

Chapter 261 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Kent!” Daniel shouts into the phone as Jerome drives frantically down the road, blazing through intersections, weaving around and between cars. “Someone – someone fucking took her!”

They’d done their best to follow the van, but it had already been too late. By the time that they realized that Fay was gone from the side of the road – that she’d been snatched and wasn’t just hiding or something – the van was already out of sight, driving like a maniac. The farmer had screamed for them to go after her and they’d gotten into the car as fast as they could –

But by the time they were on the road after it?

The trail was completely cold. They had absolutely no idea where it had gone.

They’d done their best, of course, to find any trace –

But it was a lost cause. Now they’re speeding home, trying to get to Kent, because he’ll know what to do. Jerome glances anxiously at Daniel, trying to listen to the conversation as Daniel stumbles out an explanation of what happened as best he can.

Daniel’s voice shakes throughout the entire call and Jerome can tell that he’s close to frantic tears. Jerome presses further on the gas pedal, trying to get home as fast as possible.

Kent, Jerome thinks to himself, nodding tensely. Kent will know what to do. But I...

He shakes his head at himself, cursing because...

Fuck. Fuck. He should have told everyone sooner...

But there’s no time to think on it now. Jerome barely slows as he pulls up to the gates of the house, pressing frantically at the button at the top of the car that opens the gate. Daniel snaps to Kent that they’re home, just come outside, they’ll explain everything –

As the gate barely opens wide enough, Jerome squeezes the car through and flies down the driveway, skidding to a stop at the end.

Kent’s already out the front door, storming towards them.

“What the fuck happened!?” Kent roars, ripping open Daniel’s door and grabbing his son by the collar, hauling him out. “Why the fuck weren’t you at her side!?”

“Dad –“ Daniel stumbles, trying to get his footing while he looks up at his father with such guilt on his face. Jerome’s throat tightens to see Daniel like that – because this is – this is his fault, not Daniel’s –

“Kent,” Jerome starts, stepping forward. “It was a complete surprise –“

“She was across the street!?” Kent shouts, dropping Daniel and taking a step towards Jerome now, focusing his rage on him. “By herself!? Why the fuck would you let her go anywhere alone – you idiots –“

Thompson comes out of the house now, looking with wide eyes at the commotion at the front of the house. He takes a sharp, deep breath when he looks around and realizes that Fay isn’t there.

“What,” Thompson gasps, his eyes widening. “Where...” But his words fade away, almost as if he doesn’t want to ask, because he knows the answer is going to wreck him.

“David,” Daniel says, moving towards the older man, his voice breaking. Thompson just shakes his head at Daniel, stepping away from him, not wanting to hear it. Daniel continues to move forward, putting his hands on Thompson’s shoulders and starting to explain to him as carefully as he can what happened.

Jerome watches for a second, but his attention breaks when he sees the seething mob boss striding towards him.

“You’re coming with me,” Kent growls grabbing Jerome by the scruff of his neck and hauling him inside. Jerome gasps but does not protest as Kent shoves him through the door. “Weapons, now,” he growls, pointing towards the master bedroom, where Jerome knows there’s an arsenal of guns behind the false back of the closet. Because, of course, Kent wants complete control and to keep them safe.

Gio, standing in the kitchen, looks at them with wide eyes. “Gio!” Kent barks, “You too! Let’s go!”

Kent pushes Jerome ahead of him into the room and then into the closet, Gio striding closely behind as Kent mutters to Gio the short details of what happened to Fay. When Kent presses the code into the lock at the back of the closet and the secret door swings open, Jerome glances back at Gio and is unsurprised to see the young man looking very, very pale.

Kent gets immediately to work, taking guns off the wall and tossing them on the table at the center of the room alongside appropriate ammunition. “Load them, Jerome,” he snaps, and Jerome gets to work in silence – because he’s been trained for precisely this moment. Kent finishes picking his last weapons and slams them on the table, turning to Gio, who flinches.

“Tell me right now,” Kent growls, his words low and gravelly as he snaps a clip full of bullets into a handgun that he holds tense at his side, “if Bianci is behind this.”

“No!” Gio says instantly, shaking his head and going rigid with fear as he realizes that, any second, that gun could be pointed at him. And considering the stakes of this? He could be dead in minutes if he says the wrong thing.

“Tell me the truth, Gio,” Kent growls, narrowing his eyes and taking a dangerous step toward his nephew.

“I am, Kent!” Gio insists. “He would have told me if he was – or at least used me for recon, to know where she was going to be and when. But he didn’t – and I didn’t even know Fay was gone until her father told me where she went! Just ten minutes ago!”

“He’s not lying, Kent,” Jerome adds, his voice soft as he continues packing guns with bullets. “Gio was nowhere around when we decided to go to the grocery store – and asking Fay to come along was a spur-of-the-moment decision. He didn’t know.”

“And where were you,” Kent growls, looming over his nephew now, glaring down at him, dangerous.

“I was,” he hesitates and then shrugs his shoulders, “I was...in my room. I was talking to Janeen, on the phone.” He shrugs again, clearly anxious, not knowing what to do. “You can ask her – you can check my calls, I swear.”

Kent backs away a little bit, studying his nephew, seeing his real surprise and fear, the way he stutters over his words.

“Besides,” Gio says, shaking his head at Kent, “what would Bianci’s motive be? I have reported everything about the progress of the heist, he knows it’s tomorrow – he knows it has a high chance of success and being incredibly profitable – I see no reason for him to want to throw you off those plans by kidnapping Fay –“

“Neither do I,” Kent snaps, turning away from Gio finally and letting him off the hook, at least for the moment.

Kent sighs sharply and ducks down to grab three black duffel bags, tossing them on the table with the guns. “Fill those up,” he snaps, nodding to them. “We’re moving out. Wherever she is, we’re going to get her.”

Gio nods, moving forward to the table, but before he can touch a gun Jerome puts a hand on Gio’s arm, stopping him.

“Let me pack, Gio,” Jerome says, his hand and his voice shaking a little bit. “Give me and Kent a minute.”

Gio pauses and looks at Jerome, confusion all over his face. But then he shifts his gaze to his uncle, who gives him a sharp nod, even though Kent’s eyes don’t leave Jerome.

Gio hesitates for just a second but then turns and leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

Jerome takes a deep, shaky breath, his eyes focusing on the gun in Kent's hand.

"Jerome," Kent says, his growl livid, his fingers tightening around his weapon. "What the fuck aren't you telling me?"

Chapter 262 – Jerome's Confession

Chapter 262 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Jerome takes another shaky breath and raises his eyes to meet Kent's. The air sticks in his throat, his lungs, because he knows this could...

This could go very badly for him.

"You'd better start fucking talking, Jerome," Kent snaps, slamming the gun down on the table as he loses his temper. "Because I have methods to make you talk, and I don't have the fucking patience right now to use the easy ones."

"Okay," Jerome says, putting up his hands and backing a step away, starting to talk very, very fast. "Okay, Kent. Um. I've been...I've been meaning to tell you for a while –"

"Skip the fucking preamble, Jerome!" Kent shouts.

Jerome's eyes drop and his shoulders start to shake. "Okay. Okay. But it's important for you to know that I would never betray you, Kent. Or Daniel. Or Fay! All right?"

Kent doesn't say anything, but the fact that he doesn't say a word lets Jerome know both that he understands and that Jerome is on very, very thin ice.

"So," Jerome says on an intake of breath, "there might be...someone else looking for you who has a particular interest in Fay. Besides the cops in New York. Besides...besides Bianci."

"Who?" Kent asks, his voice terrible and cold.

Jerome looks up through lowered lids, his whole body starting to tremble as he comes out with it. Fuck, I'm going to die, he thinks, shaking his head. He gulps. "The...the woman who hired me. To get myself into your good graces. She –"

But he doesn't get another word out, because before he can Kent is across the room, his fist flying through the air.

Jerome shouts as Kent's fist connects with his cheek, sending him stumbling to the side, clutching his face. Jerome groans, pain flashing through him as he bends over, his face cupped in his own hands –

Somewhere in the back of his consciousness, he hears the door creek open –

“Jerome!”

It's Daniel's voice but Jerome can barely focus on it, because the fucking pain –

“Stop!” Kent shouts and there's a scuffle behind Jerome, who finally blinks back to himself and begins to stand up, turning to see Kent shoving the door to the room shut, Daniel's shirt wrapped in his fist. “Your fucking boyfriend betrayed us, Daniel,” Kent growls, shaking Daniel hard, making him listen.

“Wha – what?” Daniel gasps, going still and turning to stare at Jerome, his face horrified.

“It's not like that!” Jerome gasps, desperate for Daniel to see – Kent too, but especially Daniel –

“Stay right the fuck there,” Kent growls, not letting go of Daniel but grabbing his gun from the table and pointing it right at Jerome's heart.

“Dad!” Daniel gasps, but Kent just shakes him again, silencing him.

