

Chapter 271 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent and I take a few more minutes to sit quietly together on the bed, petting the puppy and genuinely just check in on each other – ensuring that we feel right and prepared or what is coming next.

And then the rest of the night?

It's way, way busier than I expected it to be. Honestly, you'd think that the night after a kidnapping you'd be content to just curl up in bed and relax, happy to be home, but with this ultimatum on the line? And the plans that I'm brewing in regards to it? There's a great deal to do.

Kent storms through the house, bossing everyone around, which I think makes him feel centered as much as it ensures that everything that needs to get done is done. He gives Daniel the most instructions, sending him out for takeout for dinner and dog supplies – apparently Lil Kent needs a crate as well as puppy food? Who knew.

Jerome Kent completely ignores, which I think devastates Jerome more than being bossed around, because it's very clear that Kent hasn't decided that he's still part of the team. Still, Jerome makes himself useful, cleaning up and ensuring that everyone has what they need.

My dad comes home after a long walk and mostly wants to sit quietly, though Jerome sits with him for a while. I notice them talking softly after a long bit and, as much as I want to know what they're saying, I'm still not ready to speak to Jerome with anything like civility. So, I turn away.

Gio is the hardest, when he finally gets home. He wraps me in a big, relieved hug that makes me smile as he murmurs his gratitude for my safety before admiring the new puppy, calling him a very handsome specimen. Kent and I fill Gio in on...about half the story, letting Daniel stand close and catch what we're saying. We tell Gio about my mother's threat against Kent, but we keep out the second half of the ultimatum, that offers his grandfather as the second choice.

It's not that we don't trust Gio or want him to know. It's just...well, Kent and I haven't ironed out the details, have we?

And until we do, Gio can stay lightly in the dark.

Me? I spend a lot of my time...walking around. Not because I am idle, but because these labor pains...they're getting sharp. I do my best to disguise it as wanting to take the puppy out, ensuring that he doesn't go to the bathroom inside the house. The contractions are still not very close together, and they're really short – but still, I don't want anyone to know.

There is...too much at stake right now.

And, luckily, my busy house full of men seems quite willing to lose themselves in distractions at the moment, no one really noticing the regularity with which I step outside.

When the night grows late and I get off the phone with my sister – who is pissed as hell at my mom – Kent nods solemnly to me, letting me know that it's time.

And so I say a quiet goodnight to my dad, doing my best to ensure that he's all right. He laughs a little sadly to me, patting my cheek and saying not to worry about him – it's his job to worry about me. So, I give him a big hug and tell him not to hesitate to wake me up if he wants to talk, and my stoic, quiet dad nods and makes his way to his room with a beer in his hand.

I sigh as I watch him go, Kent coming to my side to wrap an arm around my waist. "He'll be all right, Fay," Kent murmurs softly to me.

"I know," I say, resting my head on his shoulder. "I just...it's a big shock."

"As a big a shock for you as him," Kent says, making me look up at him. "If not bigger. And yet you're so concerned about taking care of everyone else?"

I just shrug, not having an answer, not really willing to plumb those depths of my psyche right now. Because Kent's right – I'm not really letting myself feel Janeen's anger, or dad's sadness. I'm locking it all away because...

Well, because I've got a job to do.

"Come on," I say, turning towards our room and taking Kent with me. "We've got to talk."

Kent and I wave our goodnights to the three boys who still sit in the living room, drinking quietly and talking amongst themselves. They call their own goodnights before I give a sharp whistle and hear the puppy scamper across the room to me, eagerly coming to my heels.

"How did you teach him that?" Kent asks, frowning down at the dog.

"I didn't. He's just a good boy," I say, smiling down at the pup who prances along eagerly at my side, staring up at me. "Plus, I'm the only one who had fed him and let him outside."

"Clever pup," Kent says, leading the puppy and I into the room and closing the door behind us.

Kent and I shower and change into our pajamas before the three of us bundle up in the bed then – Kent groaning at my insistence on keeping the puppy by my side –

"Just until he falls asleep!" I insist –

Kent sighs, giving in as the puppy grows heavy in my arms, his sleepy snout stretched out over my wrist. And Kent and I settle against the pillows, getting comfortable for what we both know is going to be a long, long talk. Because as busy as we've been, my mind has been turning and turning, coming up with what I want to do. And frankly, the anger and pain and shock that I've been denying – it's been simmering low within me.

And I have absolutely no intention of letting my mother walk away from this with the upper hand.

But before I can even get to that...there is something that I desperately need to address.

"All right, little viper," Kent murmurs, looking me over. "What do you have turning over in your mind? I can tell it's something."

"I'm going to ask you a question, Kent," I say, my voice quiet and serious. "And I want you to answer me with perfect honesty."

Kent blinks at the seriousness of my tone but gives me a single nod, telling me to ask.

"Have you ever," I say, studying his face very closely, "made out with my mom?"

His face falls in complete shock, his mouth falling open.

I gasp, slapping a hand over my mouth, disturbing the puppy just a little so that he raises his head in concern. "Oh, ew!"

"Wh-what!? Fay!"

"Kent!" I hiss his name behind my hand, "that is so gross!"

"Fay!" he shouts, grabbing my hand away from my face, "you didn't even give me a chance to answer before you leapt to conclusions –"

"You had plenty of time!" I protest, shaking my head, "you had time to say 'what' and 'Fay,' twice! That's plenty of time to say no!"

"Oh my god," he groans, his hand tightening on my wrist. "Fay, you're being ridiculous – no, of course I've never made out with your mother –"

"But did you want to?" I press, leaning forward again to study him.

"What!?" he gasps again, his brows knitting together in anger. "No! Fay! What even gave you this idea!?"

"Things she said," I reply, working to keep my cool but narrowing my eyes, "about you two knowing each other more than you've implied."

“And what is it that I’ve implied?” he growls, dropping my wrist.

“Don’t you play this game with me, sir,” I say, pointing a finger in his face that he swats away. “You know very well that when we first met you said that you met my mother at a party once, and she was very beautiful, and that she was not afraid to dance –“

“What?” he breathes, clearly not remembering the moment like I do.

“You said it, Kent!” I protest, reaching out to smack him on the arm.

“All right,” he growls, not even flinching at my smack and holding my eyes instead. “And it was not a lie.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “And I don’t think that what my mother said today about knowing you more than just a random person she saw at a party once was her just taunting me. So?” I sit back, demanding my explanation. “What’s the truth, Kent?”

He sighs sharply through his nose. “Fine,” he says, glaring at me. “I knew her.”

My mouth pops open with a betrayed squeak.

“Not like that,” Kent growls, leaning closer to me, “we just...she was around, when I was coming up in the ranks. Alden was more established than me – he was one of the people for whom I did jobs. Daniel was just a kid – I was married, and so was she! It had nothing to do with anything like what you’re implying, Fay, and if she lead you to think that then she’s manipulating you –“

I sigh, leaning back a little, believing him now. Still, I narrow my eyes again. “Well?” I say, careful. “Then what was it? Where did your paths cross?”

“Those jobs I did for Alden, Fay? To build my cred in the community, to make some serious cash?” he says, turning his head to the side a little. “Your mom, she was on some of them. One hell of a shot with a pistol, your mother.”

The breath all leaves me in a woosh as Kent sighs and begins to lay the truth for me – a very particular story about a very particular job they were on together, the night before she took me from my father’s home and ran away.

And as he continues my jaw drops lower, and lower.

Chapter 272 – All Nighter

Chapter 272 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent and I – we stay up for hours as he spins out the story of my mother’s past. I get quite mad at him, of course, for taking so long to tell me about it.

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this?” I ask, resting my head on the pillows, ignoring the cramping low in my stomach for now – too tired to worry about it. Hell, I’m even too tired to glare at Kent, even though he deserves it.

“Because it didn’t matter,” he sighs. “She was dead – you never talk about her, or seem nostalgic about her. And I never think about those strange times twenty years ago when I was squeezed into a van and then into a gunfight with the woman. It just – honestly, it doesn’t cross my mind.”

“Well, I still would have wanted to know,” I grumble. “And Ivan would have wanted to know too. It could have given us significant leverage over him.”

“You’re right,” he says, reaching out to stroke my face. “In retrospect, it should have been part of full disclosure. But honestly, Fay, I didn’t remember that I’d said anything to you about her before, let alone what – I wasn’t trying to keep it from you. And Ivan –” he waves a vague hand, “I thought I had bigger fish to fry than Ivan. It was a mistake.”

“I believe you,” I sigh, turning my face and kissing his hand. And then I look back at him. “And, as long as you never made out with her, or worse,” I manage a little glare then even at the thought of it, “then...I guess it doesn’t change anything.”

“What do you mean?” he murmurs, stroking my face.

“It means that we need a plan, Kent. For what we’re going to say to her tomorrow. What we’re going to do.”

“All right,” he says, nodding to me. “What’s the plan?”

“Don’t you want to take lead on this?” I ask, my eyebrows going up

Kent shakes his head back and forth, keeping his eyes on me. “This is yours, Fay. Your mother, your vengeance if you want it. Or your peace, your triumph. Whatever you want, I’m on board.”

I stare at him for a long moment. “And if I asked you to take lead?” I ask quietly.

“I’d do what I thought was right. But...” he hesitates now, narrowing his eyes at me. “I don’t think that’s what you really want.”

I shake my head then. “No, but it’s nice to know you would take it, if I asked you to.”

He nods, steady. “So?”

I nod too. “I know precisely what I want, Kent. I just...don’t know if it’s going to make you hate me, if I ask for it.”

And then, as Kent clicks his tongue and sits up, pressing a hand to my cheek, I spill everything – all of my thoughts, my ideas, my plans. I tell him everything I want and how I want to do it. It takes a long time to spell it all out.

And at the end of it? Kent looks at me with clear eyes.

“Are you sure?” he asks, just once.

“I’m sure,” I say, my voice quiet, giving a single nod.

