on the granite counter top and drawing Gio's attention before placing cheese on top and beginning to ask Gio friendly questions about his life, easily distracting him from asking Jerome and Janeen any awkward questions about how they met. The next few hours are...masterful. I take mental notes as I watch Kent carefully orchestrate every single moment of the night. He's a charming host, making Gio perfectly at ease, but I do not miss that Kent dominates the conversation with Gio, continuing to ask questions so that we learn a great deal more about Gio and the Biancis than he does about us. We all chip in on the conversation as dinner is prepared – Daniel asking questions about old friends, Jerome asking about where Gio went to school – but Kent quickly gives us all jobs so that our hands are busy in the kitchen and Gio has no opportunity to steal one of us away for a private chat.

I scowl a little when Kent plops a single onion in front of me with a cutting board and a knife. "Slice," he quietly orders, starting to move away.

"Can't I do cheese?" I ask, glancing over at where Janeen is grating a large block of parmesan and laughing a little too hard at Gio's jokes.

Kent just smirks as he raises an eyebrow at me. "You can graduate to cheese," he says, "when you demonstrate that you can properly slice an onion."

I scowl, picking up the knife and starting to saw the onion in half. Gio's eyes shift to me even as he chats nightlife with Janeen, and I don't miss the huge smile that breaks onto his face.

"Oh, baby," Dad says, quickly coming to my side. "No, Fay – you slice it, you don't have to saw it like bread. Let me show you –"

I scowl again, handing my knife to my dad and crossing my arms over my chest as he shows me how to cut an onion, considering bitterly that he probably should have shown me this a decade ago.

But I only half watch my dad, my eyes really on Gio as he carefully surveys our family, clearly trying to suss out what's really going on here. Kent moves to his nephew's side, again speaking cheerfully and dominating the conversation so that he is complete control of what Gio knows...

But is it already too late? What has Gio already figured out?

And what will he tell Bianci tomorrow when he goes home?

Chapter 243 – A Long Evening

Chapter 243 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

We have a long, pleasant Italian dinner after that – not as elaborate as last night's, but still with a great deal of food and wine and laughter going around the table. As the evening passes, I settle back into my chair and allow myself to relax under Kent's capable control. I feel a great deal of guilt, obviously, about missing the fact that Bianci sent someone to tail us home, but seeing the way that Daniel and Kent smile at Gio?

Honestly, it doesn't feel like it's turned out that bad.

When desert comes around – just gelato and fresh fruit, since Kent didn't have time to make anything more elaborate - Daniel gives me a little wink from across the table. I smile back, nodding and letting him know that I, too, think it's okay.

When I turn back to the table, however, I find that Gio is watching us very closely, a little smile playing at his lips.

"I'm surprised," he says, pointing between Daniel and I with his spoon, "that the newlyweds do not sit together. One would imagine that you're too much in love with each other to be much apart."

I look to Janeen on my left and Jerome on my right, noting that Gio is right. While none of us sat next to our actual lovers, we didn't do a very good job of playing into our façade. Jerome and Janeen in particular have pretty much ignored each other.

I shrug, lifting another bite of desert to my mouth. "I am close with all of my family," I say before taking a bite. I swallow the delicious strawberry gelato before I finish my thought, giving

Gio time to see my calm. “My romantic relationships do not need to take priority at dinner, especially with a guest to entertain.”

“Is it your home?” Gio asks, turning his head. “I would have thought that it belonged to my uncle.”

“Everything here is mine,” I say quietly, giving a little shrug. Because while that’s technically not true – Kent rented this house with funds from his secret bank accounts – the story we spun to the Bianci’s is that Kent has nothing and I have everything. “Though,” I continue, putting my desert down with a sigh as if I’m a little tired with the conversation, “we don’t really parse ownership like that in this family. It is all of our home.”

“Shall we?” Daniel says smoothly, standing up and gesturing towards the back patio, ending the conversation but distracting us with the view of the gorgeous sunset over the sea. “It’s a beautiful night.”

Janeen, catching Daniel’s cue, stands and begins to clear the table, chattering about how lovely it will be to sit outside. Everyone else begins to move too, Kent wrapping an arm around Gio’s shoulders and leading him outside first with Daniel on Gio’s other side. The rest of us clean up.

“You going to fill me in?” Jerome whispers to me as we carry dirty plates to the kitchen. He passes the dishes to me as I rinse them and load them into the dishwasher.

Quickly, one eye always on the door, I do fill my family in, giving them the quick and dirty version in a whispered hush, of course, but all of the details are there – going to the Bianci house this morning, the offer we made to Daniel’s grandfather for Kent’s freedom, Gio’s role as Alessi’s son and spy.

“Well,” Janeen says as I load the final dish, slipping an arm around Jerome’s waist. “Looks like we’re getting hitched for the time being, you lucky boy.”

“You hold very few charms for me, physically, Janeen,” Jerome says, his voice dry. “I am marrying you purely for your mind.”

“Oh, you poor thing,” she murmurs, squeezing his cheeks between her thumb and forefinger. “Prepare to be disappointed. That is my least fun attribute.”

We all laugh at this and my dad takes a beer from the fridge. “Welp,” he says, coming forward to give Janeen and then me a kiss on the cheek. “This is all out of my league. I’ll leave you to it.” I wrap him in a hug, murmuring my goodnights and thanking him for being a good sport. Because I do know that he’s not here for the drama – he just wants to be with family. I make a mental note to order him some kind of American sports package so that he can watch all of his favorite games while we do...whatever it is we’re going to do next. After dad goes to bed, Janeen and I agree to head outside, Jerome staying in for a minute to make cocktails, saying something about Gio being more manageable if he’s drunk.

“I sure hope this Italian cousin becomes very manageable,” Janeen murmurs, her voice low and lascivious as we approach the back door.

“Behave yourself, sister,” I say, squeezing her arm and narrowing my eyes. “There’s a lot at stake here.”

“You heard my fiancé, Fay,” she says, her eyes bright with her joke. “He doesn’t appreciate me. I need a real man.” When my glare deepens she just laughs and pulls her arm from my grip so she can sling it around my shoulder. “Don’t worry, baby, I’ll play nice. For now.”

“You’d better,” I mutter as we head outside. Daniel grins at me immediately, patting the seat next to him. Smiling, I curl up at his side, only risking a glance at Kent when Gio turns away to look at the sunset over the ocean.

Kent’s eyes are on me already, and I smirk when I see them narrow – perhaps unintentionally – at Daniel’s arm casually around me. Even though I know jealousy is unhealthy, there’s something nice about the fact that Kent doesn’t want anyone else touching me, even when he knows that Daniel poses no risk at all.

Kent huffs a little laugh when he sees my smile, but he turns away when Jerome comes out with a tray full of gin cocktails. When I shiver a little at the cool breeze – Gio wasn’t wrong when he said that my apparent swim was a little unseasonable – Daniel produces a blanket from a bin beneath our loveseat and wraps it warmly around me.