“Talk,” Kent snaps, his hand holding the gun steady. “You have about fifteen seconds, Jerome, to convince me not to kill you.”

“Please,” Jerome says, putting up his hands now, his pain disappearing in the wake of his blind terror. “I swear – it was years ago – she – she hired me, she told me to put myself in your view! To let you notice me! And then – um – when I got in your good graces, I was supposed to report back! I was a mole, or whatever!”

“Jerome,” Daniel says, his voice breaking on his name, desperate and devastated. “How could you –“

“No!” Jerome continues, shaking his head frantically, his eyes wide and locked on Daniel's. “I swear – Daniel – I reported to her like twice – stupid shit, because I was nobody, I didn't even know any secrets at the time! And then once I got into the family? Once I met you?” His voice breaks as he focuses only on Daniel now. “I – I decided that's where I wanted to be! I cut ties completely! I never spoke to her again – she tried to get me back, but I completely broke away –“

“God, fuck, Jerome,” Daniel moans, and his father lets his shirt loose as Daniel buries his face in his hands and turns his back on him. “How could you fucking do this –“

Jerome's heart breaks as he hears Daniel gasp, his breath thick with tears as his world pretty much falls apart – his best friend fucking kidnapped, his boyfriend who he is completely in love with confessing an insane betrayal –

But Kent isn't so easily distracted.

“So did you do this?” Kent snaps, narrowing his eyes and taking a step closer to Jerome, the gun still pointed solidly at his chest. “Did you put this woman in contact – did you tell her where Fay was going to be?”

“N-no!” Jerome gasps, his eyes going wide as he focuses again on the man in charge. “I'm not lying, Kent! I cut ties ages ago – I have been loyal for years –“

Kent strides forward and hits Jerome again, the butt of the gun in his fist connecting solidly with the side of Jerome's skull. Jerome moans and falls to the ground, covering his head and curling into a ball.

“Tell me!” Kent shouts, looming over him. “What the fuck did you tell her!?”

“I didn't tell anyone anything!” Jerome insists, covering his head.

“Dad!” Daniel gasps, coming forward and grabbing Kent's arm, stopping him from hitting Jerome again.

Jerome peeks through his hands to see Daniel pulling hard on Kent, making him turn towards him. “He didn't,” Daniel growls, defensive, putting his body between Kent and Jerome. “I swear to god – if Jerome was up to anything? If he'd been betraying me for years? I would know.”

Kent seethes but locks his jaw shut, staring into his son's face, probably deciding...fuck, Jerome doesn't know what. Whether to kill him? Whether to trust Daniel? Whether any of this actually matters – because honestly, Jerome doesn't know who took Fay – it's just a hunch –

“Please,” Jerome moans, shaking his head. “I'm sorry – but you needed to know –“

Kent snaps his attention back to Jerome at that. “Tell me,” he demands, his voice more even now. “Who is it? Who hired you to watch me, to spy?”

Jerome takes a deep breath, still clutching his head and hiding his face.

“Jerome,” Daniel begs, pleading with him.

Jerome takes a single steadying breath before moving his hand from his face, looking up at the mafia boss and his boyfriend, who – fuck – look so strikingly similar, but who are so...totally different.

Just like Fay. And that woman.

God, the first time he'd seen Fay...

"It's her mom," Jerome moans, shaking his head, tears leaking out the sides of his eyes. "The one who hired me? It was Fay's mom."

Kent and Daniel stare down at Jerome for a long moment in complete shock.

And then Kent lets out a stream of curses, turning away and storming from the room. He slides some guns at random into one the black bags on the table as he goes, not checking to see what he's got. He doesn't look behind him either as he moves through the closet, through the bedroom, and into the house.

He barely looks around as he strides for the door, grabbing his set of keys on his way to push it open –

Except –

"Kent." Thompson's cold voice rings out behind him, agonized and terrified and pissed.

Kent slowly turns to look the man in the eyes.

A thousand words run through his head – apologies, pleas for forgiveness, excuses that this wasn't supposed to happen –

But he swallows them all and nods once.

"I'm going to get her back, David," Kent says, his words tight.

Thompson just stares at him, livid, his jaw clenched.

Kent nods once and pushes through the door.

Gio's already waiting for him at the car.

Chapter 263 – The Agent

Chapter 263 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

"All right," I say, quietly stroking the little dog's ears, noticing the deepening of his breathing as he starts to fall asleep – probably a very puppy reaction to all the stress. "You've got my attention, Ivan. By force. But all right, tell me about this offer."

“I can’t,” he says, shaking his head a little. “That’s for her to say.”

“Who?” I ask, tilting my head to the side.

“You’ll find out,” he says dryly. Then he sits up, trying to peek out the back tinted windows. “I think we’re almost there.”

“Ivan,” I hiss, leaning forward. “What the fuck is going on? Like, why are you even in Italy? Running someone else’s errands?”

“What?” he asks.

“Seriously,” I say, gesturing towards him with an open palm. “This is – so not your style. You’re the errand boy, going to kidnap me and bringing me to someone else? This is very much not the mafia boss who blocked the road with his Lamborghini, nor is it the kinda-sexy police man who was all,” I shrug a little, “all stuck up and straight laced. And bossy.”

Ivan tries to fight it, but he smirks a bit at this. He can’t help it. I burst into a grin. “Well,” he says, shaking his head at me. “If this isn’t my style that’s not my fault. That’s yours.”

“What?” I ask, sitting up straight.

“Yeah,” he says, leaning forward again to glare at me. “Someone got me put on leave from the NYPD because I botched the Lippert escape so badly. I was very much under suspicion for why I asked half the police force to meet me across the state.”

I can’t help it. I burst into a laugh and then smack my hand over my mouth.

“Yeah,” he says, shaking his head at me. “Real funny, Fay. Just my career down the drain.”

“But it was just leave!” I say, tossing an apologetic hand out towards him. “They didn’t fire you.”

“And when they bring me back, if they ever do, I’ll be on desk duty for the rest of my life. They’ll never trust me ever again.”

And suddenly I do feel guilty about that. Because I never meant to ruin his life. Just...get him out of my hair. And rub his nose in it a little bit.

“So why are you here?” I ask quietly, shaking my head, not getting it.

“Consider it freelance work,” he says on a sigh, narrowing his eyes. “I found someone a little higher up whose plans intersected nicely with my own.”

“Higher up?” I ask, curious.

“FBI,” he says, his voice a little superior as he delivers the news. My eyes go wide with shock.

But I shake my head, dismissing it, needing more information. “Wait, plans? Ivan...what are you planning?”

“What I’ve always been planning,” he replies. “Nothing has changed, Fay. I’m still working to bring Lippert and the mafia down.”

“Why,” I exclaim, almost shouting in my exasperation. “Just let it be, Ivan! You’re letting this vendetta control your life – just let it go. Find a nice girl, settle down,” I sit back against the wall, letting my eyes flick over him. “Go have...little blonde police babies. Or whatever.”

“It’s all very easy for you to say, Fay,” Ivan says, sighing at me. “Because you got what you wanted. Me? I’m still hungry for it.”

I sigh too, rolling my eyes. But we don’t have a chance to get into it any further, because suddenly the car rolls to a stop.

Ivan stands up in the back of the van, looking down at me calculatingly. “Are you going to do something stupid? Like...run, or whatever?”

“Ivan, I don’t know where we are,” I say, exasperated, “and I don’t speak Italian –“

“You don’t speak Italian yet?” he exclaims, baffled.

“And,” I continue, moving on without acknowledging his rude remark, “I’m crazy pregnant. So even if I did want to run? I’m not getting far.”

“True,” he says, offering a hand. When I take it but still struggle to get to my feet, he helps me, being very patient and, frankly, delicate with me as I stand and settle the little puppy in my arms.

“Are you seriously taking the puppy?” he murmurs, looking down at me like I’m crazy.

I gasp and look up into his face. “Are you suggesting I just let him go!?”

“Fay, this is serious –“

“He’ll die!”

“Oh my god,” Ivan sighs, and then he leans forward and knocks on the door, which slides open. A plain dark-haired man stands there, pointedly not looking at us. Ivan murmurs something to him in Italian as we climb out.

“Wait, you speak Italian?” I ask, confused and a little impressed.

“Fay, do you seriously think I went undercover in the mafia without speaking Italian?” He rolls his eyes at me.

“Well, who is he?” I ask, looking back at the man, who turns away from me.

“He’s just a driver,” Ivan says, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and moving me forward. “Temporary hire. The less he knows, the better, and vice versa.”

“Temporary hire,” I murmur, confused and turning back to him. “Wait, aren’t you FBI now? Don’t you have better resources than this?”

“Just,” he sighs and rolls his eyes at me, “can you just get inside, Fay? Before you begin your interrogation? God, I forgot how annoying you can be –“

“I never annoyed you,” I mutter, narrowing my eyes but starting to look where I’m going. And I’m shocked to suddenly realize that we’re at some sort of...Italian version of a cheap road-side motel. What? In such a beautiful country, how did Ivan land here?