“All right,” he says, his eyebrows going up. “We have a short timeline for this, Fay. We’ll have to stay up all night.”

“I’m ready,” I whisper, holding his gaze.

Kent leans forward, pressing a single kiss to my mouth, and then the two of us get started, all business. When the sun comes up, our bed is scattered with paper, our notes everywhere. And Kent – poor thing – despite his best efforts, he did fall asleep at the end. I smile at him as I silently pace the floor, my hands pressed against the small of my back, breathing steadily through the contraction that pulses through my body.

They’re about fifteen minutes apart now and even more painful as my body begins to get ready for the real work of labor. I grit my teeth, wondering how the hell I’m going to keep this a secret. Because the moment Kent realizes what’s happening, he’s going to call off our entire plan –

But that can’t happen. It’s just...not an option. So, even though I’m more intensely uncomfortable than I think I’ve ever been in my life – and aware that it’s only going to get worse – I breathe through the contraction, and steel myself, and nod, knowing that we’re going to have to move fast. I glance at the sweet puppy, asleep in his little crate with his little doggie blanket, and then at the clock, which reads 6:00. And as the contraction ends I grimace, knowing I’ve got about fifteen minutes until the next one, and it’s time to go.

I move, then, to sit on Kent’s side of the bed, reaching out and running my fingers through his hair, knowing it will wake him.

I smile as his eyes blink open and focus on me. The moment they do he reaches up and takes my wrist, bringing my hand to his mouth and pressing a kiss to my palm.

“Hey, gorgeous,” I murmur.

“That’s my line,” he mutters, his words still thick with sleep.

I grin at him. “I’m just borrowing it. You can have it back tomorrow. Are you ready?”

“Did I fall asleep?” he asks, sitting up and scowling at himself. “Did you?”

I nod eagerly. “I got a couple of hours,” I lie. “But baby got me up. Constant bathroom breaks, as you know.”

Kent murmurs something comforting to me as he sits up, and then he presses a kiss to my mouth. I lean into it, wanting his love, his warmth, and he holds me close for a long moment.

“Okay,” he says, pulling away and nodding to me. “Let’s get started.”

And then Kent and I stand up and get ready for our morning. And individually, I prepare myself for the biggest performance of my life.

My heart breaks, just a little, when I walk out of my bedroom with the puppy in my arms to see Jerome asleep on the couch, his bruised face pressed unconscious against a tiny throw pillow, a scanty blanket draped over his legs.

And then I scowl at myself, because I’m not supposed to feel bad for him, my betrayer.

But I sigh, because Kent explained more of it to me last night – the whole story, at least from his perspective – and I know that I owe Jerome a long talk. And he owes me a great deal more.

And, because I love him, I’ll give him that when all of this is done.

So I walk over, and, balancing the puppy on my hip, I lean down, stroking my fingers through his hair until he, too, blinks awake.

“Hey, ‘romey,” I say, smiling down at him.

Jerome groans and rolls over on his back. “Hey, Fay,” he says, trying for a smile and failing, that guilt already coming back into his eyes.

“You ready to get to work?”

He frowns a little and sits up. Behind me, I hear Kent’s feet moving across the room and down the hall, intent on waking Gio and Daniel.

“Work?” Jerome asks, looking up at me, his eyes curiously moving over me and taking in that I’m dressed for the day. “What – what are we doing? Are we still going to Monaco –“

I quickly shake my head as I take a step back, letting him put his feet on the floor. “Change of plans,” I say, my voice steady. Then I look at the puppy and over at the coffee machine, anxious suddenly as I feel a contraction coming on. “Will you make me a cup of coffee? I want to take the dog out –“

“Fay,” Jerome says, grabbing my hand before I can skirt away. I bite my lip, anxious. “Please, we need to talk –“

“Coffee first,” I bite out, pointing towards the machine and turning to the back door as I grit my teeth at the pain. And as I scurry away, I silently thank my contraction, because it’s certainly making me look sterner to Jerome than I actually am.

I barely get outside before the pain hits, making me gasp.

Chapter 273 – Playing Fetch

Chapter 273 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I moan softly as I put the puppy on the grass and wait for him to do a little business, breathing sharply through the short contraction. I assess myself quietly, remembering what I’ve read online and in the baby books Natalia bought me – that I’m only really in trouble when I can’t talk or breathe through the contractions anymore.

And while I didn’t walk or breathe, instead standing quietly next to the puppy, I’m pretty confident that I could do both. Bolstered with this knowledge, I cheer for the puppy as he finishes up, congratulating him heartily on being clever enough to go to the bathroom outside.

I don’t bother to pick him up then, and he cheerfully gambols at my side as we go back into the house.

When I go in I’m unsurprised to see a sleepy Daniel and Gio standing with Kent at the coffee machine, Jerome sitting quietly at the kitchen island. As I take them in, I have to suppress a grin at my collection of big tough men, quite pleased to have them on my side.

Kent takes a moment to look me up and down, as he always does, but when he assesses that I’m fine he moves back to his task.

“Good morning, Fay,” Daniel says, opening an arm to me and pressing me tight to his side as I fill the gap. “And good morning, Lil Kent!” he says, leaning over to smile at the dog.

“We’re not calling him that,” Kent says dryly as Gio laughs, hearing the name for the first time.

“Then what are we calling him?” Daniel asks, turning his grin on his dad.

“Anything. Else.” Kent snaps, turning to hand coffee to Gio and Daniel. He nods to me, letting me know I’m next.

Gio leans forward to give me a kiss on the cheek as my morning greeting before sipping his coffee. “So?” he says, looking around. “Am I to assume...”

“Plans have changed,” Kent interrupts, all business. “Fay’s mother threw a wrench in the Monaco plans – they’re being postponed. You,” he says, nodding to Gio, “are going to the airport to pick up Janeen.”

“Oh,” Gio says, surprised, looking around at all of us. I smile at him, leaning into Daniel and hoping he doesn’t see through my expression. Because we’re all aware that Janeen could get a very expensive cab from the airport, or take the train or a bus, or rent a car. But...quite frankly, we want Gio out of the house.

And at last minute? This was the only reasonable excuse Kent and I could think of.

“Her plane lands in two hours,” I say helpfully, raising my eyebrows at him.

“Yes,” Kent murmurs. “So, drink up. We need you on the road.”

“What –“ Daniel says, his arm slipping from my shoulders. “What is happening? Why didn’t you –“

“Daniel,” Kent snaps, his focus still on the coffee. “Go get dressed. Jerome too. We’ll see you out here in a few minutes.”

His tone brooks no compromise, and even though Daniel hesitates for a moment, he and Jerome go. Kent stops Jerome on his way, handing him a cup of coffee that makes Jerome smile far too wide. It’s Kent’s first kind gesture to him all night and all morning.

As the two of them leave, Gio looks carefully between us. “Is everything...all right?”

“It is,” Kent says, handing me my own coffee and turning to look at Gio sternly. “I’m asking you to trust me for a few hours, Gio. Our deal still stands. Are you all right with that?”

Gio’s silence implies that he is decidedly not okay with that, but then he sighs, his head dipping a second before he meets Kent’s eyes again. “I trust you, Zio.”

“Good,” Kent says, his eyebrows going up as he nods Gio back towards his room. “Go get dressed, fast. Fay wasn’t kidding about Janeen’s scheduled arrival.”

It really isn’t a ploy – we spoke with Janeen last night and she agreed to get on a plane this morning. A little thrill of happiness runs through me at the idea – because as much as I love this house full of men, it will be good to have my girl back at my side.

Gio nods once, a good soldier, and heads off. I sip my coffee, looking up at Kent, who wraps an arm around me. We stand quietly for a long moment as our troops get themselves together, as Gio comes out – surprisingly first, though I suppose Daniel and Jerome are taking a minute to

make peace – and says his goodbyes to us, taking the keys to Janeen’s Porsche and hitting the road.

When Daniel and Jerome emerge, they look around confusedly for Gio.

“He’s gone,” Kent says, and I grit my teeth and lean against the counter, trying – impossibly – to look cool and nonchalant as another contraction hits.

Daniel frowns at me as he walks over to us, but I just wave him off and sip my coffee, yawning and pretending my pain is...sleepiness. I don’t know. Inwardly, I sigh with frustration at myself, because I sincerely doubt I’m being very convincing.

“Dad,” Daniel says, letting me off the hook and turning to Kent. “What the hell is going on?”

“We’re making a move,” Kent says, his words clipped. “And we need the two of you two be part of it.”

Daniel looks between us, confused, but Jerome’s face brightens before he turns to me and sees my scowl.

“That is,” I say, “if we can trust you. Jerome.”

“Fay,” Jerome says as my contraction finally passes. He reaches out a hand towards me. “You can trust me – honestly, the reason I never said anything was because I knew it would make you doubt that –“

“Which is not an excuse,” I growl.

“I know,” he replies, genuine sorrow on his face. “And I know we need a longer conversation that there’s no time for today – but Fay?” He holds my gaze, willing me to believe him.

“Whatever you need me for today – for any day, for the rest of your life. I’m your man. I swear it.”

“Good,” Kent snaps, drawing all of our attention to him. “Because you’re with Daniel this morning. We’ll discuss the rest of her life later. And Daniel?” Kent turns his singular, not insubstantial attention on Daniel now. “If he does anything worth doubting – you’re going to shoot him. All right?”

Daniel goes pale at the prospect, freezing.

My own eyes go wide. So do Jerome’s.

But then Daniel looses a breath, holding his father’s gaze, not glancing at Jerome. “All right,” he says, nodding sharply. “If those are the stakes, dad? All right. Because I trust him, I agree to these terms.”

Kent turns to Jerome then, silently asking if he agrees to this as well. Fervently, Jerome nods, which goes...a very long way towards making me trust him.

Although, honestly...I kind of did anyway. But seeing him say that he's willing to be shot by his boyfriend if he steps out of line?

Yeah. It's pretty good insurance.

