

Chapter 41 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

A few minutes later, Fay and Daniel are curled up on her bed, sharing a bottle of white wine and a box of donuts that Daniel swiped from the kitchen. The rest of the room is still a complete wreck – furniture overturned, clothes and books thrown everywhere – but the bed they were able to set to rights pretty easily.

Fay ignores the mess as she bites into her second powder donut, overlooking the dusting of sugar that falls all over her shirt and comforter while she chases her food with a sip of wine.

“So,” Daniel says, holding his still-full glass of wine uncomfortably in his hands, “you’re seriously okay?”

“Yeah,” Fay says, shrugging one shoulder at him. “Seriously, I mean, it was scary. But it didn’t hurt.”

“And he just chained you to floor and yelled at you? And then hit you on the...butt? Once?”

“No, he chained me to the table first,” Fay says, taking another bite. “To interrogate me.”

Daniel stares at her, shocked that she’s being so blasé about it. Almost as if she didn’t mind it.

And considering Kent’s expression when he had stormed up from the basement, it certainly seemed as if Fay had come out of the situation with the upper hand.

Daniel sighs then, looking down into his glass. “It sounds like the sort of thing he does pretty often,” he says, letting her in on a few family secrets. “That’s why he has the chain in the middle of the floor. He uses it to...initiate people. Into the trust of the family.”

Fay raises an eyebrow at him, seriously doubting that Kent’s previous interrogations have gotten...well. That hot.

But she doesn’t say that to Daniel. Instead, she asks another question. “Does that mean I’m like...made now? A made man? Officially in the family?”

Daniel scoffs. “No way,” he says with a little laugh. “If you were made you’d be way more shaken by it. He makes you take all kinds of oaths, lets you see the sort of stuff he’ll...do to you. If you go against the family.” He grimaces a little at this.

“How do you know,” Fay says, cocking her head to the side curiously. “Are you made?”

“I’ve been made since I was born,” Daniel murmurs, looking down.

“But you didn’t go through like...a ceremony.”

He shakes his head no.

“Then how do you know what it’s like?” she asks.

Daniel pauses before answering. “He made me...watch. A few times. Made me...participate, a little bit. So I’d know what to do when the time came for me to do the same.”

“Oh,” Fay says, raising her eyebrows. Then, she considers for a moment. “I think I’d actually like to see that.”

“What?!” Daniel exclaims, looking at her with a little disgust on his face.

“What?” she replies, frowning at him. “This is my world now. I’m curious.”

He narrows his eyes at her. “I thought we were leaving,” he says.

Fay pauses a second. That conversation in the back yard – was that seriously just two hours ago? But it seems like a lifetime ago now.

“Yes,” she says slowly. “But in case we figure out that we...can’t. Like if we can’t get passports or something. Then I guess I want to know everything I can about this life I’m marrying into.”

It’s Daniel’s turn to shrug now as he turns to look out the window. Fay studies him, considering that Daniel has done everything he can to avoid learning more about this life. That he actively avoids it.

So why was she, who was his match in so many ways, so curious?

After a moment, Fay clears her throat. “Daniel,” she says slowly, quietly. “Why do you think it is that you don’t want this life. I mean, I know why I don’t. But you were born into it. Do you think it’s something about like...who you are, intrinsically, that makes you a mismatch? Or is it something else?”

He turns to glare at her then. “Are you asking if I don’t belong here because I’m...”

Fay blinks at him, not understanding, before the pieces snap together. “No!” she says, genuine surprise on her face. She certainly hadn’t been thinking about whether it was because he’s gay. “No, not at all. But...” she pauses a moment and takes a sip of wine. “Well, that’s where your mind went. Do you think that’s why?”

Daniel shakes his head ruefully. “No,” he says. “I think it’s impossible to be in this life and not be married, not have a family – family, lineage, is...everything. But,” he looks her in the eye

then, “it’s not possible that I’m the only mob heir to have certain...desires. Predilections. Preferences.”

She nods, understanding. “I’m sure that you’re right.”

He stares off into space for a minute, brooding, but Fay bites her lip, unable to help herself from asking her next question. She’s in a strange mood today, feeling a little impulsive and powerful, having come out of that basement unscathed. So, she doesn’t hold back.

“So are you like...seeing anyone?” she asks quietly.

“What!?” he says, surprised, and then scowls. “No, Fay,” he murmurs. “I’m not.”

“What about Colin?” she asks, surprised. “The baristo at the book shop?”

“That was...nothing,” he murmurs, embarrassed. “We were never dating – we just hook up sometimes.”

“Oh,” Fay says, resting her chin in her palm and taking another bite of donut. “That’s disappointing. He was cute.”

Daniel sends her another little glare and then looks away. Realizing that he won’t hold her gaze, Fay gasps a little.

“Nooo, wait,” she says, giggling. “You’re lying! You are seeing someone!” She sits up straight then, thrilled. “Daniel! Tell me!”

“Keep your voice down,” he says, bossy, unable to keep the little smile from the corners of his mouth as he flings a tiny decorative pillow at her.

“Oh my god,” she says, leaning forward and whispering. “Come on, you’re my fiancé. We have no secrets. You have to tell me everything.”

“Seriously?” he says, raising an eyebrow. “You’re not...mad at me?”