“Thank you, baby,” I murmur, snuggling up against him.

“I kinda missed this,” Daniel whispers to me as he again pulls me close to his side, glancing to ensure Gio is distracted. “We had fun, didn’t we? Back in the day of Natalia and Alessi in the house – pretending to be a couple.”

“It was fun,” I say, smiling up at him. “Though...I admit, I was glad to have it over with.”

“Just a little longer,” Daniel says with a sigh, his eyes shifting to Gio who chats animatedly with Janeen and Jerome. “I think Gio is going to be more amenable than we originally thought.”

I shake my head, suspicious and worried. “Do you just want him to be more amenable, Daniel?” I ask quietly. “Did your grandfather just send precisely the right spy, the one to whom you’d be most likely to spill your secrets?”

“Good point,” Daniel says with a little chagrin, taking a sip of his drink. “I guess we’ll have to ask dad. He has a better instinct for this sort of thing than I do.”

I nod, agreeing to again let Kent take control of this and settling in against my husband’s side, ready for a long night.

The atmosphere is quite festive as the evening passes, with lots of jokes and stories being told. Daniel and Jerome do a great job of keeping Gio engaged, and while Gio gets in a few sneaky questions about how we're set up financially and how the house is run, Jerome's plan to just get Gio stinking drunk is quite successful.

Unfortunately, it also means that Daniel, Jerome, and Janeen are stinking drunk by the end of the evening too.

As midnight approaches, Kent catches my eye and flicks his gaze towards the house, his face stressed because he's very aware that the other members of our party are reaching a tipping point. While Gio is sufficiently distracted, Janeen is leaning heavily towards him and letting her eyes slip over his body, while Jerome is starting to gaze at Daniel with that loving expression –

And as I see that?

Yup. It's time to go to bed.

"Danny," I sigh, whining a little, and Daniel's head snaps to me when I deliberately use Jerome's pet name for him. "Are you ready? I'm sleepy."

Daniel comes back to himself a little as I wind my arms around his arm and he grimaces at me, apologetic, before turning to smile at the rest of the party. "Fay's right – it's about time to turn in." Kent and Jerome stand up, apparently agreeing to the plan, but Janeen stays put.

"Oh," Janeen says, giving Gio a languid smile and not taking her eyes from him. "You guys go on. My new friend and I will stay up for a little longer. Right, Gio?"

Chapter 244 – Out the Window

Chapter 244 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent turns towards the house, rolling his eyes, and he bumps Jerome hard on the shoulder as he goes.

"Oh!" Jerome says, spinning back to the group of us still on the patio, his eyes going first to Daniel and then Janeen. "Oh, uhm...no, baby!" Jerome says, and I groan just a tiny little bit to see how incredibly bad he is at being Janeen's fiancé. "You come to bed too!"

Gio, a sly little smile on his face, stands up. "Thank you for the offer, Janeen," he says, steadier on his feet than I thought he'd be. "But I think I'll go to bed too."

Gio walks to Daniel and I, heading inside with us while Jerome goes to take Janeen's arm. I roll my eyes when I see that she doesn't even bother to hide her scowling disappointment.

Together, we all troupe into the house, Jerome and Janeen leading the way.

"You're lucky the guest bedroom's all set up," Daniel says, turning his charming smile on his cousin. "We just got here."

Gio nods his appreciation as, ahead of us, Jerome stops at his and Daniel's room, starting to step into it. I grit my teeth and press my eyes shut, a sigh on my tongue, as Janeen pulls him away.

"No, Jerome," she growls, pulling him down the hall towards her own room. "Our room is this one."

I look up at Daniel to see him fighting his laughter as he pushes open the door across from his own. "You're in here, Gio," he says, his voice soft. "You'll let us know if you need anything?"

"I will," Gio says, turning to study Daniel. "Though, I very much hope we get a minute alone tomorrow, Daniel," he says, his voice soft and genuine. "We did not leave things on good terms the last time you were here – I'm sorry for it. There were things that were said that –"

"I know," Daniel says, nodding his agreement. "I'm sorry, Gio. You're right. We'll have a moment tomorrow."

"Good," Gio says, his face genuinely eager – at least, as far as I can tell. And then he murmurs something in Italian that makes Daniel smile before heading into his dark room.

Daniel sighs as he turns and tugs me along into his and Jerome's room.

"What was that?" I ask when we're inside, pressing the door shut behind me. "What Gio said?"

"Just something we used to say as kids," Daniel says on a sigh, heading for his closet and starting to pull out pajamas. "Something from The Three Musketeers, which we liked a lot. What do you want to wear to bed?" he asks, and I don't miss his abrupt change in topic. But I just turn my head to the side a little, considering him and letting it pass. Daniel and Gio, I suppose, have a more complicated relationship than I had previously thought. But Daniel's entitled to his privacy on this, even if I want to know more.

"I want to wear my pajamas to bed," I say, sighing a little and moving to the window.

"Shame," Daniel says, turning towards me. "Best I can offer is Jerome's pajama pants or one of my t-shirts, which on you will be a nightgown." He smiles at me, holding up both options in either hand. "Or a combination thereof."

“Thanks, Danny,” I say, wrinkling my nose and twisting the handle that opens the window to his bedroom. “But I meant what I said. I’m going to sleep in my own pajamas tonight.” And then, as his jaw falls open, I start to climb out.

“Fay!” he gasps, dropping the pajamas and darting to the window, grabbing my arm and holding me back as I get one leg out. “Are you insane!?”

“Daniel, it’s a first-floor window,” I say, rolling my eyes at him. “Your dad dropped me off a balcony earlier – this is actually much safer –“

“Dad what!?” Daniel gasps.

“A story for another time!” I sigh, trying to tug my arm out of his grip, though he holds fast.

“What are you even thinking!? Just sleep here tonight!”

“Old habits die hard,” I say with a grin, looking up at my handsome husband. “A wardrobe in the old house, a window in this one.” I shrug. “What’s the difference?”

“The difference is that Gio is already suspicious –“

“All the more reason for me to go to Kent and make a plan! I mean, do you want to come along!?”

“No,” Daniel sighs, letting my arm go as he realizes that I’m stubbornly determined to do this. “Just...would you please be careful, Fay? Don’t let Gio see you.”

“He’s on the other side of the house,” I say, waving a dismissive hand as I slip out. “He doesn’t even have a window that faces this direction. Night, Danny! Sleep tight!”

“Stop calling me that,” Daniel grumbles, sticking his head out the window and watching me trot away across the front of the house to the windows which I know open into me and Kent’s room. Grinning, I wave over my shoulder at him, confident that it will be fine.

It’s the middle of the night, after all. Who on earth would be watching?