"All right," Kent says, turning to me with a nod. And out of my back pocket, I pull Kent's phone.

"What we need," I say quietly, entering Kent's code and placing the phone on the counter between the four of us, "is for you two to...play fetch."

As I say the words I open the app on the phone and let Daniel and Jerome see what Kent and I already know: the location of my phone, about forty-fives minutes away.

"Fetch what?" Daniel asks, confused. "Fay, where is --"

"I left my phone in Ivan's car," I say quietly. "In the seat cushions, so he wouldn't know where it was." Jerome lifts his head and smirks at me, pleased and proud. I don't change my expression, looking between the two of them. "We want you two to go here, and only when Kent and I give you the word, we want you to take Ivan. And bring him back to this house. All right?"

Daniel's goes very still, his face paling as he stares at me.

Then, a little frantic, he looks between me and his dad. "What -- what the hell are you two planning?"

Chapter 274 – A Simple Phone Call

Chapter 274 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

"We'll tell you when you need to know," Kent says, his voice dry as he leans back and slips his hands into his pockets. "And when your boy here proves that he can complete this without betraying us?" Kent shifts his gaze to Jerome here and shrugs. "We'll tell you more."

Daniel heaves a sigh and glares at Jerome, nodding before grabbing Kent's phone and pressing a few buttons, sharing the location of my phone – the one in Ivan's car – with his own. That done, he nods to Jerome.

"You ready?" Daniel asks his boyfriend, who nods solemnly.

“Take guns,” Kent says, nodding towards our bedroom. Daniel and Jerome nod, heading towards our door.

“Wait,” I say, frowning and standing up straight. “Where are they – Kent!” I gasp and turn to him. “You keep guns in our bedroom!?”

“Where did you think I kept them,” he murmurs, frowning at me. “In the freezer?”

My jaw drops open as I stare up at him and then I scowl and point a finger up into his face. “You had better make sure those guns are locked down and that the baby can’t get to them, Kent Lippert,” I growl.

“Fay,” he says, reaching for me and pulling me close. “If you didn’t know they’re there, the baby won’t either. At least, not until she’s six. And then we’ll get a better lock.”

And I scowl and put the issue of Kent’s arsenal to the back of my mind.

Because honestly, we’ve got enough on our plates today.

And it’s just getting started.

When Daniel and Jerome come out of the bedroom and move to the door, I look closely to see where they’ve hidden guns on their bodies – but...nothing.

“Are there just guns everywhere, all the time?” I muse, resting my chin in my hands and watching as the boys grab their keys and wave goodbyes over their shoulders, heading out to Daniel’s car.

“Yes,” Kent answers distractedly, glancing towards the hallway where the rest of the bedrooms are. “Is your dad up? He...might not want to walk into this.”

“It’s too early,” I sigh, straightening up and looking anxiously at the clock, knowing I’ve got about five minutes before the next contraction hits – if not sooner. I mean, they’re supposed to speed up, right?

Shit. Is that enough time for a phone call?

“All right,” Kent says, pulling out the little slip of paper my mom wrote a phone number on. “Are you ready for this?”

I sigh, putting my anxiety out of my head, knowing that I need to concentrate right now and also that I have to stop trying to micromanage this whole situation.

Because all of it – it’s happening so fast, and it’s completely out of my control, the kind of fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants job that Kent, quite rightly, said is not my forte.

“Hey,” he says sharply, putting a finger beneath my chin and turning my face up to his. “Are you having serious doubts? Because if you are –“

“No,” I say, scowling and pulling my chin from his grasp. “I’m just...out of my element, Kent. You know that.”

“Luckily,” he says, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and pulling me close, “I’m in mine.” He dips his head then, pressing a warm kiss to my mouth that floods me with warmth – even makes me almost forget the cramping that’s starting low in my stomach.

Shit. Not even five minutes now. They are speeding up.

Kent pulls away and looks down at me with his eyebrows raised, a question in his eyes.

I nod, ready. “Let’s do it,” I say, staring up into his green eyes. “I love you.”

“I love you, Fay,” he says, utterly serious, knowing it’s important for me to hear it.

And then I nod, and he grabs the phone, dials the number, and presses the speaker button.

Anxiety floods me along with the pain of my contraction as the phone rings once. Twice.

And then it picks up.

I take a small step back as Kent leans forward, hoping to hell he doesn’t look back at me as the pain of the contraction sweeps through me. I take long, deep breaths, hoping that if he hears anything strange about my breathing he’ll attribute it to the anxiety of the moment.

“Hello?” I go rigid – even more rigid – at the sound of my mother’s voice.

“Hello, Victoria,” Kent says smoothly, adopting his Mafia Don voice, deep and steady, all business.

There’s a long pause and I bite back a groan as my lower back begins to ache, the pain wrapping around my abdomen as the contraction continues.

“Kent,” my mother says, her voice light, interested. “I didn’t expect to hear from you. Where is my daughter?”

“She’s here with me.”

“And,” mom says with a low chuckle. “May I have some proof of that?”

Shit. Shit shit shit.

Just before Kent turns, I wipe my face clean of pain, forcing my face into steady lines. “I’m here, mom,” I say, calm, even.

Kent nods to me and turns back to the phone as I exhale a huge, silent breath, letting my face crunch with the pain of the contraction again. Mentally I curse and force myself to take deep, deep breaths.

“All right,” my mom replies. “So, are you in charge now, Kent?” she asks, dry.

“I should have been in charge from the start of this,” Kent snaps, his voice harsh. “It was a mistake to go to Fay, Victoria. You should have come to me.”

“And why,” she asks, dry, “would I do that?”

“What?” he asks, a little humor leeching into his voice now, and I have to admit that I’m impressed with his performance. “You didn’t think I’d buy your threat? Admit it, Victoria, you went to Fay because she’s naïve. She wouldn’t know how to handle it, which was to your benefit.”

Kent’s words bite, but I remind myself that we decided on this method together – we practiced this conversation, all the ways it could spin out. Mercifully, the contraction starts to ebb, and I step closer, finally able to pay more attention, my hand stroking over my stomach.

“Partially,” my mother agrees, admitting it. “But it changes nothing, Kent. I want Bianci on a platter, or you go down.”

“I understand the terms,” he growls. “But unlike Fay, I’d like to take the opportunity to counter.”

My mother laughs a little then. “Why on earth would I accept a counter-offer, Lippert? I hold all the cards here.”

“No, Victoria,” Kent says, turning to look down into my eyes. “You just think you do. Besides, in exchange for your silence, I might be willing to offer...much more.”

“And what would that be?” she asks, newly curious.

“The Alden family, likewise served up,” Kent says. “The largest Italian and the American families, together, on a platter.”

“You can do that?” she asks, her voice a little more breathless than I think she’d prefer at this moment.

“I can,” he replies, nodding even though she can’t see him. “I want out of this, Victoria – all of it. You’ve been following me for years – you know I’ve been trying to go legit. We’re on the same side, you and I. We could have negotiated this as equals, if you’d just come to me first.”

“All right,” she sighs. “And what do you want from me to make this happen?”

“A face-to-face,” Kent snaps. “Today. Now.”

“No,” she replies. “It’s impossible –“

“Then the offer goes off the table, Victoria,” Kent says, sounding almost bored.

“I’ll turn you in –“

“You won’t,” he snaps, impatient. “You’re not leaving Sicily with nothing – and you won’t play the trump card you’ve got hanging over my head out of spite. Don’t forget, Victoria,” he seethes, perhaps genuinely angry at her now, “I know you. You’re not turning me over unless you get something out of it.”

My mother is quiet for a long moment and in that long silence I know that we’ve called her bluff. Kent looks up into my eyes and nods once. The corners of my mouth start to turn up.

“All right,” she says, her voice dry. “I’ll meet. Though I’m bringing backup.”

“Be my guest,” Kent says. “How long will it take you to get here?”

“One hour,” she snaps, and Kent hangs up the phone call without another word said. When he turns to me, I find that I’m shaking just a little, from fear, or adrenaline – or – god, who knows. Whatever. I’m too exhausted by it all to parse my emotions right now.

“All right?” he asks, moving close and stroking a hand down over my hair.

I hesitate but then give a shaky nod and Kent gathers me to him, holding me and rocking me back and forth, murmuring sweet things as I bury my face against his chest.

Because...I mean, there’s no going back now, is there?

I exhale a long, long sigh.

“Everything all right in here?” I hear dad ask, and I jump a little, turning to see him standing in his pajamas at the edge of the kitchen. He looks around. “Where did everyone go?”

Kent sighs and releases me. I bend down and pick up the puppy, not able to meet my dad’s eye.

“David,” Kent sighs, slipping his hands into his pockets. “I think we should have a talk –“

“No,” dad says, and I look up at him with wide, curious eyes. “Kent, I have a feeling...well.” He looks between the two of us now. “Whatever’s going on? I have a feeling I just don’t want to know. Is that all right?”

Kent looks at me and I look between him and my father before giving a small nod.

If that's...really what he wants? Then I'm okay with that too.

"I think I'm going to town," my dad says, looking out the front door where two cars still sit. "I'm going to stay there all day. And you'll call?" he says, raising an eyebrow at me. "When...well, when I should come back?"

"Sure, dad," I say quietly, working hard to keep my voice from shaking.

"All right, doll," he says, coming forward to press a kiss to my cheek and then heading back to his room to get changed.

"Class act, your dad," Kent says, running a hand through his hair.

"He's the best," I sigh, exhaling another long breath.

Kent picks up his phone again, and I watch him dial Daniel's number. "Are you on your way?" he asks, and I don't hear the answer, but Kent gives a curt nod.

And then he tells Daniel the rest of the plan.

Chapter 275 – All in One Place

Chapter 275 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Victoria sighs as she pounds on Ivan's door, hoping to hell that he's up. She clenches her teeth as she hears movement in the room, clutching her hands impatiently.

A moment later the door swings open and Ivan flinches back from the bright morning sunshine.