Ivan doesn’t respond to me, though, instead moving forward to a door tucked into the corner of the building. He glances at me once before he sighs and raises his hand, knocking.

Fear begins to rise in me now and I tighten my arms around the puppy. Because while I’m not afraid of Ivan – honestly, even after everything, I know he’s not going to hurt me –

...I have absolutely no idea what’s behind this door. Or who. Or why they’re here.

“Come in,” calls a voice from inside and something in me passively realizes that it’s a woman’s voice.

Ivan twists the knob, pushing the door open, and gestures me in in front of him, blocking my exit behind. I look up at him, scared, my face silently pleading for him to tell me that it’s okay.

But he just shakes his head and nods inside the door. “Go, Fay,” he says, his voice defeated.

And I bite my lip, and turn, and take two steps into the room.

Ivan closes the door behind us as my eyes focus on the woman standing across the room with her back to us, her shining red hair falling to her shoulders. My eyes sweep over her, taking in her crisp white shirt, her pencil skirt.

But my jaw absolutely falls open when she turns around because...

God, fuck, because it could be a mirror.

Or, at least some weird, cursed mirror from a fun house that shows me what I’m going to look like in twenty-five years.

My mouth goes absolutely dry as she smiles, a cold, dark thing, and looks me up and down.

“Well,” she says, assessing. “You turned out prettier than I thought you would, with that man as your father.”

Her voice is what seals the deal. It rings somewhere in my memory – from back in the days when I had a mother.

All the blood rushing from my brain, from my face. When I do speak, the word stutters lamely from my lips, shocked, haunted, and alone.

“M-mom?”

Chapter 264 – Long Lost

Chapter 264 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I stare, completely baffled, at my mother – who I barely remember – but it is absolutely undeniable, instantly, who she is. Not only because she looks exactly like me, but because...

The things I do remember about her? The way she moves when she walks, the shape her words take as they ring in my ears? They're...precisely the same. I'd know her anywhere in an instant – because she's my mother –

But...

My mother is dead...

I blink at her, completely confused, tears filling my eyes in response to the insane rush of emotions that fill me – fear, and...is it happiness? And an unbalanced sort of hysterical humor, at the ridiculousness of the situation? And betrayal – that I know is there - because where the fuck has she been for the past twenty years –

“Don't cry, Fay,” she says quietly, crossing her arms and peering at me. She leans forward to study my face and I realize that, even though I expected her to be taller – because, duh, she's always been taller – we are precisely the same height.

“W-what?” I ask, unable to utter – or think – anything besides that.

“You always were a little silly,” she says, her mouth twisting a bit with irritation. “And emotional. I think you got that from your Italian side.” She stands up with a sigh, looking me

from head to foot. “And it looks like you went and got yourself pregnant. That was foolish of you, wasn’t it?”

“What?” I spit out, starting to get mad now. Because – is she – is she for real?

I look back over my shoulder at Ivan, who watches me carefully, actually wondering suddenly if this is real –

Because – I mean – am I dreaming or something?

Is this –

“Pay attention, Fay,” my mom snaps, and I spin to look at her with wide eyes. Because that tone I remember. She shakes her head at me, and then glances once at the little dog in my arms, and rolls her eyes. She doesn’t say anything about it but I blush, suddenly, realizing that she thinks I’m ridiculous.

Mom smirks at my blush and turns away, heading across the room to a little table, where she opens a bottle of water and takes a sip.

And I purse my lips, and draw myself up, and try to remember frantically precisely who I am – a powerful, rich, ruthless woman – the donna of the Lippert family – a viper as well as a fawn –

Because right now? In front of my mother? I feel every bit the lost little girl she left behind.

Tears start to spill down my cheeks despite myself.

Ivan, seeing them, comes to my side.

“All right, Victoria,” he says, his voice a little bored now. “Let’s get on with it.”

Mom turns her smirking gaze to Ivan now. “You told me you were close to her, Ivan,” she says, raising an eyebrow. “But you didn’t say you were in love with her.”

“I’m not,” he growls, crossing his arms.

“Really,” she says, raising her eyebrows and slowly twisting the cap back onto her water bottle. “So protective of someone you...don’t love. You must be a real pitbull for the girls you do care about.”

My mouth is open but I snap it shut at this, my mom’s cruelty to Ivan somehow snapping me more back to myself than all of her coldness to me.

I glance up at Ivan now, wondering why the hell he’s working with her if she treats him like this. And then I glance back at her, my eyes narrowing. Is she deliberately putting me on edge? I’m her daughter – why make it so clear from the start that she has no familial affection for me?

“What is this?” I ask, my voice quiet as my mind starts to run, trying to put all of the pieces together. “Why did you bring me here? What do you want?”

“There she is,” Victoria says, turning her head and considering me as I come back to myself. “This must be the girl I’ve heard so much about – who has become so accomplished in crime in so short a time. I knew you couldn’t be a complete idiot.”

I straighten my shoulders. “You can stop it now, you know. I get it. You’re here on business, not some kind of tearful reunion. If you don’t want me to think of you as my mother, then message received.”

“Good,” she says, raising her eyebrows at me. “I’m glad to see you can be rational.”

“Why am I here?” I ask again, insistent this time and stepping further into the room so that I can see both Ivan and my mother at once. “What is this all about? Because you two might think that you’ve been clever, grabbing me off the side of the road? But my people are not without resources, and you do not have a lot of time before they come through that door.”

My mother’s eyes snap to the purse tucked behind my back and Ivan’s eyes fly to it too.

“Shit,” he murmurs, suddenly diving for me, realizing that I’ve probably got a phone in here that has tracking on it.

Which I do.

“How did you ever go undercover, Ivan,” my mother murmurs, sinking into a rickety little chair by a small table with a sigh. “You’re such a slob.”

I dodge Ivan, trying to keep the purse behind my back, but he just glares at me.

“I’m going to get it, Fay,” he growls. “Don’t make this difficult.”

I glare back at him but turn, letting him dig his hand into his purse and pull the phone from it.

“Get rid of it,” my mother murmurs, nodding towards the door.

Ivan sighs and looks me in the eye. “I’ll be two minutes,” he murmurs, and then heads for the door, striding out of it with my phone in his hands.

“It’s not like Kent won’t be able to track me here anyway.”

“It doesn’t matter,” my mom sighs, reaching for a pack of cigarettes on the table and languidly pulling one out. “We’ll be gone before they can get here. Our conversation will be short, Fay.”

I raise my eyebrow, inviting it. The sooner I get out of here the better.

And as I realize that – that I have no desire to spend this time with my mother, to ask her where she’s been for so long, why she left me, what she’s been doing – I wonder if she’s manufactured this reaction in me to keep herself safe.

Is she being this cold on purpose? Or is this...who she is?

My mother watches me puzzle it out, lighting her cigarette and taking a little puff. She blows the smoke into the air above her head, not bothering to apologize for smoking around a pregnant woman. I don’t mention it either.

“You’re a fool, Fay Lippert,” my mother says quietly, making it abundantly clear that she knows my history and to whom I now belong. But, of course she does – Ivan will have told her everything. “For falling back into the world I worked so hard to get you out of. For getting pregnant by that man and dooming another generation to this life.”

I raise my chin and stare back at her. “What’s worse, mom,” I say, working to keep my voice equally cold. “That I went back to the world you left? Or that I thrived in it?”

She just smirks at me, maybe a little pleased. “Kent Lippert wasn’t a bad choice,” she says quietly. “He’s handsome. I knew him, you know.”

“He mentioned it,” I say dryly.

Her little smirk grows. “Oh, I doubt he told you all the details.”

Something twists in me.

What?

What details?

But I keep my face schooled, not reacting, falling back on my months of practice with Kent and Daniel. I don’t even look his way when Ivan comes back into the room. They’ve turned me into an accomplished liar by now – and my mother had the upper hand when I first came in the room, but I’m on the offense now. She squandered my surprise, if you ask me.

I don’t say anything, letting her talk. I want her information; I don’t want to give her mine.

“Good girl,” she says with a little laugh, taking another drag on her cigarette. “My, but they have trained you well.”

I narrow my eyes at her, done with these games. “What’s your deal, mom,” I say quietly, nodding towards Ivan. “He told me you have something to put on the table. So, let’s get it done, so I can go home to my husband.”

“Which one?” my mom asks, the corners of her mouth lifting into a tiny, cat-like smile.

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I ignore her jibe, keeping my face straight. Ivan leans against the wall next to me, taking a deep breath.

“Fine,” my mom says, sighing and studying her nails. “You’re here, Fay, because you’re in a unique position to give me what I want. And I am in a unique position to take away what you love.”