When I get to my bedroom windows, I smile to see that a little light spills through the folds in the curtains, suggesting that Kent’s already in there. I tug at the bottom of the window, but I’m unsurprised to find that it’s locked from the inside. Of course it is – it’s Kent’s room. Not likely to be any insecure entrances.

So, I raise my hand and use my fingertips to tap lightly on the glass, hoping it’s enough for him to hear me.

I lower my hand, peering curiously at the curtains, wondering if he heard me.

Sighing, frustrated that I'm still out here in my bathing suit – honestly, it has gotten cold – I raise my hand and start to tap again –

The curtain whips back and my eyes go wide as I stare down the barrel of a gun.

I shriek and cover my head, instantly dropping to my knees and curling into a little ball –

The window creaks open above me a second later.

“God damn it, Fay,” Kent growls. “What the hell are you doing!?”

“Where the fuck did you get a gun!?” I hiss, staying crouched but turning my angry face up towards him. He glares at me, his head and shoulders leaning out of the window.

“Why did you think I didn't have a gun?” he snaps, the gun no longer in sight as he reaches a hand out a hand for me. “Come on –”

“You almost shot my head off!” I protest, still mad. Honestly – we're going to have a baby soon, and his first instinct when he hears a tap at the window is to go waving a gun around!?

“I did not,” he returns, his voice tight, dismissive. “Come on – you wanted to come in, didn't you? So come in.”

Scowling, still shaking a little with adrenaline from – you know - having a gun pointed at me – I stand and accept his hand. Kent pulls me close to the window and then, when I boost myself up, he tilts me into the room and then reaches out, sliding a hand beneath my legs and neatly turning me so that he lifts me into the room in the safety of his arms.

“You're lucky that I'm in love with you,” he growls, glaring down at me and shaking his head as I start to grin. “Because otherwise, you would be off my staff, Fay Lippert.”

I sigh and snuggle against him, happy despite myself because, well, while I don't appreciate his response it is nice to be back in his arms. “I wasn't aware that I was on your staff, Kent Lippert,” I say, taking an inconspicuous sniff of his shirt. God, he smells so good. “Can you put me down now? I want to get changed. Wearing a bathing suit all day is cold.”

“Not a chance,” he murmurs, pushing the window closed and flicking the lock before carrying me immediately to bed.

Chapter 245 – Stolen Night

Chapter 245 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I laugh as Kent plants me down on my side of the mattress and stands back, looking me over like I could have possibly been wounded or something. Even though it's a little bit overkill, it's nice to have him fuss over me.

"Are you all right?" he murmurs, sinking his hands into his pockets.

"I'm fine," I say, unable to stop smiling as I pat the bed next to me. "Come to bed."

"In a minute," he murmurs, and then he starts to move around the room, setting things just the way he likes them. I watch as he checks the windows again, and then puts the gun back in its hiding place – strapped to the bottom of the desk, apparently – and then shuts off the lights before glancing towards the fireplace, clearly considering building a fire.

"It's too late," I say quietly, reaching a hand out for him, wanting him near. It's after midnight, after all, and I assume we'll have an early day tomorrow. "Come here."

Kent turns to look at me, his eyes already searing.

My smile deepens as a coil of heat starts to twist within me.

Yeah. We definitely don't need a fire. Not tonight.

Kent, apparently agreeing, prowls over to me and sits on the bed in front of me, reaching for my shoulders. I lean forward, allowing him to push the robe from my arms so that it pools around me. Then, he pulls off his own shirt, tossing it to the floor.

My eyes go immediately to his naked torso – god, how did he manage to keep so fit these past couple of months? – but I turn my head to the side, because his movements are slow and deliberate – not at all the furious passion that I know he can get worked into when he wants me.

"Up," he says, putting his hands out and pulling me onto my knees when I place my palms on his. Wordless, he pushes the straps of my bathing suit off my shoulders. I help him then, wiggling and pushing the bathing suit down my body, sliding it over my ass and sitting back so that I can slip it over my legs, still very curious as to what's happening.

I don't have long to think, though, because when I'm fully naked Kent reaches for me and pulls me into his lap, heaving a deep sigh and touching his forehead to mine as we sit quietly, skin-to-skin. I smile, snuggling into the warmth of his body.

"I'm glad you came tonight," he murmurs, his hands slowly roving over my back, my arms. "Even if I perhaps would not have advised your particular methods –"

"And what would you think was better?" I ask, my voice soft and slow. "Sneaking across the living room, risking a peckish Gio catching me while he went to the fridge for a midnight snack?"

“I would advise any method,” Kent says, giving me a half-hearted glare, “that doesn’t surprise me and make me reach for a gun.”

“Well, that’s just your trauma response,” I murmur, reaching up a hand to brush my palm over his stubbly cheek, butterflies rolling in my stomach at the feel of it against my fingers. “We can work on that.”

Kent huffs a tiny laugh and shakes his head at me. I bite my lip a little, marveling at him a bit as he holds me closer. He is just so incredibly handsome, and sweet, and good to me. How did I get so lucky?

His eyes hold mine as one of his hand shifts to my stomach, running softly over my baby bump. “How is the little peanut doing?” he asks.

“Bigger than a peanut now,” I say, bursting into a grin. “Almost an heirloom tomato.”

“Really,” Kent’s eyebrows going up as he shifts his gaze to my belly with a clear smile. “Now this I can get on board with. A good Italian fruit.”

I laugh, snuggling closer and looking down at my belly, adding my own hand. “Be careful, baby,” I say softly. “Daddy’s going to be very tempted to turn you into a sauce –“

“A delicious sauce,” he adds with a nod. “The best.”

I murmur something noncommittal and Kent scowls at me, gripping me tighter until I laugh and admit that his marinara is the best I’ve ever tasted. But then he grins at me, and I know we’re both pleased to have a light moment to joke.

“Really, though,” I murmur, running a finger down the length of his bare chest. “Do you think tonight went okay?”

“I think it went as well as it was going to go,” he replies. “We are, I think, a little lucky that Bianci sent Gio instead of Alessi or anyone else.”

“That’s what Daniel said,” I say, giving a little frown. “Why do you both think that?”

“Because,” Kent replies. “Giovanni has always been the least content with what our family does – the most eager to rebel. I suspect that he asked Bianci for the opportunity to come and spy on us today – that maybe he sees Daniel and I as a lifeline to get out, if I’m trying to get out. Or,” he says, giving a little shrug, “Gio’s just very good at his job and telling us what we want to hear so we trust him. I can’t tell.”

“Well,” I say, raising my eyebrows. “The fact that you can’t tell perhaps suggests how good at his job he really is. You’re excellent at reading people.”

“Well, he’s Alessi’s son,” Kent says consideringly. But then he continues, a little bitterness working into his tone. “And I’m not so good at reading. I missed Ivan and Alden. And Daniel and Jerome.”

“Well, the first two were actively trying to deceive you,” I murmur, “and the latter...maybe you just have terrible gaydar.” I shrug.