“Daniel,” she says, leaning forward and putting a hand on his cheek. “We’re not together. And we’ve been through a lot. Whatever happens with us, I’m rooting for you. And I hope that you are for me. I hope that we both find people who love us, under whatever circumstances.”

Daniel traces the rim of his wine glass, considering this. Then, after a moment, he responds. “Thank you, Fay,” he murmurs. “That might be the kindest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

She leans forward and presses a kiss to his brow, not pushing him any further. He’s confessed enough today, she thinks. He’ll tell her when she’s ready.

“Come on,” Fay says, leaning off the edge of the bed to grab the bottle of wine on the floor. “Drink up. We’ve got nothing else to do today. And I’m not going downstairs again until we’re sure your dad has cooled off.”

Daniel toasts her refilled glass and then takes another sip, looking at her closely. “And,” he hesitates for a moment. “You’re not mad at me...otherwise?”

She frowns at him. “What do you mean?”

He looks down at his wine again, ashamed of himself. “For not...coming downstairs, in the midst of it all. For not...interrupting. Taking you away. Saving you.”

Fay’s mouth rounds in surprise. She takes a moment to think about it and then blushes, laughing a little. Actually, she’s very glad that Daniel hadn’t come into the room in the middle of that. What would he have thought if he had seen –

Frankly, what did she think of it all, all that had happened, the heat between them?

She shakes her head, deciding to mull that over when she had a moment alone. Instead, she turns her attention back to Daniel.

“Actually,” she says, “no. I’m glad you didn’t. I’m starting to learn that I can handle myself in this world. Learning...methods. Of managing your father. Of...figuring out my own power.”

Daniel laughs darkly at this. “Don’t ever let my dad hear you say that you’ve learned to manage him.”

Fay smirks. Of course, she would never. Unless she really wanted to piss him off, which...well, which she might actually enjoy.

Her face grows serious, then. “I wonder, though,” she says quietly. “If your dad would have liked to have seen you interrupt.”

Daniel just frowns at her, so she continues.

“Well,” Fay says, looking down into her glass. “I think he’s expressed that he wants you to...learn the business. Take control. This could have been an opportunity to show him that of what happens to me, at least, you are in charge.”

Daniel nods contemplatively and Fay is grateful to see that she hasn’t hurt his feelings.

“That’s...an interesting point,” he says, taking a big gulp of his wine. “That’s definitely some food for thought.” He looks at her then. “I could start with you,” he says, “to show him that I’m in control.”

Fay smiles and nods happily at him, agreeing.

But deep down, she's starting to figure out the truth:

That secretly? At the heart of it?

She had the control. Every bit of it.

Chapter 42 – Bolder

Chapter 42 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

The next day, I go down to the kitchen in my riding clothes and wait. And wait.

I have my breakfast with Daniel, waving him off as he goes to class, and then have about five more tiny cups of espresso as I wait so me more.

I'm practically buzzing when Kent finally deigns to come into the room, which is, as usual, busy with activity.

He doesn't even look at me as he sweeps through the room, stopping to check on those cooking this morning, and then heading to the back corner, where the older captains sit. He joins them and consult for awhile, making plans for whatever their next move is.

I grit my teeth, realizing that I'm going to have to wait a little longer. To pass the time, I cross to the espresso machine to make myself another cup.

Forty-five minutes later, Kent walks swiftly past me, headed for the door.

Pissed – I know he saw me sitting here, I know he's doing this on purpose – I stand up and call after him.

“Kent!” I call.

He stops in his tracks and then slowly turns to look at me, an eyebrow raised. Otherwise, though, his body gives no indication of what he's thinking or feeling.

“Can I get a ride, please?” I ask. “To the stables?”

Kent's eyes flick over me and then he gives a little laugh. “No time today,” he says as he pushes through the door. “Maybe tomorrow. If I'm feeling generous.”

I glare at the door as it swings shuts.

God damnit. This was my real punishment.

Finishing my tiny cup of coffee, I head upstairs and get changed, opting for a comfortable pair of leggings and a sweater. Then, I flop onto my bed, realizing that I have...absolutely nothing to do.

I sigh, glancing over at my books, but not wanting to read them. It's moments like this when I really miss Fiona. She was always a bright spot in my day, making me laugh, filling up my time by dressing me up and playing with my hair like her own little human-sized barbie.

Sitting up, I wonder about where she is now. I hope she's okay, that she got somewhere safe. That she's happy, living a good life.

It's so strange, realizing someone you'd come to love is your biological family in the moment when you say goodbye to them. Fiona was good to me perhaps because I am her cousin. She taught me so many skills that I've found useful already in this mafia life, skills I'm not sure I truly appreciated until now.

I wonder, too, if she was also giving me hints about how to defy Kent. Considering that she was, apparently, here the whole time as a spy herself –

Perhaps she was preparing me to take her place.

I pale a little at the idea, still not knowing – not really – where my allegiances lie. With Daniel, certainly, but between Kent and my father, the true real powers at play here?

Whose side was I on? Perhaps neither.

But Fiona. She was the one who showed me, first, that there's more to this house than meets the eye. And that if I'm sneaky, I can find some really interesting – and potentially useful – stuff in the house's most under-explored corners.