My stomach twists again with anxiety, and I flinch a little as it turns into a very real, physical pain. My body contracts low on my abdomen and I clench my jaw, willing myself not to touch my stomach. These pains...

God, fuck, if I go into labor right now...I will never forgive this little baby.

But I straighten my shoulders, ignoring it. My mother moves on, either not noticing or not caring.

“What I want,” she continues, her eyes locked on mine, “above all things in the world – the reason I left you with David Thompson to pursue my work – is to have the mafia wiped off the face of the planet. I want all the dons locked away. I want all of their systems dismantled.”

“Why?” I demand, my voice clipped.

“So they stop hurting people. Taking advantage of poor families, of young women. Are you aware, Fay?” she asks, her eyebrows shooting up in superiority, “of precisely what industries you support by not turning these men in?”

“Not the men I support,” I say dryly, though...well. I guess I don’t know for sure, do I? Kent, I know, doesn’t have his hands in anything like that anymore. But Bianci?

My mother just laughs at me, shaking her head. “Naïve,” she murmurs, but then she takes another drag of her cigarette and moves on. “I want these industries gone and I’ve dedicated my life at the FBI to making sure that that happens. But I’ve been working a very long time, Fay, and have made very little progress against these entrenched, monied forces, with very little method for changing that.”

She smiles at me now, gesturing towards me with her cigarette. “That is, until you fell into my hands.”

“I didn’t fall anywhere,” I growl, glancing at Ivan now. “I was dragged here against my will.”

“You’re a bit of a coup, really,” she says, flicking the ash off the end of her cigarette with a charming smile. “A pretty little girl with all the connections I need to make just the perfect move against them.”

“Can you please spit it out?” I sigh, rolling my shoulders, getting tired of this gloating.

Ivan looks anxiously towards the door, and I can tell that he’s ready for it to end too – especially considering his mistake with the phone.

“Fine,” she snaps, and I stand up straight – something in my muscle memory making me react to that tone of voice. I frown a little – because I don’t remember her being a stern mother. I mean, I don’t remember her much at all. But clearly, my body remembers more than I do.

“I’m going to give you a choice, Fay,” she says quietly. “I want you to –“

“I’m not giving up Kent,” I interrupt, raising my eyebrows at her, cutting her off before she asks for something I won’t give her.

She smirks at me again. “Luckily,” she says, “I don’t want him. No, baby Fay –“

I shiver, a little, to hear my mother use Fiona’s nickname for me, the name Janeen has called me so many times.

“Today,” she continues, again not noticing or caring about my reaction, “I’m going for bigger fish. I want you to give me Bianci.”

“What?” I breathe, my eyes going wide.

“We’ve been watching you,” she says, gesturing towards Ivan. “We know you’ve got Bianci’s heir in your house. We know you’re tight. We want you to wear a wire in the upcoming months, to give us the information the Italian officials need to take him down.”

“Absolutely not,” I gasp.

“But it would be so easy,” she laughs, leaning forward and grinning at me. “The supposed mother of his first great-grandchild? They will have no filter around you.”

I keep my face impassive, letting her think that I haven’t taken a different role in the family, that Bianci doesn’t understand me as more than Daniel’s pretty pregnant wife. Because Ivan and my mother – they’ve been watching, but clearly they don’t know all the details.

“They’ll catch me and kill me,” I snap, looking between Ivan and my mother. Ivan looks down at the floor, guilt written all over his face.

“Well,” my mother says with a sigh, “either you risk that, or I take everything I know about Kent Lippert’s current location, and his plans, and everything I figured out about what happened at the Alden house the day that container ship conveniently left the New York harbor, and I take it directly to the FBI.”

I go cold as I realize what she’s proposing.

“Yes, Fay,” she says quietly, nodding to me as she takes a final drag of her cigarette before stubbing it out in the glass tray before her. “I’m giving you a choice here. Either you give me Bianci, or I take Kent.”

I say nothing, my mind racing, trying to figure out a way out of this.

“The paperwork is already in an electronic lock box in DC, Fay,” my mother says quietly. “One phone call from me and my contacts at the FBI have the location of your cute little villa neatly in their email.”

Is it a bluff? What would they do with that information? Would they actually pursue him across international lines?

Slowly I turn to look at Ivan...because what’s his business in all this?

Does he want Bianci to go down?

Because as far as I know...all he wants is Kent.

My mind spins, but what I do know is that I need a great deal more information. And I need to get out of here before I give them anything else.

“How long do I have to decide?” I ask quietly, slowly turning my head to look at her again.

“One day,” she says, her voice light and even cheerful now.

“And Ivan said...he’s taking me home?”

“Yes,” she says, flicking her eyes at him. “Because I want you to talk this decision through with our mutual friend, Kent,” she says, smirking now because she’s again implying that she knows Kent more than I thought she did, and I think she knows it’s driving me crazy.

“Why?” I breathe.

“Because I don’t want him to chase me down and shoot me for taking you,” she says, narrowing her eyes. “And because I think he will obviously have a preference regarding which side of the deal you should take.”

“And if I don’t decide in one day?” I ask quietly.

“Oh, Fay,” she says, turning her head and studying me like I’m cute. “You know the answer to that.”

I nod, because I do. She’ll release the information anyway.

My mother sighs happily, getting to her feet and coming to place her hands on my shoulders. She again studiously ignores the dog, leaning forward and pressing a kiss to both of my cheeks in the Italian way. “I’m really looking forward to working with you, baby,” she whispers. “It will be so nice to have a mother-daughter team working to bring down corruption and crime.”

I don’t move an inch as she pulls away from me, partially because I am...stunned.

Her scent – after all these years, god...I remember what she smells like.

Tears fill my eyes again, and my stomach aches, and I am just...completely overwhelmed.

“Here,” she says, pulling a little folded piece of paper from her skirt pocket and holding it out to me. When I don’t move she leans forward and tucks it into my little purse for me. “That’s the number you can reach me at tomorrow,” she says quietly, “to give me your answer.”

I nod and she backs away, crossing her arms and nodding at Ivan.

“Come on,” he murmurs, slipping a hand behind my elbow. “Let’s go.”

And without another word, barely able to understand anything that I’m thinking or feeling, I let him lead me out of the room, the little puppy fully asleep in my arms.

When the door closes behind us, Ivan sighs and moves his hand from my elbow, slipping his arm around my shoulders instead. “Come on, Fay,” he says, surprising me by leading me to a little blue car. “Let’s get you home.”

I don’t say anything as I let him tuck me into the front seat, buckling my belt over my lap before he moves to the driver’s side and climbs in.

Because I’m really at his mercy, aren’t I?

As we pull away from the dirty little roadside motel I keep my eyes on my mother’s door.

And wonder where the hell Ivan’s really taking me.

Chapter 266 – Delivery

Chapter 266 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“I’m sorry about that,” Ivan murmurs, shaking me out of my stupor a little bit. He keeps his eyes on the road. “I didn’t expect her to be...that cold.”

“Seriously, Ivan,” I breathe, shaking my head at him, holding the little puppy on my lap, close to my belly. “What the fuck was that?”

“Do you have any room to talk?” he asks dryly, glancing at me. “Sending that knockoff Lippert to the coffee shop to lure me away —“

“That was business,” I snap, rolling my eyes, sick of it. “This was...” I shake my head.

“Well, it was personal to me,” he throws back at me, but then he sighs. “But. Yeah. I guess springing your dead mother on you is...next level.”

“How did you even meet her —“ and then I go a little still as I realize something. “Ivan, have you known this whole time that she’s ali-“

“No,” he says, abrupt, turning to frown at me. “I wouldn’t have done that to you, Fay. Not when I thought that we meant something to each other. I would have told you immediately.”

I sigh, sinking back into my seat, believing him. I take a minute, working over the thousand questions in my mind. “So?” I ask quietly. “How did you find her?”

“She found me,” he responds dryly. “Apparently, she’s been keeping an eye on you, on this whole situation. She figured out my connection to it and,” he shrugs, “asked me if I wanted to team up.”

“So, are you like, part of the FBI now?” I ask, confused.

He shakes his head. “We’re sort of doing this freelance. Your mom — she is...passionate about this project. Really, crazy dedicated. So much so that she burned some bridges at the Bureau, got placed on temporary leave herself.”

“So, you two are just like...vigilante cowboys, out here seeking justice?” I ask, letting precisely how stupid I think that sounds bleed into my tone. Ivan narrows his eyes but he doesn’t say anything. “What were you trying to get out of this?” I ask quietly. “Like you’re going to show up back in the USA with Bianci’s head on a platter and what, they’re all going to applaud you and give you your jobs back?”

“Kind of,” Ivan snaps, turning those narrowed eyes on me now. “Plus, I get the justice I’m looking for.”

I turn my head a little at this, considering him. Because, actually, Ivan patently does not get justice out of this. For all I know, his vendetta is against Kent, and Kent alone. So, why would he team up with my mother, who wants to take down the mafia as a whole?