Kent laughs openly at this and I grin when I realize that maybe no one has ever said the word “gaydar” to him in his entire life.

“Really, Fay?” he says, and Kent’s smile is so genuine that a deep and real pleasure combines with the heat already turning within me. “You think my gaydar is the problem here, the thing putting my family at risk?”

“Yes, Kent,” I say, nodding too seriously. “In fact, I’ve been meaning to break something to you about my own sexual identity ...”

Kent begins to glare at me even as he smiles, anticipating the joke. I click my tongue and shake my head, looking away.

“I mean,” I continue, twisting my fingers together in a false awkwardness, “your perfect male form just doesn’t do it for me – I’ve tried, but you’re just so unappealing –”

Kent growls then, pulling me close against him as he rolls onto his back, making me give a little shriek of laughter as I go with him. “Bullshit,” Kent says, pulling me tight against his side and sinking his fingers into my hair as he brings his face close to mine. “My gaydar might be off, but my Faydar –”

I burst into laughter at the term, making him laugh as well.

“That,” he continues, smiling at me, “is unfailingly accurate.”

“All right, mind reader,” I say, wrapping one leg over his hip and using the leverage to turn him so that we’re face to face, my stomach pressed against his. “If you’re so clever, what is it that I want now?”

“Easy,” Kent replies. “I can read you like a book, Fay. My favorite book, that I’ve read a thousand times and can never get enough of.” And then he presses his mouth to mine, answering my question with his actions instead of his words.

Chapter 246 – Chat with my Mafia Nephew

Chapter 246 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

My eyes fly open when Kent's arm tightens around me the next morning, but it wasn't his touch that woke me.

Instead, it was the knock at the door.

"Shit," Kent growls, still not moving and holding me close, clearly working at once to wake the hell up and decide what to do.

"Maybe it's Daniel?" I squeak softly, my voice hardly higher than breath. Kent shushes me anyway.

The knock comes again.

"Zio?" a voice calls, and Kent's arm tightens around me again.

I spin frantically beneath Kent's arm as I recognize the voice as Gio's, trying to read Kent face and figure out what he wants – me to go out the window? To...to jump off the balcony? What - "No time," he whispers, his voice soft. Then he lifts his head. "A second, Gio!" he calls, moving faster and snatching me up into his arms, carrying me with fast steps into the closet, snatching his phone off the bedstand as he goes. When we get into the closet, Kent puts me on my feet and presses me up against the wall closest to the door.

Over my shoulder, I hear Gio call back his assent, but my eyes stay focused on Kent.

"Stay completely quiet, Fay," Kent instructs, holding my eyes so I see how damn serious he is. Then he opens his phone and presses a few buttons, handing it to me when he pulls up the sound recording feature. "Record every word of this conversation, all right? And don't even breathe loud enough to be heard." I nod fervently, taking the phone even as I start to shiver a little bit, though I can't tell if it's from adrenaline or cold.

Kent clicks his tongue in frustration and pity before moving to his shelves of clothing, tossing a big sweatshirt at me before pulling on a pair of sweatpants. I pull the sweatshirt on as he hauls a black t-shirt over his head –

And, by the way, damn – because I actually don't see him in a t-shirt very often and suddenly wish that I did –

But before I can even pat down my admiration Kent strides out of the closet, crossing to the door. As instructed, I press back against the wall and don't move an inch.

Listening carefully, I hear the door unbolt and then swing open. As soon as I hear that, I press the record button on the phone and do my best to hold my breath. Gio says something in Italian, his tone apologetic, but Kent speaks over him in dismissive English.

“It’s fine, Gio,” he says, and I hear the door shut again before they begin to walk into the room. “You didn’t wake me.”

A lie, but...well, we did stay up late.

“I brought you a little coffee,” Gio says, and a jealousy ridiculously rolls through me. As much as adrenaline has me instantly awake, I, too, would like a coffee if I’m going to be standing barefoot in this freezing closet.

“Thank you,” Kent murmurs, and I hear the two of them sit on the bed.

“I wanted to talk privately,” Gio says, his voice hesitant. “About what is coming next.”

“Why privately?” Kent asks, and I hear his tone easily fall into its interrogation mode. Even if Kent was asleep and wrapped around me less than a minute ago, he’s all business now.

“Because,” Gio says, and I can imagine him giving a very Italian little shrug. “You know that I love Daniel, but I get the impression that he is...not as much involved in the business as is his wife.”

“True,” Kent says. “What about Fay? Did you speak with her?”

“I’ll speak with her next –“

“Don’t,” Kent snaps. “Let me speak to her.”

There’s a long pause. “Why?”

“Fay is clever but she’s impulsive.” I narrow my eyes, a little pissed off at this assessment – but, well, I did crawl through my own bedroom window last night, and Kent might be telling Gio what he wants to hear. “Let me speak with Fay. I’ll ensure we’re all on the same page.”

“All right,” Gio says slowly before moving on. “Nonno suspected you’d be here, Zio. He didn’t think that Daniel would leave you behind – and even said it was a good move, letting Fay negotiate your terms, if she’s the one who is in charge of the industries being offered.”

“How did she do yesterday?” Kent asks, abrupt. My eyebrows raise as I realize – quite suddenly – that he’s asking that for my benefit, so I can hear Gio’s honest answer. And that they’re having this conversation in English for my benefit as well.

I smile slowly, grateful for my considerate man. I listen carefully for Gio’s reply.

“She did well,” Gio says, his voice honestly impressed. “Nonno – he doesn’t think women should be in business, but he learned about her before she came. And then, the little stunt she played with Natalia –“ Gio laughs a little. “He was impressed by that.”

“What stunt?” Kent asks, suspicious, and I wrinkle my nose a bit because...well, because I may have left that out.

Gio quickly summarizes and Kent laughs darkly. “I admit,” Kent says. “I’d have liked to have been there to see that. Well?” he says, moving on. “What’s next?”

“Nonno said that if you were here, I was to bring you to dinner. Tonight.”

There’s a long silence in the room before Kent replies.

“All right,” he says. “So, we’ll go to dinner tonight. What can I expect?”

“A great deal of negotiation,” Gio replies. “And then...a counter offer.”

“Do you know the details of that?”

I listen carefully, but there’s no reply – I curse inwardly, wishing I could see Gio’s face right now, know if he’s nodding or shaking his head.

“All right,” Kent says slowly, and then silence reigns for a long moment. “What else is going on, Gio?” he asks when he speaks again, his tone suddenly sharp.

“I don’t know if I should ask,” Gio says.

“Out with it, kid,” Kent says, his voice softer now. “I taught you how to kick a football. If there’s something you need, ask me for it.”

“I was intrigued by the deal Fay laid out,” Gio says on a sigh. “I was...jealous.”

My eyebrows go up and I imagine that Kent’s do as well. But he doesn’t say anything.