"Why aren't you up?" Victoria asks, her voice frustrated.

"Why are you up?" Ivan retorts, glaring at her and rubbing his eye. Then he stands up a little straighter. "Did you hear from Fay?"

"Look at you," Victoria says, smirking. "Standing at attention at the mere idea that she would call."

"Shove it, Victoria," Ivan sighs, a little sick of her. "Just tell me what's going on."

“We have to go,” she says, nodding over at their cars. “Lippert wants a face-to-face. I’m going to the house and I need backup.” She turns to walk away but Ivan grabs her arm.

“Victoria,” Ivan says, shaking his head, “this is stupid –“

“It’s a move I have to make –“

“It is not,” Ivan snaps, his eyebrows going up. “What – why the hell would you go to their territory –“

“Just come, Ivan,” she groans, rolling her eyes and tugging her arm out of his hand. “She’s my daughter, it will be perfectly fine – it’s just a counter-offer, completely normal. Which you should know, considering your years undercover.”

Ivan just scowls and shakes his head more, leaning against the doorframe and studying this woman who is so like Fay and yet...so completely different. For someone who’s not much of a mother, he thinks, she’s got a hell of a lot of faith in her daughter.

“I’m going now,” Victoria calls over her shoulder as she moves towards her rented car. “You have about five minutes to pull yourself together – follow behind, and for god’s sake, stay out of sight when you get to the Lippert house, all right? They know I have backup coming, but it won’t do any good for them to know where.”

“Fine,” Ivan calls after her, not liking this plan at all but backed into a corner by this woman. She’s the only route he’s got left, after all, to the one thing he’s wanted since he was a kid.

Revenge.

Ivan ducks back into his hotel room, getting dressed fast and scowling the entire time because as much as he’s going along with this plan? Something about it just doesn’t feel right. When he’s ready he grabs his wallet, his keys, and the shady black market gun Victoria gave to him when they arrived. After all, neither of them are technically here on official business – no way of getting a good gun into the country.

“Should just steal one from Lippert while I’m there,” Ivan murmurs, checking the clip. “I’m sure he’s got dozens.”

And then, ensuring everything is neatly tucked away on his body, Ivan leaves the hotel room and heads for his car, lost in his thoughts and anxieties about what the hell Lippert has up his sleeve, asking Victoria to come to the house.

Is Fay even in on this? Does she know what’s going on? Is she –

“Hey,” a voice says calmly behind him as Ivan reaches for his car door. Ivan spins immediately, something ringing with familiarity about that voice –

But before he can even process it, a fist flies through the air and connects solidly with his face.

“That’s for kidnapping my wife,” Daniel growls as Ivan falls to the ground of the parking lot. Before he can react, Daniel presses a shoe to the center of Ivan’s back, forcing him flat, and another pair of hands grabs Ivan’s wrists, zip tying them together behind his back faster than Ivan can process it.

And then, suddenly, he’s being hauled to his feet. Ivan shouts, kicking out at Daniel, but Daniel punches him again and he groans, tasting blood in his mouth.

“Don’t be a fucking idiot, Ivan,” Daniel growls. “It’s done.”

Ivan only has the opportunity to blink at Daniel once before a piece of duct tape smacks over his mouth and a sack descends over his head, making his vision go black.

When my mother arrives at the house, I’m standing on the front porch in a serious black dress. Not because I felt it fits the occasion – not really. Just because it’s the only damn thing that fits.

The puppy jumps around at my feet, chasing a leaf, and I smile down at him as my mom’s car makes its way down the driveway.

“Oh, little pup,” I sigh, passively grateful that my most recent contraction passed just before the gate opened to admit my mother’s car. “I wish I was you. You’re having a great day.”

The puppy looks up and yips at me, excited, and I can’t help but smile at him as my mom parks and climbs out of the car, looking me over from head to foot.

“Where’s your keeper, Fay?” she asks, her voice cold. “Or are you allowed to speak for yourself now?”

“Hey, mom,” I say, my voice sarcastically cheerful. “Welcome to our home! Would you like to come inside? Can I get you something cool to drink?”

She rolls her eyes at me as she comes up the front steps and gestures to the door. “Shall we?” she asks, clearly not having any time for my fake niceties.

“After you,” I murmur, leaning down to pick up the pup as she pulls the door open and steps inside.

Kent’s waiting for her in the kitchen.

“Victoria,” he says by way of greeting, looking her over from head to foot. “You look well.”

“Bodes well for you, doesn’t it,” my mother says, walking boldly into the kitchen and looking Kent over in kind. “Considering that you’re getting a preview of what that one will look like in about twenty years.” She gestures at me over her shoulder with a thumb.

Kent looks over my mother's head at me and I just shrug, not knowing what the hell else to do. I mean, it's not like she's wrong.

Kent smirks and then turns his attention back to my mother. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"What is with you two?" my mom asks, looking between us with her nose crinkled. "Offering drinks – this is not a visit, we're here on business. Let's get it done."

"Fine," Kent says, gesturing towards the hall. "This way, please."

"I'm perfectly comfortable right here," my mom says, moving for one of the stools by the counter.

"Actually," I say, taking a step forward. "We'd prefer you came to one of the back rooms, mom. Dad...he doesn't precisely know you're here."

It's a lie of course – dad's gone to town. But still, we need mom in a private room for the rest of what we've got planned.

My mom raises her eyebrows at me, complete shock on her face. I tilt my head to the side, wondering if she actually knows her husband is here at all. I mean – they've been watching us, right? But then again...dad doesn't leave the house often to go to town...

A sly little smile finds my lips. "So, unless you'd prefer to have a much larger confrontation today..."

"Fine," she scowls, sighing and following Kent as he moves down the hall. "Though I'd like to remind you that my backup is here, and that if I don't come out of this house in one hour –"

"You are perfectly safe with us," Kent murmurs as he opens the last door on the right down the hall, his voice smooth and comforting.

I follow my mother slowly down the hall, only turning into the room when she's stepped inside. And then I lean against the doorframe, my hand moving slowly across my stomach as I watch my mother turn slowly around, her eyes roving over everything.

"What...what is this," she asks, her voice breathless.

"It's the baby's nursery, mom," I say quietly. "We thought you'd like to see it. You're about to be a grandmother, after all."

She snaps her gaze to me and glares, not at all liking that term. "Cut the emotional subterfuge, Fay," she says, her voice withering. "It's not going to work on me."

"It's also the only private room we have that works conveniently for our conversation," Kent says, his voice bored. "So, emotional subterfuge or not, Victoria, would you please take a seat?"

He gestures towards the comfortable armchair I plan to use when nursing and my mother sits down.

“Okay,” I sigh, turning away from the door. “I’ll leave you to it.”

“What?” my mom asks, surprised.

“Did you think I’d stay?” I ask, blinking innocently at her, the puppy in my arms looking her way with curiosity. “After all, I’m too naïve for these conversations.” I give her a bit of my own withering stare as Kent nods to me. “Call me if you need me, sweetheart,” I sigh, playing my prescribed sweet little mafia wife role and pulling the door shut behind me as I head back into the living room to peer out the window.

“Just in time,” I murmur, watching Daniel’s car pull down the driveway as well.

As I watch, Daniel parks the car and Jerome steps out of the back seat, hauling a captive Ivan out with them. I glance down the hall, hoping to hell our soundproofing of the baby’s room two months ago is as good as the contractor said it would be. And then I go to open the front door.

“All right,” Daniel says, striding through the front door and gesturing for Jerome to follow. “Where do you want him, Fay?”

“Fay!?” I hear Ivan shout, the word muffled by his duct-taped mouth.

“In my bedroom, please,” I say, gesturing towards my room, which is the furthest point across the house from where Kent and my mom are having their little chat.

Ivan moans in frustration as Jerome lifts his arm up, hauling Ivan across the living room and pushing through the door into my bedroom.

I sigh, hanging my head and kissing the top of the puppy’s ear as I take a deep breath, praying to hell that the rest of this goes smoothly. Because there are way, way too many wildcards left in this game for my comfort.

But, I’m in it now. And so I stride forward, following the boys into the bedroom, grabbing a little baby monitor off the back of the couch on the way.

Chapter 276 – The Truth

Chapter 276 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Just as I'm about to pass through the door though, I feel the next contraction take hold. Cursing to myself, I flatten myself against the wall outside of my bedroom and grit my teeth, holding on to the puppy but doing my best not to squeeze him as the pain starts to deepen, an ache building low in my body.

The puppy whines as I start to pant my way through this, lifting his little head in concern and sitting up straight, reaching out his little nose to kiss me on the chin. I turn my head away, unable to concentrate on anything else –

“Fay?” Jerome’s voice calls, and I look up just in time to see him step out of my bedroom. His eyes go wide as he sees me pressed against the wall, clearly in pain. “What! Are you –“

“Get out here,” I growl, releasing one hand from the puppy and tugging him into the hall with the hand that’s not holding the baby monitor. Daniel and Ivan – if he’s got his hood off yet – absolutely cannot see Jerome’s shock and concern.

“What’s wrong –“

“Jerome,” I hiss, “if you say anything about this to anyone in this house right now –“

“Oh my god - ” his eyes go wide as he realizes what’s happening, “Oh my god, Fay, you’re in labor!?”

“Would you shut up!?” I whisper shout, glancing over my shoulder towards my bedroom. “We are getting...” I moan for a second, distracted by the pain, unable to finish my sentence. But then I take a deep breath and press on. “We are getting through this now, and both Daniel and Kent will have a meltdown if they find out –“

“What about me!?” Jerome gasps. “What about my meltdown!”

“You,” I seethe between my teeth, tightening my grip on his shirt front, and relief begins to flood me as the contraction subsides, “lost your rights to a meltdown when you kept my mother a secret from me. All right!? You promised this morning that you’d be my man, Jerome.” I glare up at him, demand and plea equally present in my eyes.