A wicked little smile crosses my face then.

Well. If Kent won't keep me out of trouble by taking me to visit my horse, then I guess...trouble it is.

I bounce out of bed, putting on my slippers, and head out into the hallway.

I look both ways, realizing that I actually know very little about this house. There's a linen closet next to my room, and then on the other side there's Daniel's room. Beyond that is the room that Fiona used, and then some other guest rooms.

I blink, realizing that – really – I have no idea where Kent sleeps.

A smirk crosses my face as I wonder if he hangs from the rafters like some kind of evil bat. That would suit his personality, for sure.

Thinking of the rafters, though, my eyes travel up the next set of stairs, which wind slowly upwards beyond my room.

I had asked Fiona, once, where they went, but she had dismissed the question off-hand, telling me there was nothing up there but a whole bunch of junk in storage.

I consider this for a second, mulling over her words. What kind of storage, though? Especially if all of the family heirlooms and photo books were kept downstairs in that little room in the basement...what the hell did they keep upstairs?

Suddenly curious, and feeling bold – and frankly, bored – I look around for any evidence of prying eyes and then tiptoe forward, heading up the steps without a sound.

Surprisingly, there isn't even a landing at the top. Instead, there's just an ugly brown plywood door, its shabby material clearly at odds with the fine woodworking in the rest of the house. This, clearly, was installed late.

I reach out a hand, firmly grasping the round knob, and give it a twist – but it doesn't budge.

Disappointed, I drop my hand and screw my mouth to the side. I make a mental note to ask Daniel what's up there and, also, to look up some basic lock picking methods on the internet.

Shrugging, I skip back down the steps and decide impulsively that if I'm denied knowledge of the storage centers above, I might as well explore those below. Without stopping to let myself think much about it – lest I chicken out – I hurry down the stairs and push through the kitchen door.

I walk confidently across the kitchen, not avoiding eye-contact with anyone, but not initiating it either. Instead, I simply glide through as if this is precisely what I'm supposed to do – as if, in fact, Kent expressly told me to do it.

My tactic works and I smile as I push through the little white door, heading downstairs. Nobody stops me and – I think – nobody really noticed me going by.

As I reach the hallway below, I realize that this place doesn't hold any terror for me anymore. My experiences yesterday got rid of those, replacing them with...well, with a little tremor of excitement that pulses through me.

I consider this, for a moment – consider whether that's healthy, really. Honestly, a girl like me should have a healthy fear of the mob boss's torture chamber basement. I was still naïve and new to this world – there was still so much danger here for me, and yet here I was, walking through without a care.

Really, seriously, who was I anymore?

As I come to the end of the hallway and push through the door into the archives room, I realize that a big part of me...doesn't really care about the changes that I'm going through. That I like myself like this – this bold, somewhat careless new Fay.

Maybe this new version of me was just some kind of trauma response to what happened yesterday? But, I shrug as I stand in the middle of the room. Whatever. It's better than being terrified all the time.

I take a minute to look over the stacks of porn sitting in the corner, but then I shake my head, deciding against it. I am definitely curious – especially knowing that some of it is Kent's homemade stuff – but...no. Not today.

Instead, I move to the opposite side of the room, to where the photo books are. Some of them are very old – a hundred years or more, even. The academic historian in me wants to explore those early photographs, but instead I reach for the newer bindings further down, hoping for some information about Daniel and his upbringing.

I take a few volumes over to the little chair, flipping through.

I smile, recognizing Daniel's face in a few of the first photos, but then frown when I realize that they're too old – grainy old photos, with fashion from the 1980s...

I blink, shocked, realizing that these must be pictures of Kent when he was a child. Fascinated, I flip through, looking at the people who must have been his mother and father, his family. I quickly flip to the front of the book where I'm lucky enough to find a picture of a beautiful, dark-haired woman, who is happily caressing her pregnant belly.

This, I'm sure, must be Kent's mother. I study her face for a resemblance to her but frown when I can't find it. Kent's looks, like Daniel's, must likewise come from his father.

Hoping for pictures of Daniel as a child, I put this album down and pick up the next one. I'm shocked, when I flip it open, to see that it's actually Kent's wedding album.

Slowly, I flip through the photos – black and white, surprisingly – and take in all the details of their beautiful Italian wedding. It looks terribly romantic, situated at a beautiful vineyard, the couple's private table set up under a wide-branching olive tree.

There is a photograph, right at the beginning, of the beautiful bride, her stunning face quite serious as she looks directly into the camera. Her dress is long, lace, and clinging – the opposite of the one that I had chosen for my own wedding.

Or, well. The one Kent had chosen for me. I wonder, passingly, if it was an intentional choice, remembering that none of the dresses selected for me looked anything like this.

I return my eyes to her face again, her hair tightly pulled back so as not to distract from her severe expression as she raises her chin and looks proudly at the camera.

I find myself quite moved by her, curious about this noble – and, am I imagining it? A bit melancholy? – mafia bride.

My thoughts are interrupted, though, by a single word that makes me jump almost out of my seat.

“Fay.” Kent’s tone is serious and disapproving as I raise my eyes to see him standing at the door, his feet set wide apart, hands in his pockets as he frowns at me. “I told you not to come down here.”