What did she promise him?

But I don't bother to ask, not only because I don't think that Ivan's going to give me a straight answer, but because I don't want him to know that I'm seeing beyond his lie that taking Bianci down will satisfy the vengeance he's held onto since childhood.

Luckily, the little puppy gives me an opportunity to turn the conversation when he lifts his head and gives a sad little howl.

"Aww, baby," I murmur, stroking a finger across his head. "Poor thing, kidnapped and scared, away from your family."

"He's probably just hungry," Ivan mutters, looking at the dog from the corner of his eye.

"And who's fault is that," I coo, my focus still on the puppy. "If someone hadn't hauled him into a van by the side of the road —"

"If someone had just dropped him —"

"Don't listen to your kidnapper," I whisper to the puppy, ensuring that I'm loud enough for Ivan to hear me. "Starvation techniques are part of Stockholm syndrome —"

"Oh my god," Ivan sighs, slowing suddenly and swerving into a service station.

"What?" I ask, surprised and a little freaked out. I do not need more surprises today. "What's happening?"

"I'm not going to let you accuse me of starving the puppy, Fay," Ivan growls, rolling down his window a little and waving the surprised attendant away from the pump, beckoning him towards the car and speaking in swift, near-fluent Italian.

I blink in surprise. Seriously, am I the only one who doesn't speak Italian anymore?

The attendant looks between us, shrugs, and then heads into the gas station.

"What's going on?" I ask, watching him go. But then I start to laugh when, a few seconds later, the man comes back out of the station with a wrapped sandwich and a bottle of water. He comes around to Ivan's side of the window as Ivan pulls out about ten euros and hands them over, waving away the offer for change. Then he pulls forward into a little parking spot, though he doesn't turn off the car.

"Here," he says, offering me the sandwich.

“Thank you,” I say, my voice bright because I’m honestly touched. He didn’t have to do this. I lift the puppy up and hold him out to Ivan.

“What?” Ivan says, confused, leaning away a little bit.

“Take him,” I say, holding him out with more insistence.

“Why?!”

“Because,” I laugh, plopping the puppy down in his lap. “I can’t hold him and feed him at the same time – and I want the food to come from me so he loves me.”

Ivan grumbles but lets the puppy stay in his lap as I smile and start to unwrap the sandwich. The puppy looks up at Ivan with worried eyes as Ivan continues to lean away from him, looking at him warily.

“You can pet him, you know,” I say dryly. “He won’t bite.”

“How would you even know that, Fay,” Ivan snaps, “you just met this dog.”

“Because he’s just a cute little baby,” I coo, leaning forward with a piece of chicken from the sandwich, offering it to the pup. He sniffs it and then eagerly bites, taking it from my hand in his teeny tiny teeth. I laugh, offering him more, and when I glance up at Ivan I see that he can’t help but smile a little bit too.

“Okay,” Ivan sighs, reaching out a finger to stroke the puppy’s head. “He is cute.”

“And he was hungry,” I say softly. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Ivan replies, his voice gentle. We continue like this for a minute or two, me giving the puppy a snack, Ivan lightly stroking his head. And as we do, my mind turns back to my mother, and the strange events of today.

“Ivan,” I say, my voice quiet. I don’t look up at him. “Does she...I mean, why does she hate me?”

“What?” he breathes.

“My mom,” I say, swallowing against the thickness in my throat. “Did she say anything? About...why she left? Why she didn’t...”

“Fay,” he says, and I look up at him, because he sounds so sad for me. He shakes his head.

“Your mom – I think she was damaged by your relationship with your dad. I don’t think – it wasn’t good, Fay. I’ve spent a lot of time with her at this point, and I think there’s a great deal of trauma there. I don’t think she could have stayed with you – it became...an obsession. To take them all down.”

I look down then, my heart breaking a little bit. Because at least when I lost her before, to a car crash? At least then she didn't choose to leave me behind.

But now...

I clench my jaw, but I can't help the tears that fill my eyes.

"Hey," Ivan says, and I look up when I feel a hand on my shoulder. Ivan slowly shakes his head at me, and the puppy peers at me closely, shifting in Ivan's lap. "It has nothing to do with you, Fay – nothing to do with who you are. If she couldn't love you, if she had to go...it wasn't your fault."

And I nod, because I know it's true – it's the only thing that makes sense – I was just a kid. And from what it sounds like, she may not have ever even wanted to have me – or wanted to marry my father –

But god damn it, it still hurts. Tears start to drip down my cheeks.

And Ivan, good guy that he is, reaches out to softly cup my face in his palm.

Chapter 267 – Lil Kent

Chapter 267 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

"Shit," Ivan curses as he watches me cry, looking frantically over his shoulder back at the gas station. "Should I go inside? Should I get you like, candy? Maybe they have ice cream..."

I can't help the laugh that stumbles out of my mouth. "What?"

Ivan sighs and shakes his head at me, freaked out and upset, his jaw clenched. "Well, I can't just sit here and watch you cry, Fay," he growls, I think a little pissed that my being upset is upsetting him so much.

I laugh a little harder now, wiping my tears away. "I thought we were enemies now, Ivan," I reply, my voice a little cold, even though there's still humor in it.

"Yeah well," he sighs, sitting back in his seat, studying me, his mouth twisted with disappointment. "I guess I don't hate you as much as I thought I did."

"I never hated you," I reply, holding his gaze, my voice barely a whisper as I tell the honest truth.

We stare at each other for a long moment when suddenly Ivan gasps, his body going rigid as he stares down at the dog.

“What?” I ask, sitting up straight, worried something’s wrong –

“Oh my god –“ Ivan shouts, grabbing the dog and holding him up off his lap, “oh my god, Fay, he peed all over me!”

I burst into laughter as I reach for the puppy, looking into Ivan’s lap to see that his dark grey pants are, indeed, a little bit darker right where the puppy was sitting.

“Oh noooo,” I coo, cracking up and taking the puppy back, wrapping him up in my arms. “Did you have an accident!? Ohh, little babyyyy.” The puppy scrabbles his paws at me a little, lifting his nose and kissing my chin. I cuddle him close, still laughing.

Ivan grumbles, reaching into the console for some napkins and wiping angrily at his pants. “This is so ridiculous,” he mutters, sighing and tossing the damp napkins on the floor at my feet. “Come on. Let’s get you home.”

My eyes move to Ivan’s face as he reverses out of the parking spot and then heads out onto the road. “Are you really taking me home?” I ask, wiping the last of my tears off my face, grateful for the little puppy for making me laugh when I was feeling genuinely horrible.

“Are you surprised?” he replies, raising an eyebrow at me. “Where did you think I was taking you?”

“Well, I don’t know!” I say, laughing. “It’s been a day full of surprises, Ivan. You could take me anywhere – throw me in a ditch somewhere. Load me on a ferry, take me to mainland Italy, and then elsewhere in Europe.”

He’s quiet for a moment and doesn’t look at me when he speaks next. “Do you want me to take you elsewhere in Europe, Fay?” he asks.

I consider him for a moment, my mouth twitching up in a smile. “Are you asking me to run away with you, Ivan?”

I hold the puppy tight, genuinely curious about his answer.

“Well,” he says, tilting his head as if actually considering it. “If you’re finally starting to regret your idiotic decision to tie yourself to a mafia family and asking me to help you run away, then sure. I’d help facilitate your escape.”

I smile at him, because even though his voice is sarcastic, he’s being sweet. And he’d do it, if I asked him.

“I don’t regret it, Ivan,” I say, my voice soft. He still doesn’t look at me, so I look away, letting him feel however he feels about that. “But...thanks for the offer.”

“Anytime, Fay,” he says, his voice equally gentle.

We drive for a long time in silence. I keep my eye on the scenery, looking for anything familiar as I continue to feed the puppy pieces of chicken and give him sips of the water. After about twenty minutes, I start to recognize things from my neighborhood and I sit up straight, pleased that Ivan was as good as his word.

“Wait,” I say, turning to him, “how did you know where I lived?”

He gives me a rather withering look. “It wasn’t hard, Fay. I just searched for the fanciest rentals in Sicily that have room for a horse and checked to see which were recently rented. There were like, two possibilities.”

I burst into laughter at this, shaking my head and shrugging. Because, yes, I guess we didn’t really go incognito on that one.

“So,” Ivan says, a smug little smile on his face as he slows the car down. We’re getting close to the house. “What are you going to name the puppy?”

“Lil Kent,” I say instantly with a small smile.

“What!?” Ivan turns to stare at me, incredulous.

“You don’t like it?” I ask, trying very hard to keep my face straight and failing.

“It’s the worst fucking name I’ve ever heard –“

“Ohhh, you’re just still mad because Lil Kent peed on you,” I murmur, turning to smile at the puppy, who looks up at me eagerly and gives a little doggie yawn.