He hesitates. “Fay, how far along are you?”

“Just at the start,” I lie, my words swift. “Honestly, Jerome, I can do this – I just need...a little break sometimes.”

“Oh my god,” he sighs, straightening and running a hand through his hair. “All right, Fay – but if this gets bad?”

“If this gets bad we’ll go to the hospital,” I say all in a rush – because I can hear Daniel’s steps moving towards the door. “Now go!”

Jerome nods to me and head into the room, almost slamming into Daniel on the way.

“What’s going on?” Daniel asks, frowning at us and reaching out a hand to steady Jerome.

“Nothing,” I say as the contraction graciously passes. Good. About eight minutes of freedom now, if I’m lucky. “Puppy had an accident, is all.”

Daniel’s serious expression instantly lightens as he buys my lie. “Lil Kent,” he says, reaching out and petting the puppy’s head. “I forgive him, as long as he kept it away from my shoes.”

I can’t help my own smile, but I lift my chin towards the room, indicating that we need to go inside. We have things to do.

Anxiety roils in me as we walk into the room because I am...trying to do a lot of things at once right now, aren’t I? I mean, this baby – it is coming soon, whether I like it or not –

But I also have to manage the kidnapping of my ex, and the negotiation with my mother in the nursery across the house.... I let out a shaky breath as I do my best to steel myself and concentrate. “One thing at a time, Fay,” I murmur to myself.

And then I turn towards Ivan, who is sitting zip-tied to the chair of the desk with his hood off but his mouth still duct-taped shut. He glares at me, clearly pissed as hell.

I set my shoulders and push all the thoughts of labor away for the moment while I concentrate on being the mafia donna for the next eight minutes.

Well, maybe seven now. If I make it that long.

“Hey, Ivan,” I say, forcing my body to relax, a smooth smile to take shape on my lips. I step forward and put the baby monitor on the desk next to him. “I had such a nice time being kidnapped by you yesterday. So much that I thought I’d repay the favor today.”

Ivan’s brow furrows as his glare deepens and he attempts to say some angry words through his duct-tape, but obviously I can’t understand him.

I tilt my head to the side and raise an eyebrow, clearly asking him to consider whether this is worth the breath. He inhales sharply as he shakes his head at me, recognizing that I’m in control.

“We’re here to offer you a gift, Ivan,” I say quietly, bending down to put the puppy on the floor so I can concentrate. He starts to gambol about at my feet. “I’d very much like it if you could leave the house today with us agreeing to be allies and friends. If we take away the duct tape, can you agree not to shout?”

He stares at me for a second but then slowly nods. I look up at Jerome, who takes a step forward and holds Ivan’s head steady as he rips the duct tape from his mouth. The tape makes a vicious ripping sound and Ivan groans, his face red over his mouth and cheeks.

I wait, giving him a second to recover, and when he lifts his head again he renews his glare at me.

“So nice to see you again, Fay,” he growls. “How the hell did you find me?”

I shrug, implying that it doesn’t matter how I found the location of the new hotel he and my mom transferred to after they left the last one. “It’s not important,” I sigh, needing to get this done fast. “I need you to listen to something, Ivan. One conversation. And if you do that – really listen, without interruptions, actually considering what is said...we’ll let you go.”

His mouth drops open a little bit at my words.

I wait patiently, letting him process this.

“Wait, seriously?” he says, looking between the three of us. “You just want me to...listen to something?”

I nod.

“This isn’t a trick?” he says, looking at me from the side of his eye, trying to figure out the catch here. “You’re not going to...beat me up anymore? Kill me?”

“We reserve the right to beat the shit out of you,” Daniel says, crossing his arms, “if you try anything. And frankly, I wanted to rough you up a lot more. But you bizarrely have a fan here in Fay,” he says, sending me a glaring little glance. “Who wants to keep you pretty.”

“Then why did you even kidnap me?” Ivan growls. “I would have come willingly, just to listen.”

“He said I’m nice, Ivan,” I snap, my lip curling. “Not stupid.”

Jerome laughs a little, and Ivan renews his glare. “Seriously? This is it? I listen, and I walk? You’re not going to tear me limb from limb and dump me in the ocean off the back of your house?”

“Ivan,” I say, my voice gentle as I slowly walk towards him. “We’re friends. I’ve always liked you. And quite frankly, after all of this, I don’t really see why we can’t call it even and leave on good terms. But,” I bend over now that I’m very close to him, bringing my voice close to his ear. “Don’t make any mistakes about it. I will have you killed if you come after me, or my family, or even my new little puppy. Ever again. Are we clear on that?”

And I lean back a little so that there’s barely a hand’s breadth between our faces, staring into his cool grey eyes. To my pleasure, they widen a little in surprise as he sees how completely serious I am.

“All right,” he breathes, nodding once as I straighten. “I’ll listen, and then I’ll go, and we’ll be...even, Fay. We’ll be even.”

“And by ‘we,’ you recognize that you meant Kent too, right?”

Ivan hesitates, gritting his teeth, because he knows I’m asking him to give up the vendetta he’s carried in his heart for years.

“Agreed,” he finally grits out. And I nod.

“Okay,” I say, heaving a little sigh. “Daniel?” I gesture towards the baby monitor. Daniel reaches for it, flicking the button that turns it on. There’s a fuzz of noise as he puts it back on the desk, a little green button in the corner lighting up.

Jerome moves to Ivan’s chair, turning it so that he faces the monitor as Daniel turns the volume up. Ivan glances up at me once before leaning forward, looking at the screen. “What the hell is this?” he murmurs, curious. And then his eyes go wide as he hears my mother’s voice, halfway through her negotiation with Kent.

We all listen quietly for a minute or two, with nothing interesting happening yet, and just as I lean forward to put some of my weight on the back of Ivan’s chair, another contraction hits.

I stand up straight, turning and heading for the bathroom, wanting to be out of Daniel and Ivan’s eyeline before this truly takes hold –

“Fay,” Daniel calls, frowning after me.

“Just a second!” I say over my shoulder, working hard to keep my voice light as I scurry into the bathroom. I shut the door behind me just in time, my body bowing almost in half as the pain overtakes me.

And suddenly, as I grit through the pain, I feel a very strange little popping sensation and then...a rush of liquid down my legs.

Shit. Shit.

I groan, not because it hurts but because my water just broke at the most inconvenient moment. But there’s nothing I can do about it now, so I just moan low through the pain and wait for the contraction to pass. When it does, I grab one of Kent’s precious fluffy towels – sorry, Kent – and do my best to pat my legs dry with it, leaving my poor ruined panties on the floor and dropping the towel on top of them.

I mean, it’s a mess but...

I glance at my watch and then back towards the room. Shit. Shit. The contraction was only five minutes after the last one this time. God damn it, the labor took so long to get started – why is it going so fast now!?

And have I missed anything important in the conversation?

I spin towards the door.

Chapter 277 – The Story Comes Out

Chapter 277 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

As I pull the bathroom door open, I grit my teeth again and glare down at my belly.

“You’ve sure got crap timing, little baby,” I mutter, but as I step out I almost trip, immediately, over the puppy, who stares up at me with worried eyes. I can’t help the little laugh that stumbles from my lips.

“Come on, puppy dog,” I murmur, shaking my head at him and starting to walk across the room back to the grouping of boys by the desk. The puppy runs to keep up with me, clearly eager to be at my side, clever boy that he is.

Daniel steps aside as I reach the desk, making room for me to squeeze in. I bend over, peering at the screen with the rest of them.

“Did I miss anything?” I ask Daniel quietly, not looking at him.

“No,” he murmurs in reply. “It’s taking him a minute to get her on the right track.”

I nod, understanding. Kent’s job was to kill time negotiating with my mom until we turned on the baby monitor – when we turned it on in here, a green light appeared on his as well, so he’d know we were listening.

Now the real talk begins.

I feel Ivan’s eyes on me and I turn my face to his.

“What the hell is this about?” he hisses, clearly not understanding.

“Just listen,” I say, turning my face back to the monitor.

We all fall silent, tuning in. The puppy sits on my foot and I glance anxiously at the clock, hoping to hell that Kent talks fast. Because, ridiculously, I’ve got about five minutes until I’ll need to dash into the bathroom again – and boys are dumb, but they’re going to start figuring out that I don’t have to pee that frequently.

“What’s Ivan’s role in all of this?” Kent says quietly, snapping my attention back to the screen. I focus on his form and I can see his hands steeped together as he sits casually in the chair across

from my mother. “Do you want to make any...appointments? Concessions for him, as part of the deal?”

“I made him some promises,” my mom says cagily, “that I’d prefer to keep. But if he needs to be jettisoned in pursuit of the bigger goal, I don’t mind that either.”

“Fay’s fond of him,” Kent says quietly. “She doesn’t want him hurt.”

“She’s soft-hearted,” my mom replies, dismissive. “Honestly, Kent, I thought you’d have picked a tougher character, like your first wife. At least she had a little spirit to her.”

Kent shrugs, not defending me but not confirming her assessment of me either. “I can’t have Ivan coming after me when you and I have made a deal, Victoria,” he says, staying on track in the conversation. “I know that he wants me more than he wants Bianci or Alden. Those are your priorities, not his.”

“You’re giving her the Alden family?” Ivan breathes, looking at me with wide eyes as he cleverly puts the pieces together. “Fay, they fucking belong to you – they’re your family, they’re in your pocket – why would you give them up to the FBI!”

“Just watch,” I growl, not taking my eyes from the screen as I reach out and shove his shoulder. “Listen.”

Kent’s playing his role well but god, fuck, this has to go just right...

“So,” Kent says carefully, “you don’t want any protections for Ivan?”

“He’s not on my list of priorities,” my mother says, her voice dry. “I promised him that we’d take down you, Kent, to get him on board. But I always had my eyes on bigger targets. If this means having to disappoint the kid and cut him loose?” she shrugs, “what the hell do I care? Unless...you don’t think you can take him, Kent. What are you, scared?”