I close the photo album languidly, holding his gaze. “Well, you wouldn’t take me to the stable. I got bored.” I shrug a little. “You can’t expect a girl to stay in her room all day, can you?”

He glares at me, and a little smile tugs at my lips as I hear a rumble growing in his chest.

God, but I do love to piss him off.

Chapter 43 – Caught in the Act

Chapter 43 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Fay,” Kent says, clenching his mouth closed after he utters my name, apparently needing a minute to rein in his temper. That little muscle of frustration flickers in his cheek, making my little smile grow. “You’re not to come down to the basement. I was clear about this.”

I give him a fake little pout, seeing how far I can push it. “But it’s so interesting down here,” I say, turning my attention back to the wedding album. “For instance,” I say, my voice light, “I had no idea you’d consent to get married in just a linen shirt – no suit coat even – very bohemian of you –“

Kent takes two steps forward and snatches the photo album out of my hand, glaring at me. Then, he glances down at it, as if surprised.

We’re both silent for a moment while he stares at the photo album. “I haven’t looked at this in...years...” he says quietly, surprised into a moment of reverence.

I consider him, glad to have a moment to study his tall, muscular form while he’s not glaring at me. His face is lined with years of worry – perhaps more worry than most men his age. He carries a lot, I know, but...well, I wonder if he carries more than he needs to.

For instance, did he really need to come down here to yell at me for looking through photo albums? What harm, really, was I doing?

And what joy does Kent really have to balance out all of the worry, the constant need for control, that consumes his time? The worry and need for control that, indeed, results in his panic attacks?

My eyes flick back to the photo album, wondering if there is perhaps an answer there.

“Did you love her?”

I blush when I hear myself ask it. Again, my mouth has run away with me – speaking my thoughts before I consider whether it’s wise.

Kent raises his eyes suddenly, that glare focused on me again. He doesn’t answer my question, just tosses the album back onto the shelf as if it doesn’t matter to him. But I saw his face a moment ago – I know he’s performing a nonchalance he doesn’t feel.

I lean back into the chair, still studying him, feeling as if I’ve just figured out a little piece of the Kent puzzle. I smile a little again, pleased.

Which, of course, ticks him off.

“I’m serious, Fay,” Kent says, his voice low and serious. “There are rules in this house, and they’re in place for a reason.” He folds his arms and glares down at me. “If you do not obey them, you will be punished –“

“What,” I say, narrowing my eyes into a glare of my own, my own temper a little riled at this renewed threat. “What, Kent. If I disobey, what are you going to do, chain me to the table in your little torture chamber? Again?” I roll my eyes. “We already did that this week.”

Kent opens his mouth to say something – scold me, probably – but I just sigh and press my hands against the arms of the chair, pushing myself up. “Fine,” I say, looking at him with exhaustion on my face. “I’ll go upstairs.”

I walk past him towards the door but he stops me, calling my name. “Fay,” he says, half turning to look at me.

I stop in the doorway and wait.

“There are rules in this house. I will not have them broken.” Kent holds my gaze steadily. “You can play your little game of defiance all you like, but ultimately?” He stares at me, cold. “I will win. Every time.”

A little thrill builds in the bottom of my stomach as I think of the possibility of those challenges, of pushing him, trying him – pushing myself, at that. I’m so interested in this new Fay that I’m seeing develop within me as a result of our interactions.

Part of me wants to get to know her more. But the other part? The true Fay, who I’ve been my entire life? She just wants to live in peace.

“I’ll follow your rules, Kent,” I say quietly, keeping my face blank. “But in exchange, I will be treated with respect in this house.”

He opens his mouth to reply but I interrupt him, holding up a finger.

“And,” I say, continuing my small list of demands. “I’m not going to be held here like a little caged pet. I understand that you have to keep me safe, but I can’t spend my whole life sitting in my room upstairs.”

My face softens then, betraying, I think, a little of the misery that I sometimes feel in his home. “I’m a whole person, Kent,” I say softly. “A real person. I need to have a little bit of freedom. A little bit of a life.”

He stares at me for a moment, considering, and then gives me a small nod.

I nod as well and then turn, heading out the door and down the long basement hallway towards the steps. Just as I reach the bottom, I hear him call my name again.

I turn to see Kent standing at the door to the little records room, considering me carefully. I raise an eyebrow, curious about what he could want.

“Go and get dressed,” he says, his voice even. “I can’t take you to the stables, but I’ll send someone else with you.”

My face brightens instantly and I bite my lip against my joy, not wanting him to see quite how happy he’s made me. I feel as if I’ve gained a little bit of an upper hand here, and I don’t want to waste it.

Still, I can’t be rude.

“Thank you,” I say, dipping my head before dashing up the stairs to get ready.

Twenty minutes later, I skip down the stairs to the main floor again and then look around. The door to Kent’s office is closed, but I hear a whistle and turn towards the kitchen.

There, leaning against the wall, is Jerome. My face breaks out into a smile – Jerome, good. He’s always nice to me, and funny to boot.

“Are you ready?” he asks with a grin, standing up straight.

“Yup!” I say, hurrying down the hall with a big smile.