Ivan grins, shaking his head like he can’t help it. “Why are you giving him that terrible name, Fay? Name him something good, like...Sparky. Or Firenze, if you’re trying to be Italian.”

“Nah,” I say, turning to grin at Ivan. “I think there’s a better chance of Kent letting me keep him if he knows it’s his namesake. He won’t be able to resist.”

Ivan genuinely laughs at this as we turn the corner onto my street. “Fay, you can name that dog whatever you want. I think you’ve got Kent so wrapped around your finger that it doesn’t matter what he lets you do – if you want to keep that dog, it’s staying.”

“Yes,” I sigh. “But at least with this, Kent will think he had a choice.”

Ivan nods, a sad little smile on his mouth as he stops in front of my gate.

“What to come in?” I ask, my voice falsely cheerful. “There’s about three, maybe four guys in there who would love to greet you with a punch to the face right now.”

“I’m going to take a rain check on that one,” Ivan says, parking the car and turning to me, leaving it running. “You’ll be okay? To walk from the gate?”

“Yeah,” I say, nodding and holding the puppy tight.

“Good,” he says. And then with a sigh he reaches into his back pocket and produces, of all things, my phone.

“You still have this?” I gasp, grabbing it out of his hand. I quickly press the buttons to turn it on.

“I was going to destroy it,” he sighs. “But...your sister sent you some texts that said nice things. And...”

I look up at his pause, surprised.

He twists his lips as if deciding whether or not to say it. “And...I put my number in there. In case...things get weird. With your mom. She was...more unpredictable today than I thought she’d be. And crueler. I’m sorry. If I had known she was going to handle it like that, I’d have done it differently.”

“So...are you trying to say you want to get me out of this deal?” I ask quietly. While he considers it I quickly flip through my apps, pretending I’m looking for the texts from my sister when I’m actually turning the phone to silent and ensuring that the lock screen stays black.

“I’m not,” Ivan says, his voice serious. “Just. You know. In case you ever need it? You’ll be able to get in touch.”

I smile at him, letting my hand drop down by my side. “In case I ever need that ride to Europe?”

“Just in case.”

And he smiles back, his face genuinely warm, and I can’t help it – I quickly put the puppy on the floor of the car, and lean forward, wrapping one arm around him in a tight hug. Ivan wraps both arms around me and gives me a little squeeze, pressing his cheek to my hair.

As he does, I slip my phone deep into the crack behind the cushion of my seat, pressing it in tight so that it’s wedged firmly in there.

“Thank you for being a nice kidnapper, Ivan,” I murmur. “I don’t hate you. I hope you know that.”

“Right back at you, kid,” he sighs. And then we pull apart, and I smile at him one last time before I reach down for the puppy whose paws are on my knees, trying to jump back into my lap. I gather him back up in my arms. Ivan unlocks the door and I push it open, climbing out.

“Got your phone?” he asks.

I smile at him and tap my tiny purse with my fingers. “Right here,” I say. “Thanks.”

He nods to me once after I close the door, and then I see him sigh before he focuses on the road and pulls away. I watch the car drive until it disappears, crossing my fingers that he doesn’t bother to check my seat.

Then I sigh myself and turn to the gate, entering the code that makes it swing open.

“Come on, Lil Kent,” I say, hoisting the puppy up in my arms so that we’re face-to-face. I grin into his confused, adorable little puppy eyes. “Let’s go meet your new daddy.”

And then I step through the gate and start down the long drive towards my house. As I walk, three figures stumble out onto the front porch and I immediately recognize them as Daniel, Jerome, and my dad.

“Fay!” Daniel shouts, starting to sprint down the drive, and tears again prick my eyes even as a low pain throbs in my stomach.

Because I’m so, so glad to be home, back with my family.

Especially because I think...well, I think the newest addition to this family isn’t far behind.

Chapter 268 – Home Safe

Chapter 268 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I wipe away my tears and give Daniel a big smile as the gate swings shut behind us and he skids to a stop in front of me, throwing his arms around me and holding me tight for a long moment.

“Oh my god,” he whispers, his voice shaking. “Are you – are you all right!?”

“I’m fine, Daniel,” I say back, laughing a little. “Honestly, don’t worry –“

“Don’t worry!?” he gasps, pulling away a little and looking at me like I’m insane. I laugh when he gently pats at my hair, clearly looking for head trauma. “Fay, what –“

“No, seriously,” I say, smiling up at him and reaching up a hand to cup his cheek. “I’m fine – Ivan was very considerate –“

“IVAN?!” he gasps, his eyes going wide. “Oh my god, are you serious? It was Ivan?”

“Well,” I say, biting my lip and then sighing as I realize that I’ve got quite a story to tell, and if I spill it all to Daniel now I’m just going to have to tell it five more times to everyone else.

I peek beyond Daniel for a moment, looking for Kent, my eyes falling on Jerome, who is already on the phone, and then my dad. And my stomach drops as I realize that he, really, deserves to know first.

“Fay?” Daniel asks, worried at my pause.

“I’m really okay,” I say softly, laying a hand flat on his chest. “Just – let me tell everyone at once, all right? Where – where’s Kent?”

“He’s –“ Daniel turns, starting to walk me back to the house, but then Lil Kent gives a sad little yip in my arms and Daniel gasps, his eyes going wide as he stares down at the puppy. “Oh my god, Fay,” Daniel murmurs, stopping in his tracks, “you still have the dog!?”

“Yes, poor baby,” I murmur, hoisting him up to Daniel’s eye level so he can see him more closely. “Say hello to your new brother!”

Daniel stands stock-still for a moment, staring at the dog, and then he bursts into a hysterical little laugh when the dog pushes his tiny snout forward and gives Daniel a tentative lick on the nose. “You’re insane,” Daniel sighs, brushing a fond hand over the dog’s head and shaking his head at me. “Come on.”

My husband wraps an arm around my shoulders and escorts me the short distance to the front steps.

“Fay,” Jerome says, his shoulders trembling a little as he hops down the front steps and wraps me in a warm hug, “I’m so sorry – Kent’s coming back – he went out looking for you –“

“Okay,” I say, smiling him, though my eyes keep drifting back to my dad, who doesn’t bother to wipe away the tears that stream down his face. Jerome lets me go, knowing where I want to be, and I quickly climb the steps, letting my dad wrap me in his arms too.

I close my eyes, putting my head down on my dad’s shoulder as he rocks me slowly back and forth, placing his head against my hair. “We were so worried for you, baby,” he murmurs, his voice cracking. And something about it – the real love there, such a true contrast to the coldness my biological mother showed me this morning –

It breaks something in me, and I start to cry in earnest, the entire day washing over me at once. The real fear of being snatched away into a van, of having to confront a ghost, of having a terrible ultimatum hung over my head, and twenty-four hours to decide how to respond?

I cry, hard, for a long time. Dad holds me through it, shushing to me like he did when I was a little girl, murmuring nice things about how it's okay. And after a while...it really is okay. Because my dad is here, and we're together with the little family that we've chosen, and that's...

Well? It's the only thing that matters, isn't it?

I laugh a little as the puppy starts to squirm in my arms, lifting his nose so he can lick the tears that are dripping off my chin. I sniff and pull my head up, smiling at my dad as he wipes at my cheeks with his thumb.

"I should be the one telling you it's okay," I sigh, shaking my head at him. "You're the one who had to sit here, worrying."

"No, Fay," he says, smiling and shaking his head at me. "It's my job to tell you that – I'm an old man now. Don't take the one last thing I can do away from me."

"Don't be ridiculous," I sigh, giving him a shaky smile. "You can do lots of things."

He nods once to me, moving on from it, and reaches out to stroke the little puppy's head. "And who is this? Did your kidnapper give you a parting gift?"

"Nah, this I accidentally stole from a farmer," I say, laughing a little at the ridiculousness of my day. "Dad, meet Lil Kent."

My dad laughs at the name and looks up at me with a raised eyebrow. "Does this family really need another Kent, Fay?" he asks, his voice dry. I burst into laughter and hug my dad again. I can feel his laugh too, shaking in his chest as he holds me tight for a moment before letting me go. "Come inside, little girl," he says, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. "Let's get you warm."

I nod to him, letting him lead me inside with Daniel and Jerome following behind.

Dad leads me immediately to the couch while Jerome moves to the coffee maker, making me something warm to drink. Daniel grabs a blanket and wraps it around my shoulders as I sit down.

"Seriously, guys," I say, smiling around, "I'm not even cold –"

"Let us do something, Fay," Daniel sighs, shaking his head at me as he sits on the other side of the L-shaped couch, resting his elbows on his knees and shaking his head at me. "After we completely failed you today, the least we can do is get you a blanket."

“You didn’t fail me,” I sigh, putting the puppy down on the floor so he can stretch his little doggie legs, which have been cooped up for so long. He stays still for a moment, intimidated by his new surroundings, but then begins to tentatively explore. “It was very carefully planned – I think they’ve been watching me for weeks, waiting for just the right moment.”