Kent laughs a little, shaking his head, dismissing the idea.

Ivan slumps as much as he can, tied into his chair at the ankles and the wrists. “Took him down once, didn’t I?” he murmurs, and I smirk because – well, he’s right. My mom – she’s underestimating Ivan like Kent once did, which is not a good choice in the long run.

“Victoria...” Kent says, his voice a little hesitant now as he leans forward and peers at my mother. “Are you...aware of who this kid is?”

“Why does it even matter?” my mother breathes, “can we move on?”

“No,” Kent says, glaring at her now, “this boy is coming after me with a great deal of persistence – he’s more than just a fly buzzing around my head anymore, Victoria. And do you know why?”

“Of course I know why,” she drawls, returning Kent’s glare. “I know exactly who he is, and why he wants you, and the very deep irony that he’s working with me in that pursuit.”

Ivan goes still next to me. I glance at him, seeing his brows knit together in interest and confusion.

“So, you never told him?” Kent asks, letting his voice turn curious and conversational as he drapes an arm over the back of his chair, looking at my mother like he thinks she’s a very clever woman. “He never put together the connections between your history with his dad?”

I train my eyes on Ivan now, watching him instead of the screen. After all, I know this story – Kent told it to me last night. I don’t need to watch.

Ivan eyes go wide and I swear he stops blinking as he stares at the screen rapt.

“Why would I ever let him know the connections,” my mother says, her voice rough with disgust now, “between me and that rat?”

Kent laughs a little. “So many years of history and you’re still pissed about it?”

“He fucking betrayed all of us,” Victoria seethes between her teeth, leaning forward to glare at Kent now. “He lied to me for years, showing up in my house, buddying up to my husband, bringing that boy over to play with my daughter? One of Lorenzo’s most trusted men,” she shakes her head in disbelief in the memory, “and still, he goes down remembered as a true-blue cop.”

Ivan’s face goes pale as he realizes what my mother is saying.

“I remember your face that night,” Kent says quietly, his voice conspiratorial as he reminisces along with her, “when we were on that job? And you realized who was dressed in a police uniform? I mean, I hadn’t put the pieces together yet – but I do remember how livid you were.”

“Lorenzo’s man on the inside,” she says, her voice angry as she remembers it, even after all of these years. “Pretending to be a cop, and all the time just making sure the Alden family got out of all of their police deals scot-free. How could I not shoot him, Kent? Fucking guy went against everything I believe in – and did his job so well that no one figured it out even after he was dead.”

Ivan lets out a guttural groan, pressing his eyes shut and turning his head away as his world comes shattering down around him.

“You were a mafia don’s wife, Victoria,” Kent says, confused. “How could he be against everything you believe in? He was on your side.”

“Lorenzo forced me to marry him, Kent,” she says, her voice bitter and full of rage. “Maybe he didn’t have me as brainwashed as you have my daughter, but he, too, knocked me up and tied me

to a situation even when I knew it was wrong. I got out and have spent the rest of my life chasing down rats like Alden and Kaminski. Rats like you.”

“Enough,” Ivan grits through his teeth, shaking his head, his eyes still closed.

Daniel looks at me, questioning. I nod. Ivan – I think he’s heard all of the important stuff. Daniel picks up the baby monitor, flicking it off. I watch the little green light in the corner fade to black, knowing that the same is happening on the baby monitor in the nursery, letting Kent know that Ivan’s done listening.

I straighten up, exhaling a steady breath as I rub my stomach, which starts to ache with the beginning of my next contraction.

My mind works quick, coming up with a plan.

“I’m going to give you a minute to think, Ivan,” I say, working very hard to keep my voice calm and quiet. “Daniel? Could you get him a glass of water?” I shift my eyes towards the closet, where there are some bottles in the fridge.

“I don’t need any water,” Ivan murmurs, his eyes still pressed shut, his shoulders starting to shake a little with his effort to suppress his emotions.

“Well, even if you don’t need it,” I sigh, moving towards the door to the room already. “I’m still offering it. I’ll be back in a minute, and then we’ll talk.”

I don’t look over my shoulder as I head out the bedroom door, hoping to hell that Daniel does as I suggest and moves to the closet.

Jerome – he gives me less grace.

“Fay!” he hisses, closing the bedroom door behind him as he chases me out. I sit heavily on the couch, the contraction hitting me in full force. “Was that – was that all for real!? Did your mom – oh shit!”

I glare at Jerome as he realizes, finally, that I’m having another contraction.

“Oh my god,” he murmurs, going to one knee in front of me. “Um, what do I do!? Fay, these seem to be like, fast. Are they – are you – what –“

“Just shut up, Jerome,” I growl, reaching out for his hands, which he gives me. “It will pass.”

I turn my head to the side then, moaning heavily into my shoulder as I squeeze his hands hard.

“Ow,” he whispers, but he doesn’t pull his hands away. Instead, he keeps vigil with me, staring intently up into my face as I weather the contraction and it starts to fade. When I finally start to

catch my breath and open my eyes again, I see that he's looking at me with real worry on his face.

"Fay, please," he murmurs, reaching out to touch my cheek. "I – I think we have to get you to the hospital –"

"It's so close, Jerome," I murmur, leaning into his palm a little. "Please – let's just finish this, okay? And then we'll go –"

"Let me call an ambulance now –"

"No," I snap, glaring at him. "We're not there yet – and I can't fuck this up by having an ambulance at the gate." With a heave, I start to lift myself off of the couch. "Come on, we need to –"

"What!?" he breathes, putting a hand on my shoulder and trying to keep me on the couch. "Fay, you can't –"

"I have a job to do, Jerome," I snap, pushing his hand away and staring hard at him as I get to my feet. "Kent is handling Victoria, and I am handling Ivan. I am not leaving this unfinished."

Jerome puts his head in his hands and groans, shaking his head as I get to my feet and head back towards my bedroom, determined.

"Stubborn," I hear him murmur as I go, "rich girls – always so stubborn."

And I smirk at that – because damn right I'm stubborn.

I want this absolutely finished before we welcome this little baby into the world – I'm not going to let any clouds hang over that.

But, as I push through the door into my room...

My body tells me that we are going to need to hurry if I want that to be the case.

Chapter 278 – Ivan's Choice

Chapter 278 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

When I walk back into the room I find myself laughing, suddenly, when I realize that Daniel has cut one of Ivan's hands loose so that he can drink the bottle of water next to him on the desk, but that Ivan's using that free hand to stroke the fur of the puppy, which is now in his lap.

“Did you make a friend, Ivan?” I ask quietly as I walk over to them, my legs a little shaky after that last contraction.

“Figured he needed an emotional support animal,” Daniel murmurs, leaning back against the desk with his arms crossed.

“It is helping,” Ivan murmurs, his voice considering. But when he turns his face up to me, I see that his eyes are rimmed with red and he’s just doing his very best to put up a strong front. “Or at least, it’s not making it worse. And he is soft.”

“Ivan,” I say, my voice soft as I move close and put a hand on his cheek, my heart breaking for him. “I’m sorry,” I murmur.

“Why are you sorry,” Ivan sighs, looking away from me but not pulling away from my hand. “You’re the only one who told me the truth.”

“Yeah,” I say, considering that that’s probably true. “But I did have you kidnapped and tied into a chair to do it. Plus,” I turn his head a little and eye the bruise starting on his cheek that matches Jerome’s. “Looks like my husband got a little rough with you, didn’t he?”

Ivan sputters a little laugh, shaking his head. I step back, tucking my hands behind my back. “I might have earned that one,” he murmurs in reply.

We’re all quiet for a moment and I reach out and scratch the puppy’s nose. But even in the quiet, I’m tense, because while Ivan can sit here all day turning over the facts in his mind?

I’m on an ever-shortening time limit.

“The deal still stands,” I say quietly. “We asked you to listen. Now we’ll let you go. But...do you have any questions first? Or anything you want to talk about?”

He looks up at me, a little baffled. “Seriously, that was real? You’re just going to let me go?”

“Well, do you believe what she said?” I ask, nodding towards the monitor. “About...who your dad was, and who killed him?”

He exhales, long and slow, looking at the now-black monitor himself.

“I guess I’ve got no reason not to,” he murmurs. “A confession freely delivered to a man who was also there that night, who knew what happened. Not given under duress, totally unprompted by her interlocutor? And I have no rational reason for why she’d say it if it didn’t happen...”

He shakes his head, still thinking it through.

“Kent’s not innocent,” I say, and Ivan turns his face to me, “of a lot of things. But in this particular case, Ivan? Your vengeance, all these years, was directed at the wrong person.”

“The person I’ve been working with all these months,” he growls, tearing his eyes from mine, clearly ashamed of himself.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself, Ivan,” I say quietly, my heart genuinely going out to him. “You’re just a little mafia baby like me. We were both born into and caught up in this world without even knowing it.”

“Probably why you were so good at it, Ivan,” Daniel points out, “when you were undercover.” But I lift my eyes to Daniel and shake my head a little bit, letting him know that it’s not the time. Daniel just shrugs, probably thinking that the point stands. I can’t help smiling a little.

I glance at the clock. Shit.

“So,” I say quietly, trying to keep my cool even as the seconds tick away towards my next contraction. “Do you want to go? Or, we can have Kent come in – he can answer any questions -”

“I’ll go,” Ivan says quickly, looking up at me. “If...that offer still stands.”

“It does,” I murmur quietly, and then I nod to Jerome, who comes forward with a knife in his hands, kneeling down to cut the ties at Ivan’s ankles. “But...” I hesitate a little. Ivan looks up at me, waiting.

“Ivan,” I say quietly, crossing my arms across my chest. “Can we just have peace between us, once we’ve let you go? I mean, we’re not your enemy...”

Ivan hesitates even as Jerome cuts the last tie on his wrist. He stands as he rubs the red skin there. “Will you let me go, even if I say no?”