“I wondered,” Gio says quietly, hesitant. “If there’s any way you could...bring me in on it. Get me out of this business as well, no ties to the family except that of a son to his mother.”

“How do I know this isn’t a trap?” Kent asks, careful. “That Bianci isn’t testing my loyalties, seeing if I’d take his heir from him?”

“Why would he do that?” Gio asks, confused. “He already knows I tried to leave when I went to medical school. Zio – please, I don’t want this for my life. I asked to be the one to follow Daniel and Fay yesterday. I’ll go home and do my job, but if you can offer me way out of this? To make my father pass the job to my brother instead of me?”

There’s a long pause where Gio lets Kent answer the question for himself.

“All right, Gio,” Kent says, his voice soft and sympathetic. “I can’t promise anything. But if you are willing to join our side in this game? I will see what I can do.”

There's a deep sigh from Gio and then the expression of what I think are many Italian thanks.

"All right, kid," Kent says, laughing. I hear a patting sound as well as the two get to their feet, presumably a hug before they move towards the door. "Give me a minute to pull myself together, and then I'll come out and see you off."

"And you'll come to dinner tonight?" Gio asks, his voice cheerful.

"Yes, I'll come to dinner," Kent says, his voice sounding like he's dreading it. "Go make me another cup of coffee, I'll be out in a second."

"All of you, Kent," Gio says, his voice wary. "He wants all of you to come to dinner."

There's another long pause.

"All right," Kent says, his words clipped. "Then all of us will come to dinner tonight at Bianci House."

Chapter 247 – Coffee in Two Bedrooms

Chapter 247 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

The door shuts and Kent's footsteps cross the room again. In a heartbeat he's through the closet door, looking down at me, at the phone in my hand.

Quickly, he reaches out and presses the record button on the screen, ending the recording before taking the phone from my hand and placing it carefully on a nearby shelf. Then he takes my face in his hands and I exhale a long, shaky breath.

"Did...did he know I was here?" I ask, looking up into Kent's gorgeous green eyes.

"I don't know," Kent murmurs, staring down into my face. "Did you record it all?"

Quickly I nod, letting him know that I did it all right – everything he asked –

And then his mouth is on mine, and I let my eyes drift shut as I lean into him, letting a little moan drift from my lips as Kent wraps his arms around me and holds me, and kisses me, and sweeps me away in his own relief.

When Kent pulls away a few minutes later I blink my eyes slowly open, a bit in a daze, and he laughs lightly at me.

Which, of course, wakes me right up and makes me glare at him.

“Don’t get any ideas, Kent, you’re not that good of a kisser,” I grumble. “I just haven’t had my coffee yet.”

“That’s a lie,” Kent says, smirking at me, “but help yourself, Fay.” He keeps one arm wrapped around me while he gestures to the coffee maker behind him with an open hand.

I pout. “Can you make it for me? You do it better than I do.”

Kent laughs, shaking his head, but he escorts me over to the coffee maker where he presses another kiss to my lips before letting me go and starting to make me a cup. “We don’t have long,” he says as he works. “We have to get you back into Daniel’s room and out that door before Gio leaves. I want the lie to be as seamless as we can make it.”

“Presuming, of course,” I say, my voice dry, “that Janeen didn’t just throw herself into Gio’s lap the moment she woke up.”

Kent smirks as the espresso machine buzzes, and then he bends to get a little jug of milk out of the refrigerator below, pouring a little into an electric steamer. “Janeen knows what’s at stake. She’ll behave.”

I smile, watching him, pleased he trusts my sister. “So, what do you think?” I ask quietly, tucking my hands into the sleeves of Kent’s sweatshirt as he finishes up the coffee. “Does Gio really want out? Or is it a trick?”

“I don’t know yet,” Kent murmurs, moving over to my boxes of clothing as the milk finishes heating. “I want to talk to Daniel, get his perspective. But...if you asked me? I’d say Gio meant it. He and Daniel have always been...well, they’ve both had the bad luck of being poorly suited to their status of being first-born males in old families like these.”

“Or,” I say, watching as Kent pulls out a cute little day dress for me, floral and pretty, tossing a matching set of brand new underwear on top. “They have the good luck of having a father and uncle who is willing to fight for them to get out.” Kent smirks, I know pleased at my words but working to not show it as he scoops up a pair of sandals to match the dress, handing them out to me.

“Really?” I ask, frowning at the clothing as I accept them. “You want me to wear a day dress to dinner?”

Kent freezes for a second, looking at me like I’m insane. “We’ll dress for dinner, Fay,” he says, his face appalled, “this is just for today!”

I burst out laughing, shaking my head at the ridiculous idea that I now live in a world where I need a whole outfit just to sneak across the front of the house to my husband’s room.

Kent rolls his eyes at me and turns away, pulling on his own set of day clothes as I quickly swap his sweatshirt for the outfit he chose for me. As I finish pulling the sandals on, Kent appears before me with my coffee.

“What do you think?” I ask, turning so he can see me in the dress. “Will I do for the day?”

“You’re gorgeous,” he murmurs, cupping the back of my head and pulling me in for a slow kiss before pressing the coffee into my hands. “Now go back to my son’s room, and try not to let anyone else figure out you spent the night in my bed.”

“My bed too,” I insist, grinning at Kent as he walks me to the window and unlocks it, pushing it open and glancing out to make sure no one’s there. “I love you,” I say, reaching out to grab his shirt and pull him in for a final kiss. “See you in a few minutes.”

“I love both of you,” Kent murmurs, a finger brushing my stomach as he takes the coffee from me. I hop out the window and take my coffee back, laughing with delight at the ridiculousness of my strange, happy life. And then Kent kisses his palm as he smiles at me, clenching the kiss in his fist like he’ll hold it forever.

And I grin, and wrinkle my nose at him, and sip my coffee as I scurry across the front of the house to tap on my husband’s window this time.

Daniel whips back the curtain a moment later, groaning in relief to see me as he pushes the window open. I note, quite happily, that there’s no gun in sight this time.

“Get in here, Fay,” he murmurs, taking the coffee from me as I climb through the window.

“Morning, husband!” I say cheerfully as I take my coffee back. “Nice to see you too!”

“Why do I always get the middle seat,” I mutter, glaring at Janeen and Jerome on either side of me on our way to Bianci house. Dad begged off dinner and once we were whittled down to five, Kent insisted on taking one car for safety. “I’m the richest person here —“

“No, you’re not,” Kent says casually over his shoulder as he makes the final turn onto the street where I know the gate to the Bianci driveway stands.

“Really,” Daniel says, looking at his father from the passenger seat with a little smirk forming on his lips. “I mean, I know what Fay’s worth, dad — you’re saying you’ve got more stashed away in European bank accounts than that?”

“I’m saying mind your business, kid,” Kent murmurs, ignoring Daniel and making Janeen laugh.

“Back to the matter at hand!” I say, wiggling and trying to make more room for myself back here. “On the way back I get the passenger seat. For the baby.”