“Wait,” Daniel says, going still as Jerome brings me over a cup of coffee. I smile my thanks at him as I accept it. “They?” Daniel continues, his brow wrinkling in surprise. “I thought you said it was Ivan – who is he working with?”

I hesitate then, glancing at my dad and then at the door, wanting Kent here – because I’m not sure I have the strength to tell this story twice. My spine straightens suddenly when another pain stretches across my back, my belly tightening just a little, but I do my best to ignore it and not let the men see. The pains are still really far apart, and we have other things we really need to concentrate on right now.

“How far away is Kent?” I ask, sipping my coffee and awkwardly avoiding Daniel’s question.

“Not far now,” Jerome says, slipping his hands into his pockets and looking down. I focus on him suddenly, realizing that his energy is totally different. He’s usually energetic and fun – I’d expect him to be cracking jokes in his relief - but this Jerome? He looks...beaten down.

I lean forward suddenly, peering at him, and realize that Jerome looks – he looks actually beaten down.

“Jerome,” I gasp, blinking to clear my eyes and realizing that I’m not seeing things. His face – it’s all red on one side, darkening to purple on his cheekbone and beneath his eye. “What – what the hell happened to you!?”

Jerome raises his head and looks at me, I guess realizing that he can’t hide it any longer. “I’m sorry, Fay,” he says, looking at me with such sorrow and guilt in his eyes that I actually sit back against the couch cushion, my eyes going wide.

“Sorry?” I ask, my voice shocked. “Sorry for what!?”

“Jerome,” Daniel says, turning a little to glare at his boyfriend. “Has been keeping secrets.”

“What?” I gasp, my coffee cup starting to shake in my hands. My dad reaches out and takes it from me, not wanting me to spill. I hand it over without looking at him.

“We’ll get into that in a minute,” Daniel growls, clearly pissed at Jerome, his concern for me the only thing keeping the two of them from a major fight. “Right now, we need to hear what happened to you –“

“But who –“ I ask, shaking my head at Jerome and touching the side of my own face, wondering how he got the bruises. I spin towards Daniel then. “Did you do that?”

Slowly, he shakes his head. “Not my style, Fay,” he sighs. “Who do you think did it?”

But before I can come to the obvious conclusion, the door to the house slams open and Kent’s frame fills the doorway.

I’m on my feet, across the room, and in his arms before I can even take my next breath.

Chapter 269 – The True Betrayal

Chapter 269 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent’s whole body shakes as he holds me tight against him, and I hear him breathe a little moan of relief as he presses his fingers hard against my body, as if checking to make sure that I’m here, that I’m real.

“Fay.” My name tumbles desperately out of his mouth as he pulls me even tighter for a moment. I cling to him just as hard, crying again despite myself - just so, so glad to be back in his arms.

“It’s okay,” I whisper, my fingers fisted in the fabric of his shirt as I press my face against his chest. “I’m okay, Kent – I’m perfectly fine –“

He gives a shuddering little groan of relief at my words, pulling me tighter – if that’s possible. I can feel his heart pounding against me, his deep and ragged breaths.

We take a long moment then, holding each other, murmuring reassurances.

“I thought I’d lost you,” Kent whispers, pulling back an inch to peer down into my face, his eyes roving over it to make sure that every one of my features is untouched. One of his hands slides down my back and to my side, touching the edge of my baby bump. “Both of you.”

I shake my head as I stare up at him, denying it. “We’re both here,” I say, nodding, reassuring. “We’re both fine.” Even as I say it, though, a pang of pain passes through my abdomen. And it’s not that I don’t think the baby is okay – I think the baby’s just...ready.

I curse inwardly, wishing the baby had better timing.

Kent shakes his head and pulls me close against him again, tucking his head down close to mine. “We searched everywhere. I sent Gio east – Fay, I’m so sorry,” he whispers – and the absurdity of it makes me laugh, just a little.

“Kent, this is so not your fault –“

“I should have kept you safe!”

“I went to the grocery store –“

“I should have made you stay home –“

“Kent!” I pull back from him seriously now and put my hands on his cheeks, shaking my head again. “It can’t be all your fault – you can’t take that much on your shoulders. Some things are beyond your control – they were watching us for weeks, waiting for me to leave –“

“They?” he asks suddenly, his arms tensing around me as his gaze turns into a glare. “Who, Fay?”

I hesitate, then, looking back at my dad on the couch, at Jerome and Daniel who are waiting patiently for us to have our moment.

“Who?” Kent presses, shaking me just gently, bringing my attention back to him.

I open my mouth to protest, to say that we need to talk as a family, but before I can Kent’s head whips to the side because he heard – as we all did –

The little puppy’s sad whine as he comes around the corner of the couch, looking for me.

“Oh, baby,” I murmur, unwrapping myself from Kent’s arms – which is easy, because they go slack – and taking a few steps over to the puppy, who basically jumps in my arms when I lean down to pick him up. I pet his head, cooing to him, sorry to have left him – because I’m the only friend he’s got in the world right now, as far as he knows.

“Is that…” Kent says, a little breathless in his shock, “is that a dog!?”

I stare at Kent, a little incredulous. “Are you all right?” I ask, holding the pup up so Kent can see him better. “Yes, Kent, obviously it’s a dog –“

He storms forward three steps to me, staring slack-jawed at the animal. “Where the hell did you get a dog?”

“He got kidnapped with me! Didn’t you, little puppy?” I answer, cooing to him and stroking his velvet ears. “He was in my arms when Ivan pulled me into the van –“

“Ivan!?” Kent booms out and I can’t help but smirk and glance at Daniel – because their reaction was precisely the same. Daniel works very hard to keep his face straight, but I can tell that he sees the humor in it too.

“That reminds me,” I say, spinning back to Kent, “we need to go back to the grocery store –“

“What!?” Kent gasps, disbelief all over his face.

“We have to pay the farmer! I stole the puppy! It’s not right, Kent –“

He groans, putting his face in his hands and turning away like he can’t stand to look at me right now.

“I’m serious, Kent!” I say, stomping my foot. “It’s not right to steal a puppy, even if it wasn’t my fault –“

“We’ll take the puppy back,” he growls, turning to glare at me, his hands sinking into his pockets. “We’re not keeping it, Fay.”

I gasp and glare at him, holding Lil Kent tight in my arms and lifting him so that his face is next to mine. The puppy eagerly licks my cheek. “How dare you, Kent,” I say, honestly a little appalled. “This dog and I are bonded by trauma – I am never giving him up –“

“Fay,” Kent growls, taking a step towards me, “you are days from having a child, we are not raising a puppy and a newborn at the same time –“

“We damn well are,” I say, lifting my chin and staring up at him. “I am not sending Lil Kent back to the farm –“

Behind me, Daniel bursts into laughter when he hears the puppy’s name and Kent freezes, staring at me like I’m some horrible imp sent from the underworld just to torture him. I sigh a deep breath and roll my eyes, turning back to the couch as Kent continues to stand perfectly still.

“It’s not up for debate,” I sigh, sitting down on the couch with the dog in my arms. “This pup is a Lippert now.”

Kent sighs, closing his eyes and rubbing his forehead. “At least get him off the couch, Fay.”

Suppressing a smile, because I know I’ve won, I comply with Kent’s demand, giving the puppy another kiss on the forehead before settling him gently on the floor.

“Enough,” Kent snaps, moving closer and glaring around the room. “Fay, tell us what happened. We’ve got to know.”

I take a deep breath then, my mind anxiously turning over how to tell this story. Everyone in the room lets me have a moment to think before I exhale a big sigh and look around. “All right,” I say, nodding. “But…you have to let me tell it without interrupting, all right? Because if I have to stop and answer questions, I’ll never get this all out.”

Everyone nods their consent, agreeing to my terms.

And so I begin – telling about how Ivan snatched me off the side of the road, about how he took me to a hotel where a woman from the FBI was waiting. As I continue the story I see Kent grow angrier and angrier, seething as he holds back his true reaction, letting me talk.

But when I lay out the ultimatum – twenty four hours to decide if I’m going to give up Kent or spy on the Bianci clan – Kent can’t hold it back anymore. He turns away, his hands on his hips as he mutters a long stream of curses.

I bite my lip, looking around at Daniel and Jerome, shocked to see Jerome hanging his head, shaking it as if he regrets every choice he’s made in his life. My eyebrows go up in surprise as I study him – because what – why –

“Keep going,” Kent snaps, turning back to us.

I nod quickly, rushing through the final bit – that Ivan drove me home and was really nice to me and the dog. I keep back, just for the moment, the fact that I left the phone in the car, because...well. I know what I want to do with that. And I’d rather run my plans through with Kent alone.

But first?

“All right, Fay,” Kent says, shaking his head at me a little. “You’ve been keeping it back long enough. Tell us, now. Who was the woman.”