He pauses, the left side of his smile deepening as he looks at me, taking in my excitement. I stand in front of him for a moment, wondering why he’s looking at me like that – what he’s waiting for - and then Jerome just laughs, shaking his head and moving towards the garage.

“Come on,” he says. “Let’s get going. Not every day that I get an assignment to go play with horses in the country.”

“Oh,” I say, following him into the garage. “Are you riding too?”

“No,” he answers, holding the passenger side door of one of Kent’s Escalades open for me. “No way Kent would let me ride one of his precious thoroughbreds.”

He closes my door then and comes around the car, opening the driver’s seat and climbing in.

I consider Jerome, suddenly curious. “Sounds like you know what you’re talking about, though, if you know their breeds.”

Jerome smirks at me as we pull out of the garage. “I spent four years on the rodeo circuit as a teenager,” he says, “which is another reason why Kent won’t let me touch a horse. He knows I know what I’m doing, but he doesn’t want anyone riding his herd like a cowboy would.”

I laugh as Jerome circles a hand above his head, miming a lasso.

“Wow,” I say, shaking my head at him and grinning. “I had no idea Kent had such...variety amongst his ranks.”

“Stick with me, kid,” Jerome murmurs, giving me a friendly smile. “I’m full of surprises.”

With that, we head down the road, and I study Jerome as we go. Had I just never noticed it before? Or is Jerome kind of...cute?

Chapter 44 – A Surprise Suitor

Chapter 44 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Good, Fay! Good!” Jerome says, his voice eager and encouraging.

Kent’s trainer couldn’t come on short notice, so Jerome is putting me through some exercises on the horse. He watched me ride a bit and then told me – to my surprise – that I’m too reliant on the reins.

“You hold onto them,” he had said, smirking at me, “like the handlebars on a bike. Like they’re going to keep you from falling off.”

I had frowned at him. “Well,” I said, hesitating. “Aren’t they?”

Jerome had laughed, looking up at me from his place on the ground next to Heathcliff. “No, Fay,” he said. “The best riders barely even use the reins. You’ve got to learn how to communicate from here.”

With that, he’d shocked me by smacking my thigh.

Jerome hadn’t noticed my surprise, though, instead moving to Heathcliff’s head and unbuckling his bridle, replacing it with a halter – a head harness that has no reins at all. Then, he attached a long, long lead rope to a ring on that halter so that we could do some exercises without reins.

So now I’m bouncing around arena as Heathcliff trots in circles around Jerome, who stands at the center, the end of the long lead in his hand.

It was scary, at first, not having anything to hold onto. Jerome even made me put my arms out to the side like a bird, to make me avoid clinging to Heathcliff’s mane for safety. But then, as I got the hang of it, I started to understand what he meant.

I really had been holding on to the reins for dear life. But really, it was all about balance and holding on with my legs and my knees.

My arms still out to the side, I shoot Jerome a happy look and he laughs, pleased to see me catching on.

“Well done, Fay!” He shouts to me. “Can you kick him into a canter?”

I hesitate, not sure if I want to go faster. Jerome, seeing my hesitation, laughs at me derisively. He doesn’t quite call me a coward but...well, it’s implied.

I clench my teeth and screw my courage together, giving Heathcliff a little nudge with my heels. He responds immediately, picking up the pace into a rolling little canter.

I laugh, putting my weight into the balls of my feet and my heels, standing in the stirrups and feeling a bit of a thrill as the wind whips against my face. Jerome whoops with joy and I can’t help myself as I laugh a little along with him.

“Okay, Fay!” he shouts out to me. “Go ahead and sit back down, put your weight at the back of the saddle to slow him.”

I work to do as he says, bouncing a little, awkwardly, as Heathcliff slows to a trot and then a walk. I’m still laughing with joy as Jerome walks over to us, gathering up the length of the long lead as he goes.

“Atta girl,” he says, smiling up at me. “You’re riding like a real cowgirl now.”

I brush the hair out of my face, tucking it back beneath my little velvet helmet.

“Oh yeah?” I ask, grinning down at him. “You going to teach me how to rope steers next?”

“I’ll teach you anything you want,” Jerome says, coming close to Heathcliff’s shoulder and smiling up at me. “Pretty girl like you, though?” he says, raising his eyebrow, “you should learn how to barrel race. That’s what all the rodeo beauties do, and they make good money if they’re fast enough.”

His smile deepens as he sees me blush. I’m not used to being told I’m pretty. I have to admit though...I didn’t hate it.

“What’s barrel racing?” I ask, studying Jerome’s face as he explains the process of girls competing to see who can be the fastest to run a loop around two barrels and return to the start.

Jerome’s a good looking guy – older than me, but only by a few years, with sandy brown hair and a light smattering of freckles over his nose. He’s strong-jawed and, like most of Kent’s guys, quite fit.

I stop hearing what he’s saying as I look at him more. Does he really think I’m pretty? Or was he just saying it as a joke?

Suddenly, Jerome’s smile deepens as he realizes that I’m not paying attention to a word he’s saying. That I’m just staring at his handsome face.

“Sorry,” I say, blinking at him and blushing again. “Um, can you repeat that?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he says, laughing a little and holding up a hand to help me dismount. “Come on, let’s let Heathcliff get his rest.”