“Not a chance,” Daniel calls. “You can’t just say ‘for the baby’ and get what you want, Fay. At least not until he’s born.”

“No worries,” Janeen says with a happy sigh. “I’ll just stay at Gio’s place –“

“You would cheat on me?” Jerome gasps falsely, pressing a hand to his chest and staring at his pretend fiancé in pretend shock. “After these twenty-four hours that I’ve long been dedicated to you!?”

“We gave it the old college try, Jerome,” Janeen says, leaning over me to pat his knee. “It just wasn’t meant to be.”

“Enough,” Kent says with a sigh, “we need everyone to take this seriously, all right? Anyone have any questions?”

“No, sir,” Janeen says, giving Kent a false little salute. I glare at her and she crosses her eyes at me before placing a hand on my shoulder that lets me know she’ll do her part, even if she pretends not to take it seriously now.

“All right,” Kent says. “Get ready, because now the trial really begins.”

And then he rolls down the window to speak to the guard, who immediately signals the gate to swing open.

Chapter 248 – A Warm Greeting

Chapter 248 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

As we pull down the driveway I grin as I watch Janeen balk at the size and splendor of this house.

“Nooooo wayyyy,” she breathes, and then she stares wide-eyed at Kent and Daniel. “Are you serious? You – you two grew up here!?”

“Just dad,” Daniel says over his shoulder, turning to smile at Jerome too, who is equally impressed if not more silent.

“Yes,” I say, putting on a hoity-toity voice. “Daniel just summered here –“

Janeen scoffs and rolls her eyes at that, and I open my mouth to add more but find myself distracted when I see a large group of family waiting in front of the house. They peer closely at

the car, but as soon as they see Kent in the driver's seat they start to shout and cheer in excitement.

"Oh wow," Janeen says, her eyebrows raised. "Oh, so they like...like you –"

"Some people do, Janeen," Kent says, his voice dry, though I can hear the pleasure in it. "Don't sound so surprised." Janeen laughs as Kent parks the car and quickly climbs out, shouting a loud greeting to his family, who all rush to hug him.

Curious, Janeen gets out first and then reaches out a hand to help me. I glance over at the crowd enveloping Kent as I climb out of the car. And then I smile as I turn my eyes back to my sister, looking her up and down in her pretty purple-and-blue floral dress, all flowing silk and grace that sets off her purple hair, which she has demurely tucked back behind her ears.

"You look pretttttty," I say, grinning and teasing her.

"I always look pretty," she replies, turning me and tugging at my own cerulean-blue floor length gown to get the wrinkles out. "But you look fabulous."

"Do you think?" I murmur, turning a little so I can see down the back of the gown, the diaphanous ribbons that fall from my shoulders instead of sleeves twisting in the breeze. "I thought it was too much, but Kent liked it –"

"Kent picked this out?" Janeen scoffs, staring at me.

"Kent picks out all my clothes," I whisper to her with a little frown. "Seriously? You didn't know that?"

Janeen's mouth falls open as she stares at me.

"I know," Daniel says, coming over to grin at us with his hands in his pockets. "Creepy, right?"

"You two," Janeen whispers, leaning close to me, "have the weirdest kinks –"

Daniel laughs and then takes my arm. "Come on, they want to meet you!" he says, grinning at both of us.

Jerome laughs a little as he comes up to Janeen, first wrapping an arm around her shoulder, and then hesitating before dropping his hand to her waist. "I don't know how to do this."

"At least pretend you think I'm hot," Janeen says, rolling her eyes and linking arms with him instead. Then, when we're all ready for our roles, Daniel sweeps us forward and begins to introduce us to the family.

It's all immediately overwhelming for the three of us who don't speak Italian. Some faces I remember from yesterday – nonna's in particular is unforgettable, though she stays pinned to Kent's side, wiping tears from her eyes as she gazes up at him while he greets his friends.

My heart twists with happiness as I realize again that, of course, this is in so many ways the woman who raised him – Kent's mother, if not by blood, as much as Daniel's grandmother. Kent smiles down at Nonna, wrapping an arm around her shoulder, and I can't help the grin that bursts onto my face.

Not even Natalia can make my smile falter when I see her leaning in the doorway to the house, glaring daggers at me. I just give her a happy wave and move on to whoever Daniel introduces me to next.

"Fay!" Gio says, coming through the crowd. "Daniel, Jerome, Janeen!" He gives us all our kisses, though I note with a little laugh that Janeen presses for a lingering hug as well, though Gio doesn't seem to notice as he obliges her. "Come over, this way! Everything is all ready!"

Gio then turns and shouts something to the crowd and everyone starts to move, sweeping us not through the house but towards the gardens. I smile as I look around at this gigantic, happy family, so excited to greet their long-lost son. I glance over my shoulder but just shrug when I see that Kent has been surrounded by masses of people, still pressing to say hello as we walk.

Children run by as well, many of them coming to stare up at Janeen's purple hair and then running away laughing when she turns to look back at them.

"Wow," Janeen says, shaking her head as we pass into the garden, which I now realize has been set with cocktail tables and antipasti that we can snack on before we go in to dinner. "Gio, seriously, it's incredible here –"

"Yes," he says, giving her a warm smile. "We're very lucky. Is it very different, where you grew up?"

Janeen bursts into scoffing laughter and I grin, thinking of the happy row home where we spent our childhood. "Yeah," she says, shrugging a little at the understatement. "It was different, Gio."

"You'll have to show me sometime," he murmurs, giving her a wink before heading off to speak with a servant and ensure that drinks begin to be served.

"That is so rude," Jerome murmurs, slipping a possessive arm around Janeen's waist. "I am right here."

"I like you jealous," Janeen says, bursting into a grin and tugging him closer. "Finally, some heat!"

I laugh too, looking around the garden as I lean close to Daniel's side, taking in the incredible roses and wild, rambling plants that seem to grow with abandon in the golden light of the sunset. "Seriously, Daniel," I sigh, looking up at him. "How could you have ever left this?"

He shrugs a little before tracing his knuckles lightly down my cheek. "It's beautiful, but it's confining, Fay," he replies softly. "Dad will say the same. There's a price to pay for this."

"Well then," I reply softly. "Let's just enjoy it for a night."

Daniel smiles at me and then does a double take, his face bursting into a mischievous little grin. "Looks like we're not the only ones looking to enjoy something for a night," he murmurs, nudging me and then jerking his chin towards the large crowd surrounding Kent.

I frown for a moment, not getting it, but then I see who has taken Nonna's place pressed to Kent's side.

"Fucking Natalia," I grumble, narrowing my eyes as she tilts her head back and laughs at something Kent has said, letting her long hair fall back over her shoulders and pressing her hips and stomach more closely into Kent's side, her arm wrapped around his back. "If she doesn't stop touching him, I'm going to order her execution. Swim with the fishes, or whatever."