I consider him for a moment and then I nod. Daniel glares at me, but I ignore him. “You’re not my enemy, Ivan,” I say quietly. “You never have been. I’m not coming after you – none of us are. I’d like it if the same were true for you in return.”

Ivan looks at me evenly, his head slightly turned to the side, perhaps for the first time considering me as the powerful woman that I really am – because honestly, that is a promise I can make right now.

Ivan? He’s free. I won’t let anyone touch him unless he comes after us first.

“I need some time,” he says quietly, “to wrap my head around all of this. But, if what she said in there is real?” He looks towards the door, to where Victoria is somewhere else in this house, “then we’ve got no problem, you and I. Or me and Kent, or any Lippert. Is that fair?”

“It’s fair,” I say quietly. “I’ll forward you Fiona’s number, all right? She’s my Alden contact.” I bite my lip for a second, considering. “I mean, a lot of oldschool Alden men were killed that day we escaped...”

Ivan lets out a bitter laugh as I casually consider the murder of my and his father's old friends.

"But," I say, letting a little smile play at my lips as Ivan passes the puppy into my arms, "if there's anyone still alive who can verify the story...she'll be able to put you in contact."

"Thank you," he says quietly, looking down into my eyes.

We stand like that for a long moment, and I study his sad, serious, handsome face, wishing things were different for him. But this world is not fair – and Ivan, like so many of us, got caught on the wrong side of it.

He closes his eyes, exhaling a long breath, and then looks towards the door, clearly ready to go.

I nod to Daniel, who takes Ivan by the arm just above his elbow. "I'll see you out," he murmurs quietly.

"So gallant of you," Ivan says dryly, trying to tug his arm out of Daniel's hand, but Daniel just laughs and doesn't let go. Then he starts to quietly let Ivan know the plan – that he can take one of our cars back to the hotel – we'll come get it later today.

Jerome looks at me worriedly as we follow them out of the room, but I just shake my head at him, letting him know that I'm all right.

Well, not all right. As the tension of this particular situation rolls away from me, the stress of the next bit starts to hit in full force. Jerome seems to see it on my face, and he immediately wraps a supportive arm around my waist and takes my hand.

We follow Ivan and Daniel out into the living room and I'm a little surprised – but not concerned – to see Kent standing in the kitchen with two glasses of water on the counter. Clearly, he's used getting water as an excuse to come into the rest of the house, leaving my mother in the nursery, probably behind a locked door.

Kent nods solemnly to Ivan, who does the same as he heads for the door, the keys to Daniel's fancy car in his hands.

Before he can reach the door, though, it opens.

I blink at the sunlight that floods through it and, when I can see again, catch sight of Gio's confused survey of Ivan as he leaves our house.

"Ivan!?"

My heart sinks into my stomach when my sister's voice hits my ears and a strangled little noise comes out of my throat that makes Jerome go tense beside me, because he probably thinks I'm dying or giving birth or something equally dramatic.

There's a mumbled greeting and a farewell then as I hastily pass the puppy to Jerome and move towards the door, passing Gio and heading immediately for my sister, who peers, confused and interested, after Ivan as he walks away.

"What the fuck is he doing here..." she breathes, baffled.

"Janeen!" I cry, and my sister barely turns in time to catch me in a hug. Tears spring to my eyes – honestly, I didn't even know how badly I wanted her here until she was here –

But a wave of emotion crests through me – relief, and fear, and the knowledge that my mom is still in the other room – and that this baby is coming –

The next contraction starts to hit, and my face twists with pain.

"Baby," she murmurs, holding me tight and then pulling back to look at me, her eyes going wide. "Oh my god, baby!"

"What?" Kent's voice is tense as he appears at the door, glancing over my head for a second as Ivan drives Daniel's car away down the driveway, the gate already opening for him. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" Janeen asks, turning to glare at him. "Are you seriously trying to tell me that you didn't know that she's in labor!?"

Kent's eyes go wide as he focuses them immediately on me.

Chapter 279 – The Third Choice

Chapter 279 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

"Shit," I hiss, but, well...

Too late now.

I groan as the contraction hits in full force, clinging to Janeen's shoulder as I bend over at the pain of it, somehow feeling some kind of relief when I'm bent in half –

Honestly, I don't know – nothing makes sense right now, my whole body is groaning with the pain of it – it feels like a charley horse combined with a deep aching, almost like a burning – my knees go weak, my legs starting to give out –

But Kent's there in an instant, his arms wrapped fully around me as he barks orders at everyone to clear the door, to get inside –

I try to take a stumbling step forward as the contraction hits its crescendo, but it's too much –

So instead, I just lean, hard, against Kent, pressing my eyes shut until it passes.

When the pain starts to lessen, I find one of my hands gripping one of his, his other arm wrapped around my back and curling around my torso, holding me up.

"I'm okay," I pant, starting to straighten, to look up at him. "Seriously, Kent, I promise – I'm fine –"

He breathes my name, his voice shaky as he looks me over, assessing me.

I glance towards the house and he immediately understands, moving forward with me through the door to where my anxious family is waiting, Gio closest to the door.

"How far apart are your contractions," Gio demands as Kent walks me over to the couch.

"Um," I say, actively avoiding the question as I look around the room, trying to decide how to handle this –

"Fay!" Gio commands, glaring at me.

"They're four minutes," Jerome says, coming close with his arms anxiously crossed, the puppy clutched against his chest.

Kent curses swiftly and fluidly, turning to glare at me.

"Jerome!" I growl, glaring at him. "Betrayer, twice –"

"Are you serious," Kent growls, taking my face in his hands even as he sits down with me on the couch. "How have you – how have I –"

"That's the real question, Kent," Janeen says, coming close and glaring at him. "How did you seriously not notice this – women don't just go into labor for half an hour – she's probably been like this for hours, all night!"

Kent glares in her direction and then looks at me, the same angry question in his eyes. "Um," I say, glancing away towards the floor. "I may have been...hiding it. Just a little bit."

"Fay!" he snaps, appalled.

"We had shit to do, Kent!" I hiss, turning my eyes back to glare at him. "We were on a timeline – we had to get this done – shit, we still have to get this done!"

“Nothing is more important than your safety, Fay – than the baby –“

“Um,” I say, my voice going a little shrill and my eyes wide as I point down the hallway towards the nursery, “I might say that the fact that my mother is locked in the room down the hall maybe trumps my labor at this moment –“

“What!?” Janeen shrieks, spinning to stare at the hall which holds her own bedroom. “What the – where the hell is dad!?”

“I am calling an ambulance,” Gio murmurs, whipping out his phone and starting to dial.

“Fay,” Daniel says, coming forward, reaching for me.

“Stop!” I shout, thrusting my arms out to the side and stopping Daniel in his tracks, pushing Kent away from me just a little bit. “Everyone just stop! For ten seconds!”

Everyone, to my surprise, freezes.

Well, except Gio, who turns away from us and starts to murmur in fluid Italian into his phone.

“This is not done,” I say, pointing down the hall. “And we cannot just drop this now, just because the baby is coming as well.”

Kent starts to protest but I turn my glare specifically on him now. “Kent,” I say, my face grave. “You know I am right. We put too much work into this to let it collapse now – I have not slept in 36 hours –“

“Ohhh my god,” my sister moans, putting her face in her hands and tilting her head back, starting to pace in an anxious circle.

“We are so close,” I say, leaning towards him, locking eyes, making him see and understand. “Just – wrap this up, Kent,” I beg, taking his shirt in my fists. “Finish the plan, and we’ll concentrate wholly on the baby. I promise.”

Kent hesitates for a long second, but then he nods, steady. And then he gets to his feet, striding away from me.

“What!?” Janeen breathes, storming forward, “Kent you need to get her to a hospital –“

“Oooh geeze,” I say, leaning back against the pillows of the couch as another contraction starts. My heartrate increases as panic hits me a little bit. Because this one – I mean, it can’t have even been five minutes this time –

God, this is all going so fast –

“No time,” Gio snaps, shoving his phone back into his pocket. “Ambulance is on its way, but considering how far along she is,” he sits down on the couch next to me, quickly looking me over and checking my pulse. “...I’m sorry, Fay,” he says quietly, shaking his head at me, “I think this is happening here...”

“What?” I breathe, looking at him with wide eyes. “No, there’s still time –“

“No,” he says, taking my hand as the contraction starts. “Too late, Fay – the paramedics are coming, and my friend, an OBGYN – she is coming now –“

“Gio,” Kent barks from his place by the kitchen counter. I get a glimpse of him before the pain of the contraction makes me press my eyes shut as I cry out at the pain of it. God, it’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before. “Get over here. Now.”

“Zio,” Gio breathes, appalled. “I need to stay with Fay –“

“You need to get over here,” Kent growls, “and do as I say.”

I nod hastily to Gio, letting him know I want him to go, and I murmur my sister’s name. Gio hesitates, but I force myself to drop his hand. After a second his weight lifts from the couch and I feel a lighter body take its space. I reach for my sister, tucking my face against her shoulder as the pain wracks through me.

My sister holds me through it as I pant, as some instinct in me tells me – ridiculously – to get on my knees – maybe even to push -

“Daniel!” Kent barks, and I can hear the worried tension in his voice, can feel that he’s just barely holding it together. “Jerome!”

The contraction starts to pass and I hear footsteps moving across the room to Kent’s side.

Janeen, sensing that the contraction is passing, starts to whisper-hiss to me. “Fay what the fuck is going on?” she asks, looking frantically between me and the others in the room, her eyes going wide as she notices – maybe for the first time – the puppy that’s in the room as Jerome puts him on the floor and he scurries over to settle anxiously at my feet. “Are you crazy!? Where the hell are you sending the doctor – he has to stay here –“

“No,” I gasp, trying to catch my breath as I rest my sweaty forehead against my sister’s shoulder. “He has to take her to Bianci –“

“Who,” she asks, baffled, and then I hear her gasp, “your – your mother?”

I nod weakly, taking deeper breaths now. “It was the only way,” I murmur.