I nod and take Jerome’s hand, swinging my right leg over Heathcliff’s withers and hopping down, my butt sliding against the saddle as I go. Much more elegant a dismount, I think, then the time Kent had helped me down and my butt had slid against him as I’d almost fallen.

Still, I remember, just for a moment, the feeling of Kent’s hands on my waist.

Distracting myself from the thought, I grin up at Jerome. “I think I’m getting better at this,” I say, genuinely proud of myself.

“You’re doing great, Fay,” he says, his eyes lingering on my face a little. Then he clears his throat and looks towards the barn, tugging on Heathcliff’s halter to ask him to walk forward. “We’ll get you racing in no time.”

I walk alongside Jerome, happily chatting with him as we get Heathcliff back into his stall, unsaddled, and ready for his afternoon of peace and quiet.

I have to admit, there is something comforting about being with Jerome. Unlike Kent, I'm never worried about what mood he's in today or how I'm going to pay the consequences of that mood. And unlike Daniel, there's...well, there's a bit of a spark, really.

Daniel's great, but it's all books and philosophy and plans for escaping this life. There's nothing romantic there, not anymore, which...well, which gets a little boring.

Jerome, though? I bite my lip, watching him lift the saddle up onto its spot on the wall, his arms swelling with the effort, a little bit of sweat on his brow.

A cute guy who likes horses and, apparently, likes me too?

Maybe there's something here after all. Something worth thinking about, at least.

I'm still buzzing with joy as Jerome pulls back onto Kent's property. Jerome and I talked easily the whole way home, him telling me about his years in the rodeo circuit, and then some other years rustling cattle out West.

It sounded amazing, like a dream, and there wasn't enough time to get all of my questions answered by the time we were home. I almost regretted it, as we pulled into the garage.

"Can you come next time?" I ask Jerome as we climb out of the car, my eyes shining.

He smiles at me as we walk towards the door to the house. "I'll go as often as Kent lets me, Fay," he says. Just before we walk through the door into the house, though, Jerome grabs my arm, hesitating. Apparently, he wants a moment together while we're still alone.

"I, uh..." he says, glancing at the door. I glance at it as well. Then he takes a step closer to me. "I had a really nice time with you today, Fay," he says, his face quite close to mine now.

"I did too," I say, my stomach doing a little somersault. We stand there for a moment, smiling at each other, before the door opens.

Jerome is moving before I even realize what is happening, heading towards the house, giving Kent – who is standing there – a nod.

Kent watches Jerome carefully as he walks past, not saying a word. Then, Kent slowly turns his gaze to me. I just stare at him, my eyes wide and my face blank.

"Well, Fay?" Kent asks, crossing his arms across his chest. "Did you have a nice time?" He glances after Jerome again.

"Yes," I say, smoothing my hands over my tight riding pants. "It was...really nice. Thank you. For letting Jerome take me."

Kent just nods and then pulls something from his back pocket. “You have mail,” he says, holding out a little square envelope.

Curious, I come forward and take it. There’s no address on the front – just my name.

“Delivered by hand,” Kent explains. “Apparently, it’s an invitation for tonight. The messenger is still here,” Kent says, looking towards the front door. “Waiting for your reply.”

Quickly, I open the envelope, raising my eyebrows at what I see inside.

Chapter 45 – Competition for my Heart

Chapter 45 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“A...beach party?” I say, cocking my head to the side as I study the note.

“It’s about an hour away,” Kent says, watching me closely as I read. “Friends and family, apparently.”

I look up at Kent my eyebrow raised. “Did you...read my mail?”

He stares at me impassively, not needing to confirm. I study the envelope, wondering how the hell he re-sealed it, and then why he bothered to reseal it...

“Fay,” Kent says sharply and I look up to see that he’s frustrated with me. As usual. “Are you going to go?”

I look back at the invitation and see, in particular, that it’s made out to me. No mention of Kent or Daniel. Apparently, it’s a private party.

“Am I...allowed to go?” I ask, looking back up at him.

Kent shrugs. “I’ll send you with my guards, of course. But there’s no real reason to refuse. Unless, of course, you don’t want to. You’re not a caged pet, after all.”

Kent says the final words ruefully, but my lips crook into a smile, recognizing my language from this morning. He was listening, I realize. He’s trying.

“Okay,” I say, moving towards Kent and then past him, walking down the hallway to where a man is waiting by the front door. “Are you the messenger my father sent?” I ask cheerfully.

The messenger just bows a little, which I assume is a confirmation. “Okay.” I say, smiling innocently. “Please tell my father that I’m happy to accept.”

The messenger nods, reaching for the handle of the door so he can go deliver the reply.

“Oh,” I say, and he stops, turning back to me. “Would you please tell my father that we might be a few hours late? I apologize – I just got the invitation now, and it will take us some time to get ready.”

The messenger hesitates, and then ventures a word. “We?”

I smile broadly at him. “Yes,” I say, turning for the stairs. “My fiancé will accompany me to the party.”

As I head up the stairs, I see Kent out of the corner of my eye, smirking. Apparently, he approves.

Daniel mopes in the car. “I can’t believe you agreed to this for me,” he murmurs. “I hate this kind of stuff, Fay.”

“Oh, come on,” I say, nudging him with my elbow. “How can you hate a barbeque. At the beach.”