Daniel laughs, turning me away. "Let her throw herself at him," he says with a shrug. "We'll make a drinking game out of it. Every time Natalia embarrasses herself throwing herself at dad, drink!"

"Fun for you," I grumble as Daniel snags a glass of prosecco off a passing tray.

"Damn straight it is," he says, winking at me and taking a sip. "And trust me, I'm going to need every last drop."

I sigh, jealous, kind of wanting a drink too –

But honestly? Even if I could, I probably wouldn't take it.

Because as much as this is a gorgeous party and everyone's pretending it's all arranged to finally welcome Kent home?

Me? I'm well aware that this is business.

And as I look around and realize that Bianci himself isn't here yet?

I know that we've got to keep sharp, because something big is coming.

And I, for one, am going to be ready for it.

Chapter 249 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

When night truly falls and the garden becomes too dark to be practical, we all troop back to the front of the house, heading indoors. Kent takes the opportunity to dislodge Natalia from his side, somehow, and is waiting for us at the entrance to the garden.

“How did that go,” he murmurs, looking us over as we walk towards the house, his hands behind his back.

“Fine,” Daniel says, giving his dad a nod and a reassuring smile. “We weren’t the feature item, anyway – most everyone met us yesterday.”

“Excuse you,” Janeen says dryly from behind us, “I am always the feature item.”

Kent sends her an appreciative smirk over his shoulder but returns his focus to Daniel and I.

“You’ve got a little something, I think a little lipstick” I say wiping my own thumb over my cheekbone, indicating that Kent has something in the same spot. When he frowns, raising his hand and wiping at his own cheek, I continue. “It’s a light shade of berry pink - I think the shade Natalia was wearing tonight.”

Kent smirks, grinning at me, I think liking a little bit to see me jealous again. But he drops his hand, ignoring my joke.

“Where’s nonno?” Daniel asks.

“I don’t know,” Kent says seriously as we pass into the house and make our way to a gigantic formal dining room that can probably seat fifty people. “But I have a feeling we’re going to find out.”

Nonna is waiting for us by the door, reaching out to take Kent’s hand and leading him to a place of honor at the right hand of the chair at the head of the table, clearly reserved for Don Bianci but as-yet vacant. She murmurs something warm to Kent before coming and tugging at my hand, obliging me to lean down so she can kiss me on the cheek. She then kisses Daniel and presses Janeen and Jerome’s hands, welcoming them, before bustling off.

“Where is she going?” I ask Daniel, confused as to why she’s not sitting down with her guests.

“She’s got to get the food ready,” he says, pulling out my chair and gesturing towards it.

“What?” I gasp, staring after the tiny woman. “She cooked for everyone!?”

“She’s an Italian wife,” Daniel says, laughing and guiding me to the chair to sit. “This is her super bowl – trust me, she’s in heaven.”

“I would like,” I say, staring wide-eyed at my husband, “you to always remember that I am an American wife. Because this?” I say, twirling my finger around to encompass the massive feast about to be fed to fifty guests, “this is not in my wheelhouse.”

“No worries, Fay,” Daniel murmurs, leaning in to kiss me on the cheek as he takes his own chair. “No one would eat what you cooked anyway, for fear of food poisoning.”

I scoff at him, turning to my other side and looking for Kent to step in at my defense, but to my surprise he’s staring down at his plate, smiling and blushing of all things.

“What?” I ask, completely shocked as I stare at him. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” he murmurs, clearing his throat and sitting up straight.

“Tell me,” I insist, dying to know – because never, ever have I seen Kent Lippert blush. I didn’t think he was capable of it.

“It’s just something mamma said,” he says, the little smirk still on his face as he pulls his napkin into his lap.

“Tell me!” I push, using my fingers to give him a little shove on the shoulder, forgetting – for just a second – that he’s supposed to be my father-in-law tonight.

Kent turns to me, I think a little unable to help himself. He lowers his voice. “She said you were very pretty, Fay,” he murmurs.

“So?” I say, leaning in, my eyes flicking over him. “It was more than that, I know it was –“

He blushes again, laughing and my jaw drops open to see him like this. “She said,” Kent says, giving in and making me lean so close that I almost tip out of my chair to hear him, “that you were very pretty, Fay, but that she was surprised that you married Daniel, because you seem more like my kind of girl than his.”

My eyes flare wide as Kent laughs, shaking his head.

“Oh my god,” I say, sitting up and looking around, glad suddenly that no one is yet sitting across from us and that everyone seems to be wrapped up in their own conversations. “Do you – do you think she knows!?”

“No, Fay,” Kent murmurs, taking a deep breath as the food starts to come through the doors, carried by a series of servants and aunts who surely helped nonna prepare it all. “I think she’s just a very perceptive old woman who knows me very well.”

I relax back in my chair a little bit, smiling at him, touched. “I’m glad I get to see you with her, Kent,” I say quietly.

“Me too,” he says fast, and then nods towards Daniel. “But pay attention to your husband now.”

I turn, intending to do just that, and as I do I see Kent’s reason for the change as Alessi and Valentina move to their seats across from us, Natalia on Valentina’s other side. Natalia slips into her chair across from Daniel as Alessi comes around the table to give Kent a big hug, slapping him on the back like he hasn’t seen him in years instead of months.

The two speak cheerfully to each other in rapid Italian as Valentina leans across the table, greeting us and helping servants set out plates and plates of food that all smells delicious. His greeting finished, Alessi moves to his seat and the room quickly fills with chatter as wine is passed around, though nobody touches the steaming food or fills their plates.

Because we’re all waiting.

A hush falls on the room when the doors bang open again and Don Bianci strides in. He smiles at his family, his hands tucked into his pants, and many call greetings to him as he crosses to the head of the room. Bianci gives paternal nods to those who greet him, but his eyes quickly focus on Kent, who stands.

I move to stand myself but Daniel puts a hand on my knee, letting me know that this is just between them.

And so I watch with very closely held breath as Bianci takes the final steps towards Kent, his face serious –

My breath leaves me all in a woosh as Bianci finally throws his arms wide and smiles, wrapping Kent in a wide hug that Kent, laughing, returns. A cheer goes through the room then, the family all raising glasses to the son who has returned home, and I raise my own glass in the toast, though I only let the red wine within it barely brush my lips when I sip.

Instead, I watch as Kent and Bianci say what look like warm words to each other as they continue to hold each other tight, Bianci smiling up into Kent’s face as Kent warmly pats his back.

I raise my eyebrows, wondering if this is all a performance or if Bianci really is glad to have home the boy who is his son in so many ways, even though just yesterday we lied and said we didn’t know where he was.

But whatever they say to each other is lost to me. The two finally let each other go, Bianci taking his seat and apparently not noticing that as soon as he reaches for the dish of pasta in front of him the rest of the family leans forward as well, beginning to serve themselves.