I sigh and look around the room, my eyes settling on my dad. “It was...” I reach out and take his hand as he looks at me with shock, clearly wondering why I’m focusing on him. “Dad...it was mom.”

His eyes widen in disbelief and he stares at me for a long moment before blinking rapidly. “What?” he asks, his voice soft. “Wait, what?” It’s almost as if he thinks he must have misheard me.

“Mom,” I say again, nodding at him and squeezing his hand. “I was as shocked as you are, dad. But...she’s alive. She must have...faked her death, I don’t know. But...she’s been alive, all these years, working with the FBI to take the mafia down.” Dad’s face goes red before his eyes fill with tears – with shock, or regret, or horror – I don’t know.

“I’m sorry,” I say, my voice cracking as I curl up on the couch next to him, pressing my side to his. My dad’s arm automatically goes around me as he wipes a shaking hand down his face. He doesn’t say a word, processing the information that his wife – she didn’t die.

She left him, as coldly and callously as a woman could. Left him without a word, faked her death, and left him to mourn her and raise her daughter all on his own.

It’s brutal news, and it breaks my heart to give it, but as I glance around the room a pulse of shock passes through me as I see that...

...that my dad is the only one who is truly surprised.

“Wait,” I say, slowly sitting up and frowning around the room. “Wait, what’s going on here?”

Kent just sighs and turns his head to glare at Jerome, whose head hangs low on his shoulders.

Chapter 270 – Anyone But Us

Chapter 270 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

My mouth falls open as I look between Kent and Jerome – processing their lack of shock, and the way Jerome hangs his head, and the bruise across his cheek –

And suddenly the puzzle pieces snap together.

“Wait,” I say, sitting up straight and pulling suddenly away from my dad. “Are you – are you serious!?” I take a deep, shuddering breath, my eyes locking on Jerome first and then moving to Kent and Daniel. “You – you fucking knew!?”

“We’ve known for about two hours, Fay,” Daniel grits out between clenched teeth, glaring at Jerome. “Obviously I would have told you –“

I gasp again as Jerome raises his eyes to me, guilt and devastation on his face. “I’m so sorry, Fay,” he breathes, shaking his head at me.

“WHAT!?” I shriek, leaping to my feet and crossing the room to him in a second. “You – you knew, Jerome!?” I whip my hand out, smacking him – hard – across the arm – suddenly fully understanding why Kent punches him so much –

“I’m sorry,” he insists, flinching instinctually away from me but accepting his fate. “I wasn’t trying to keep it from you – it’s so complicated –“

“Were you – were you part of this?!” I gasp, stepping backwards in my shock as Kent comes to my side, tugging me a little further away from Jerome. “Were you teamed up with Ivan and my mom –“

“He wasn’t,” Kent growls, tugging me into his arms. “At least, not that we can tell.” I look up at Kent, desperate to believe it. He nods as he looks down into my eyes. “I’ll explain everything, Fay – as best I can. But as far as I can tell, right now, Jerome knew about your mother in a different context. He hasn’t seen or worked with her in years.”

My mouth falls open as I stare up at Kent in shock, shaking my head. And then I spin to glare at Jerome. “But you knew about her,” I breathe, my lip starting to tremble.

Slowly he raises his eyes to meet mine, and he nods once.

I pull my shaking mouth shut and raise my chin. “I will never forgive you for this, Jerome,” I whisper, shaking my head at him. And a thousand other words roil up inside of me but I turn my face away, burying it against Kent’s shoulder for a second as he strokes my hair, letting me pull myself back together.

Because, right now? Jerome doesn’t deserve another second of my attention. He may never again, for the rest of his life.

“I’m sorry,” I hear Jerome say again, his voice devastated and weak. But I ignore it, don’t let it reach my heart.

Because of all the ways I’ve been betrayed in the past year? This is the worst.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Kent whispers to me, starting to tug me towards our bedroom door. “Let’s take a minute.”

“No,” I protest, spinning away from him and towards my dad, who is starting to get to his feet.

“It’s all right, baby,” he says, wiping the tears away from his eyes. I shake my head, stepping away from Kent and moving toward my dad. I wrap my arms around him and he gives me a quick hug, patting me on my back. “I think...well, baby, I think I need a few minutes alone anyway.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, my eyes roving over his face. “I can come with you – we don’t even have to talk –“

“I’m sure, sweetie,” he says, giving me a tentative smile that I know he’s forcing for my sake. “I want to walk anyway, and you’re,” he forces a little laugh and looks down at my stomach, “well, you’re in no shape for walking, are you.”

“I’m plenty good for walking,” I growl, hoping to make him laugh, but he just smiles at me and pulls away. “You’ll stay close?” I beg, reaching out a hand to touch his arm.

“I promise,” he says, nodding to me as he heads for the back door. “Don’t worry about me, baby – I’m not going anywhere. I just...need a minute.”

And then he exhales a deep breath, and turns, and I believe him.

A horrible little sigh forces its way from my lungs as I watch my dad walk away, feeling so horrible for this man who has been so good to me my whole life, whose own life just got turned upside down again. In one day, his daughter gets kidnapped and returned, and his wife comes back to life only to reveal that she pretended to kill herself to get away from him, from us...

Because she deemed her revenge more important than our family.

I jump a little, totally lost to my thoughts, as Kent wraps his arm again around my shoulders.

I look up at him and he runs his knuckles down the length of my cheek. “Come on,” he whispers, nodding his head a little to our bedroom. “Let’s take a minute, Fay. You need it.”

“Okay,” I say, giving a shaky nod. But before we can take a step I whip my attention to Daniel. “You,” I say, pointing a finger at him. He looks at me in surprise, clearly wondering if he’s in trouble. “You get Janeen on the phone, now. She needs to know, and she needs to be on call in case dad needs to talk, okay?”

Daniel nods to me fervently, pulling his phone from his pocket and beginning to dial even as Kent and I start to walk away.

I bend down to scoop up Lil Kent on the way, pulling him up into my arms and giving him a little snuggle. Kent just sighs and glares down at the dog as we move towards our bedroom. But I do my best to smile at the pup, not wanting his puppyhood to be all scowls and frowns, and give him a kiss on the head.

He turns and playfully snaps his little teeth at a strand of my hair as Kent pushes open the door to our room, which makes me genuinely smile.

“Such a brave little puppy,” I murmur to the pup, scratching his ears.

“I can’t believe,” Kent murmurs, closing the door behind me as I walk to the center of the room. “That today, of all days, you decide to bring a dog home.”

“I didn’t decide, Kent,” I say, turning to him as he comes close. “The universe gave him to me. We’re meant to have Lil Kent, just like we’re meant to have the baby. It’s fate.”

Kent glares at me, putting his hands on my hips and pulling me close so he can look down into my face, the puppy between us. “We are not calling him Little Kent.”

“Lil Kent,” I correct, unable to keep from grinning up at him. “Not little – lil.” I scrunch my nose at him. “It’s cuter.”

Kent laughs with me and shakes his head and a sudden wave of gratitude rushes through me, because Kent – he’s indulging me right now. I know that all of his instincts are screaming at him to interrogate me about the details of what happened today, to come up with a plan, to figure everything out.

But instead, he’s standing here, joking with me about puppy names.

Because that’s what I need right now.

And so I smile at him, and stand on my tiptoes, and tilt my head back, seeking a kiss. “We can name him whatever you want, Kent,” I whisper, smiling.

Kent takes wraps an arm around my waist and presses his mouth to mine, giving me a long, desperate kiss that shows me how worried he was, how much he missed me, how incredibly grateful he is that I'm now back in his arms.

I look up at him with half-lidded eyes when he pulls away.

"I was so worried, Fay," he whispers.

"I was too," I say, raising my eyebrows. "I think...honestly, Kent, you're not going to like it – but I think we're lucky Ivan was involved. My mother – she was ruthless. I think she'd tear the world apart to get to her goals. But Ivan –"

"Has still got a soft spot for you," Kent finishes for me, shaking his head and pulling me tight.

"And me for him," I say, truthful, which just makes Kent glare down at me, jealous. I laugh a little, shaking my head at him. "Don't worry, Kent. We have a family now – a baby, and a puppy –"

"And is that the only thing keeping you in my arms?"

"Well," I say, screwing up my face a little, "considering that you're broke now-"

"I'm not broke," he growls, his arms tightening around me.

But I just smile at him, and shake my head, because I know he's well aware of the truth of it. Kent and I? We're end game.

"I'd never let you go, Kent," I murmur, reaching up a hand to cup his cheek. He leans into my palm, the action soft and animal.

A moment passes as we study each other.

"Does that mean?" he asks softly, "that you've made up your mind about which side of your mom's deal you're going to take? Bianci or me?"

"Well," I reply, my eyebrows going up. "Someone's got to go down, Kent." I start to shake my head. "And it's not going to be us."

Kent looses a breath, staring at me, and then slowly he nods.