Daniel just scowls at me and I laugh at him, smoothing out the wrinkles in my blue-and-white striped skirt, which I’ve paired with a little white crop-top.

Or, which I should say, Kent has paired with a little white crop-top. Because this adorable outfit just magically appeared in my room after my shower, complete with a wide-brimmed straw hat. Now that Fiona is gone, Kent has no plausible deniability anymore. We both know he selects my clothes for me.

Luckily, he has immaculate taste.

“You really do look pretty,” Daniel says, looking at me from the corner of his eye.

“Thank you,” I say, preening a little bit. I could tell that Kent approved, too, when I had come downstairs ready to go. He hadn’t said anything, but the look in his eye had been enough.

I had hesitated, before we left, seeing that Kent was sending us with two guards each to keep an eye on us.

“Is it...” I had asked, looking at the guns strapped to their hips, a little scared. “Is there any reason to think it will be like last time?” I ask, worried. “With...the guns?”

Kent had looked down at me reassuringly. “No, Fay,” he had said. “Whoever was responsible for that won’t pull that move again. Besides, this is a much smaller party. And with just the two of

you going,” he looked at Daniel as well then, “there isn’t as much of a sweet target. One bird with one stone, this time. Instead of two.”

I nodded, thinking about Kent’s math there, and realized that to him I’m not even a bird in the equation. I frowned a bit, but Kent had put a hand on my shoulder, moving on. “Just have fun. You’ll be safe,” he had said, glaring at our guards. “My guys will make sure of it.”

They had nodded their confirmation and then we had left.

Now, we’re forty-five minutes out of the city, heading away from the stables and towards the beach. I can already smell the salt on the air. I love the beach – I always have, despite my lily-white skin and my tendency to burn as red as a lobster. There’s just something about the beach that just calls to me.

We pull up to the indicated spot and Daniel puts a hand on my arm when I eagerly reach for the door, indicating that I should wait a moment before getting out of the car. I pause, then, watching the guards climb out of the front seat and the car behind us, sweeping the area in order to make sure that we’re secure.

When we get the nod from them, Daniel and I climb out and I look around, studying the scene.

I had expected, really, to be taken to a beach house – my father, I’ve heard, owns several. But, instead, we’re at a private beach far away from any buildings. It’s just us and the sea, and it’s really very, very beautiful.

There are plenty of people milling around – some I recognize as family members whom I had met at the party. Others, though, are completely foreign to me.

One man in particular catches my eye. He’s young – perhaps my age, or just a little older than me. He has tanned skin and bleach-blond hair, but what is really eye-catching about him is that he’s covered in tattoos – almost from head to foot. They’re all black and white, matching his casual, sporty attire, and I can tell – even from a distance – that each tattoo was carefully considered and finely done.

As I stare at him, he turns and looks directly at me. He doesn’t flinch at all, but instead looks almost...unsurprised. That I might stare at him. As I continue to look, he smirks a little and raises his beer to me.

Which, of course, makes me realize that I am just standing here staring at this guy.

Which, of course, makes me blush.

I turn to Daniel, then, trying to cover up my discomfort by remembering the security of him at my side. “Ready?” I ask.

Daniel shrugs and sighs. “Into the lion’s den we go,” he says, and we walk forward onto the beach.

“Fay!” My father says, coming forward. He’s dressed in swim trunks and a Hawaiian-print shirt, which surprises and startles me, just a little. This is a big, Italian man – I haven’t seen him in anything less than an Armani suit yet, so such an abrupt change is...well, it’s abrupt.

He comes forward and gives me a kiss, shaking Daniel’s hand without a word about the uninvited guest. “Welcome,” he says, “have a drink! Make yourself at home!”

A waiter comes forward, then, offering a tray of soft and hard drinks. I select a can of spiked lemonade while Daniel takes a coke.

Alden opens his mouth to say more when Romulus runs up to us. “Hi Fay!” he says, waving to me, apparently genuinely excited to see me. I lean down to greet him, excited as well.

“Hey, Rom,” I say, reaching out to ruffle his hair. “Are you having fun?”

“Yes!” he says, excited, but then he turns his attention to Daniel. “But we’re one short for volleyball, do you know how to play?”

Daniel hesitates, looking at me. But I shrug, encouraging him. Daniel’s a bookish guy, but I do know for a fact that volleyball is one of his favorites.

“Sure, kid,” he says, smiling at Romulus and handing me his drink. “Lead the way.”

I watch them head off down the stretch of sand and my father puts his arm around me. “Good, good,” he says, “it will be good for the boys to get to know one another, since they will soon be family.” He smiles at me and I smile back.

“Now,” he says, giving me a little tug and pulling me over to where some chairs are arranged around a fire. “You come with me. I have some people I want you to meet.”

Chapter 46 – The Young Kingpin

Chapter 46 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

My father settles me into a comfortable chair at the center of the group and Tristin, to my right, shoots me a cold smile. Baby Estrella, in her lap, coos a happy greeting to me, so I give them both a warm smile in return.

It's a happy affair, really – everyone seems eager to greet me, to bring me plates of food, to ask me about my life, my studies, and my career.