Chapter 250 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I reach for a dish in front of me but Daniel smacks my hand away playfully, murmuring that he'll fill my plate. I laugh at his over-solicitousness, but I'm secretly grateful – because while I recognize pasta and bread and cheese, I honestly don't know what any of these dishes are. And Daniel – he knows what I like, so I just trust him.

As the meal passes I realize that my trust was well-placed, because almost every bite makes me moan in delight. I have no idea what I eat, honestly, but everything is rich with cheese and butter and these amazing sauces that I soak up with bread – and the seafood and the meats –

Honestly, by the end of the meal I rub my poor swollen belly, wondering if there's more food than baby in there right now.

“Oh my god,” Janeen moans, eating her last bite of bread. “I'm going to gain twenty pounds living here –“

“Good,” Jerome says, pitching his voice to a very stern and manly register. “I like my woman with some meat on her.”

Daniel and I laugh at them before Daniel sighs, shaking his head at us. “We haven't even hit desert yet –“

“What?” I gasp, genuinely worried. “There's more!?”

He frowns at me. “Desert is half the meal, Fay –“

“Oh my god!” I exclaim, appalled, but he laughs and pats me on the knee. “Don't worry, there will be time to digest. Nonna needs time to get it all together anyway.”

I sit up suddenly, looking around the table. “Wait, she isn't even here –“

“Of course she's not,” he says, rolling his eyes. “Italian mothers – the good ones – they eat in the kitchen between courses.”

“Daniel,” I say, putting my hand on his knee and pointing to myself. “American mother. It's very important that you remember that in the upcoming months, because that? Preparing a feast for fifty people and then not eating any of it? That's crazy.”

“It's not crazy,” he says, laughing at me. “Feeding people is her love language, Fay. You just have to learn to respect it.”

I open my mouth to say something else, but suddenly my ear catches on English on my right-hand side for the first time since dinner began.

“So,” Bianci says, leaning forward and folding his hands together on the table, looking between Kent and I and clearly speaking in English for my benefit. “Now that dinner is finished, shall we go have a drink? In my office?”

Kent slowly nods and begins to stand, glancing at me as well. Taking the hint, I put my napkin on the table and stand too, stepping to his side.

When Daniel starts to raise himself, Bianci puts a hand out.

“That’s all right, Daniele,” Bianci says, giving his grandson a warm smile. “You just...enjoy the evening, yes? Ensure that Fay’s sister and her fiancé do not get lost with all these Italians.”

Daniel blinks but, clearly dismissed, settles back in his seat.

Bianci turns to Alessi now, nodding, and Alessi stands too. Gio, a little further down the table, likewise stands and together the four of us follow Bianci towards the proverbial lion’s den. We are all silent as we follow Bianci upstairs and into the same dark room that Daniel and I met him in yesterday. There’s already a fire cheerfully burning with a set of five chairs circled around it. At the center of the circle is a small table with five drinks set out on it – four whiskeys and a frosty glass of ice water with a wedge of lemon on the edge.

We each take a glass and then our seats, and I smile as I take a sip of my water, which really is refreshing.

“My wife,” Bianci says, leaning forward to smile at me, “grows the lemons herself.”

“Thank you,” I say, genuinely touched at the considerate gesture. “Again, you have such a beautiful home, Don Bianci. Thank you for welcoming us here.”

“It is your home now too, Fay,” Bianci says, waving a hand around as he leans back in his chair and sips his drink. “You are family now, after all.”

I nod, accepting the welcome and sitting back in my own chair as Kent sinks into the one next to me, giving me a single glance and a nod, which I return. I smile as I looking at Alessi and Gio, ready to play this little game of chess Bianci has set up, ready to play Queen to the King at my side. Because even if the men in this room don’t know my actual relationship with Kent, by inviting us here in Daniel’s absence?

They’ve made it very clear that they understand who in the Lippert family actually holds the power.

“Papa has told us of your offer, Fay,” Alessi starts, giving me the sweet and friendly smile that he always uses on me as he speaks. “I admit, it’s quite generous, and with such...interesting terms.”

“I’m glad you find it so,” I murmur, keeping my voice soft and my words bland because Gio, this morning, told us they’re ready to counter. And I have no intention of offering anything else until I hear what they have to say.

Plus, I want to see Kent at work.

“We admit that we’re intrigued,” Bianci says, picking up where Alessi leaves off. “Though I must say...I’m not sure the terms are quite even.”

“Out with it,” Kent says on a frustrated sigh, and I glance to my right to see him clenching his jaw, glaring at Alessi and Bianci. “No need to dance. If you want something more, tell us what it is.”

“It’s not that we want more, my boy,” Bianci says, dragging his glass of whiskey through the air before him. “We just want things to be even. Donna Lippert has offered us quite a pretty package, but you, Kent? You have been invaluable to this family. And you could live what – forty, fifty more years? In that time, what you could provide – as a respected member of the Bianci family, of course – far outstrips what is currently on the table.”

“That assumes that you don’t do anything with Fay’s industries,” Kent counters, “just liquidate them, sell them off as-is. If you built them, they’d bring you far more than I could.”

“And if we asked you to run the industries?” Bianci asks, raising his eyebrows before taking another slow sip of his drink. “To build them up for us? You have a...talent for that kind of growth, Kent, that Alessi and my other captains do not have.”

“No,” Kent says, shaking his head, taking a hard line. “My employment here, in Italy, for you, is not on the table.”

The negotiation continues for a long time and I stay quiet, watching the words travel between the two sides like a tennis match, Bianci constantly trying to push Kent, to see what he can get him to give, and Alessi wedeling and explaining where Bianci needs him to. At one point my eyes meet Gio’s, who raises his brows as if to say impressive, no?

I purse my own lips and nod, sighing discreetly through my nostrils because Kent is right: they’ve got something very particular in mind, and they’re wasting time, wearing Kent down by keeping him negotiating.

And Kent, I can tell, knows precisely what is happening too. But he also knows that he can’t leave this room without a deal made. They’ll wear him down until he has to take what they offer last – at three in the morning, if necessary.

But me?

I have an excuse.

As Alessi again makes an offer that Kent will inevitably refuse, I sigh and put a hand on my belly, pushing to my feet.

The men immediately stop talking, everyone turning to me. I put on a sad little grimace, looking around at them with apology written on my face.

“I am so sorry,” I murmur. “But I admit – I feel a little ill. I think the baby...”

I let my sentence trail off, looking over at Kent. He looks up at me, worried, and I shake my head just the tiniest imperceptible bit, letting him know that I’m not actually sick. Kent fights a smile as he stands by my side.

“Apologies,” Kent says, getting to his feet and standing next to me. “But, for the sake of my grandchild, I’m so sorry that we’ll have to leave without coming to an understanding. Such a shame, I had really –“

“Fine,” Bianci snaps, showing his cards finally when pressed and revealing that he, too, wants this locked down tonight as badly as we do.