“The only way to what?” she asks, tense beside me even as her arm slips around my shoulder.

I raise my head to meet her eyes. “The only way to keep us all safe,” I say, nodding lightly. “Mom threatened Kent if we didn’t give her to Bianci. So,” I shrug weakly. “We are giving her to Bianci instead.”

Janeen stares at me with her mouth open, shocked and I think a little appalled.

“Someone has to go down, Janeen,” I whisper, agonized – because while I am steady in my choice...I know that others will judge me for it. “Mom made sure someone was going down, and I’ll be damned if I was going to let it be me or any one of us.”

Janeen freezes as she stares at me, realizing what I’m saying.

That...that my mom is the one going down.

That I’m handing her to Bianci, telling him freely that this is the American FBI agent who has been seeking his fall.

And he...he can do whatever he wants with that information.

Can do whatever he wants...with her. Janeen’s head snaps to the side and my gaze follows it, both of us going rigid at the sight of Daniel and Jerome suddenly reappearing in the room – god, I didn’t even notice that they’d left - and leading a stumbling woman forward out of the hallway, her arms zip tied behind her back, a black bag over her head. Gio is suddenly at my side, murmuring questions to me, telling me to lay back so that he can perform an examination, ordering Janeen to go get towels –

But Janeen and I both just sit there, perfectly still, staring at my mother being lead away to the door.

“Fay,” Gio says, shaking my shoulder –

But I can’t – I can’t look at anything else –

“Stop!” Janeen calls, suddenly jumping to her feet.

Something about her movement shakes me too, breaking me from my shocked reverie. I suddenly turn to Gio as Janeen strides away from me. “Gio,” I gasp, “what are you doing – you have to take her to your grandfather –“

“No,” he murmurs, looking at me steadily, “we decided – Daniele and Jerome, they will take her in my stead –“

Anxious, I glance over at Kent, who stands between me and my mother, his eyes steady on me. Because – I mean – this wasn’t the plan –

But he gives me a firm nod, commanding me to trust him, before he turns away to handle Janeen, who is striding for my mother.

I exhale a shaky breath and nod back to Kent, reaching out my hands for Gio's even as I keep my eyes on Janeen.

"All right, Fay," Gio says, his voice taking on the calm and steady tones of a doctor well practiced in emergency medicine. "Look at me – it's time for you to focus on this –"

But I ignore him as Janeen stops in front of my Daniel and Jerome, my mother clutched between them. "Take off her hood," Janeen says, crossing her arms. "I want to look at her."

Daniel hesitates, looking at his father.

Slowly, Kent nods.

Chapter 280 – Things Happen Fast

Chapter 280 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I pant a little, feeling the next contraction coming on – shit, are they supposed to move this fast? – and I grope for Gio's hands even as I keep my eyes trained on Janeen.

"Fay, you have to pay attention –" Gio commands, his face stern.

I send him a quick glancing glare. "Shut up, Gio," I growl –

And to my shock, he does, clenching my hands in his but falling silent.

I turn my eyes back to my sister as my mother's black hood is removed, as her eyes dart around to take in everyone in the room –

My husband and his boyfriend on either side of her, holding her fast.

The father of my child, the man she thought she was negotiating with for the past half-hour, looking at her sternly without an ounce of pity in his eyes.

Her daughter, panting and pale on the couch, clearly in labor with her first child, a stranger holding her hands.

Until finally, my mother's eyes move to the beautiful young woman standing in front of her, her purple hair spilling around her shoulders.

I watch Janeen closely, my heart breaking for her too.

Because...I mean, at one point, this woman was her mother as well. Or at least, she pretended to be.

“Do you know who I am?” Janeen asks quietly.

My mother stares at her for a long moment before she slowly nods, just once.

Janeen studies her, her face blank.

And then, quick as a snake, Janeen’s hand flies through the air, her palm slapping hard across my mother’s cheek with a loud smack.

I can hear my mother groan as her head snaps to the side.

“Fuck you,” Janeen growls, her voice shaking with her vehemence. “Fuck you for what you did to that girl,” she continues, pointing a finger towards me. “For abandoning her. She is perfect, and it was the biggest mistake of your life, choosing to live it away from her side.”

Janeen’s chin lifts now and tears spring to my eyes, because I know my sister – I can see it in the way her lips press to a thin line, the way she sets her shoulders, that she’s determined not to let my mother see her cry. “And fuck you for me too. And for dad – you abandoned us as well, when we loved you. And for that, you deserve whatever’s coming your way.”

Janeen steps back then, her shoulders shaking a little with the effort it takes to hold it together. My mother raises her head then, looking one last time at Janeen’s face, her eyes...unreadable.

“I’m done,” Janeen says, nodding to Daniel. “Do...whatever it is you were going to do. I am done.”

Janeen turns on her heel, stalking away, moving back towards Gio and I as Jerome puts the bag back over my mother’s head, Kent quickly ushering orders for which car to take and how to drive.

I hear Janeen asking Gio what she can do, Gio telling her again to go get towels, Janeen’s footsteps moving away. But even as the next contraction hits me with a wave of pain, all I can see is my mother’s red hair disappearing beneath the black bag –

Her slim shoulders, hunched now with fear, as Daniel and Jerome lead her towards the door –

The shape of her as she disappears through it –

Disappears from my life –

And I gasp in pain and...I don't know. Horror? Shock? As I realize that this is absolutely the last time I'll ever see my mother again.

Tears drip from my eyes as Gio turns me towards him, trying to coach me through some breathing as the pain steadily grows in my back, my sides, my abdomen, in my bones as the baby shifts, moving lower, getting ready –

But I can't - I can't concentrate –

Because...how do I feel about this? Should I be devastated, should I be clinging to this moment, remembering the way she looked as she's lead away?

Or...am I just mourning her twice? Wasn't she dead to me already? Am I just mourning a ghost? Because that woman...

God, was she even my mother?

Sobs break from me as the pain starts to subside, and suddenly I realize that Kent is on my other side, turning me so that I can lean against his chest. I rest my head against him, panting, dazed.

"Is she all right?" I hear him ask Gio, his voice frantic with worry as I blink, trying to focus my eyes.

"She's exhausted, zio, emotionally and physically," Gio murmurs, and as I lean against Kent I see him shaking his head, frustrated and worried. "Come on, Fay," Gio murmurs, "we need to move you to the floor..."

I nod, scootching myself sideways off the couch and leaning against Kent, letting him take my weight as Gio takes my legs and together they lower me to the living room floor. Janeen's already there, I realize, spreading out towels. The puppy jumps up against my knee, also worried, and I reach out a passive hand to pat him – wanting to comfort the poor thing even as my mind is elsewhere.

"Janeen," I murmur, turning towards her.

"It's fine, sister," she says, reaching out and brushing my cheek with her fingers. We both turn our heads as we hear a siren on the road – close enough to be just outside the gate.

"Go and open it, Janeen," Gio orders, his voice clipped. "And please take this dog – it will not leave Fay alone –"

I watch as Janeen nods, scooping the puppy up into her arms as she runs for the door, pressing the buttons that will open the gate and let the ambulance in.

I look up at Kent, worried, in a great deal of pain – not really understanding, anymore, in my physical and emotional exhaustion, what precisely is happening –

Kent shakes his head at me, worried as hell, fear written all over his face and flooding his eyes.

“Fay!” Gio says, snapping his fingers in front of my face and drawing my gaze forward to where he kneels between my knees. “You have to pay attention, now, all right? It is almost time to push.”

My eyes go wide.

What?

Are we – are we seriously there already?

Gio nods to me. “Your labor is proceeding very quickly, Fay,” he says, his voice steady. “It’s time now. You have to be strong.” Behind me, I hear Janeen opening the front door and a great deal of commotion as she directs whoever it is to the living room, where I’m leaning back against Kent, who kneels on the floor behind me.

Shakily, I nod, doing my very best to pull myself back together, to focus on this.

Because this – this is the last part –

Everything else is done, and now – if I can just get through this –

“Hey,” Kent snaps, and instinctually I turn my head up, looking up into his face. “You can do this, Fay,” he says, nodding to me, forcing his expression to change – now filled with warmth and determination and love. “You’re not going to fall apart on me now, right? Not after all of this.”

I stare at him for a long moment, honestly considering it, and then I nod, even as a team of paramedics come forward, murmuring questions to Gio in Italian. He begins to explain, but I ignore them all.

“Time for the baby, Kent,” I whisper, a tremulous little smile coming to my lips.

“This is the worst shit you’ve ever pulled,” he murmurs to me, a little smirk on his own face now as he presses a kiss to my hair, “lying to me about being in labor for twenty-four hours just to get your way?”

“Well, I knew you couldn’t be mad,” I sigh, “if I gave you a baby at the end of it all.”

Kent barks a harsh laugh and settles his body more completely behind mine, pulling me back a little. I let him take all of my weight behind me as a paramedic kneels next to me and apologizes quietly before pulling my dress up and wrapping some kind of medical strap around my belly – something to monitor the baby, I guess - but I don’t really have the energy to think about it.

Because then the next contraction hits.

Gio consults for a moment with a woman kneeling next to him, who nods. Then he turns to me.

“All right, Fay,” he says, his eyes steady and confident. “It’s time for you to push.” The pain is more intense than anything I’ve ever experienced to this point in my life – so much so that I’m barely able to focus on anything else. But somewhere, beyond it all, I hear and obey Gio’s steady commands to push, and feel Kent’s hands tight around mine.

I push and push when I’m told to, following Gio’s calm counts of ten with breaths in between. There are gaps, too, when the pain lessens, when I’m not contracting –

But they’re brief, and then the pain comes again, and I push.

But, like everything towards the end of this labor, everything happens very, very fast.

And quite suddenly, as I give a guttural yell alongside one final push...

There’s a sudden lessening of the pain and the stressed tension on my lower half –

And the sound of a little baby’s cry fills the air.