Overall, I'm kept quite busy and happy, getting to know my biological family and all of their friends. I catch a glimpse, as the afternoon passes and the sun starts to set, of Daniel still happily playing volleyball. Apparently, his team has progressed to the championship round.

As people start to settle in for the evening and stronger liquor starts to be poured into everyone's cups, I start to notice...well. That there are a lot of boys around.

I look around the circle, noting that there are, of course, women – aunts and cousins, many of them. But I've also been introduced, this afternoon, to a variety of handsome young men. All here alone.

And all, apparently, single.

For instance, the one who is talking to me now – or, should I say, who has been talking at me since he sat down in Tristin's seat as soon as she abandoned it to go feed the baby.

"Yeah, I'm in finance," he says, taking a swig of his beer. He gives me a little smirk. "So, you majored in psych, right?" he asks.

I squirm a little in my chair, uncomfortable. "Um," I say, "how did you know that?"

"Your dad told me," he says, using the neck of his beer bottle to gesture towards my father across the fire. "Or at least, he told my dad. Who told me." The guy looks at me again. "They, uh...know each other."

"Oh," I say, my lips pursing as I look away from him. Am I supposed to know what that means?

"Yeah," the guy continues – what was his name again? "So, our dads think it's a good idea if we like, get to know each other." He waggles his eyebrows at me suggestively.

I sit back in my chair, my mouth falling open.

"So are you free?" he asks, leaning in. "On like, Saturday? I'll take you out somewhere nice. And then maybe, afterwards..." he runs a finger along my forearm, which I immediately snatch away.

"Um, sorry," I say, staring at him. "But I'm engaged?"

"What?" he says, sitting back in his chair. Then, suddenly, he laughs. "No, you're not."

"I assure you," I say, opening my eyes wide and leaning forward. "I am. To that guy," I point over to Daniel, who is still playing volleyball in the fading sun. Though, because he's far away, I guess my pointing towards a generalized group of men isn't very convincing.

The young man next to me has the gall to laugh again. “No seriously,” he says, taking another swig from his beer. “If you’re engaged, then where’s your ring?”

I fish around in my beach and then slide my engagement ring back on my finger. I had taken it off while I ate crab and lobster – too much butter. I didn’t want to risk it slipping off and getting lost in the sand.

“Seriously?!” the guy shouts, his face going a little pale when he sees the size of it. He stands up immediately from his seat and stalks off towards my father. I stare after him, hearing him as he mutters, “then why the hell am I here?”

“I have no idea,” I mutter in response, watching him tap my father on the shoulder, having some angry words with him. As I watch the little argument break out, I see, out of the corner of my eye, someone else take his seat.

“What’d you say to that one,” the newcomer mutters.

“I just told him I’m engaged,” I say lightly, and then, turning my head, blink in surprise to see that it’s the young man with all the tattoos. The one I had noticed, earlier, when we’d first arrived at the beach. “Oh!” I say, surprised into exclamation.

He smirks at me and, predictably, I blush. I scowl, really wishing I didn’t do that all the time.

“So,” he says, giving me a friendly smile. “Apparently you’re the lady of the hour.”

“Am I?” I say eagerly, leaning in, hoping this guy can give me a clue about what’s going on. “Do you know anything about this?” I look around at all of the guys. “Like, why there are so many guys here?”

“Because, Fay,” the guy says, laughing. “It’s a meat market. Your dad invited all of these guys here to meet you. Specifically, to meet you.” He raises his eyebrows at me, confirming that he means exactly what I think he means.

“Are you serious?” I whisper to him, angry. “My dad is seriously bacheloretting me!?”

He laughs at that and then nods. “Yeah. Imagine his dismay when your fiancé showed up, too. Luckily, he got his kid to distract him.”

“Oh my god,” I say, shocked, my eyes going to the volleyball game where I see Daniel and Romulus giving each other high fives. “Even little Romulus is in on it!?”

The guy laughs again, shaking his head. “They get ‘em young, in this world,” he says, apparently enjoying my shock. I turn back to him, then, studying him, and realizing that he’s not enjoying it in a nasty way. Instead, he, too, thinks it’s a little bit ridiculous.

The very real ridiculousness of it all hits me then, and I laugh as well.

Suddenly, the two of us are laughing together, me a little hysterically, him along for the ride.

“Oh my god,” I say, leaning back in my chair and resting a hand against my chest as the laughter starts to abate. “I can’t believe this. What is he thinking?!”

“He’s thinking,” my new friend says, smiling at me gently. “That he has a very pretty new daughter, and he wants to see her set up right.”

I shake my head a little, growing confused and a little worried. I’ve been engaged since birth, apparently – an arrangement my father set up. What on earth had changed that he suddenly wants me to meet new people?

“Who are you?” I ask suddenly, cocking my head to the side. I’ve realized, suddenly, that we haven’t been introduced. “Are you one of the candidates?”

He smirks and shrugs. “I am if you want me to be.”

I can’t help the little smile that creeps onto my lips, then. He’s terribly handsome, this young man with the dangerous tattoos climbing all the way up to his neck. And, he’s been really, really nice to me in these past few minutes.

“I’m Ivan,” he says, leaning over the side of his chair to extend his hand for a shake.

I take his hand on instinct, but my blood goes cold as I realize exactly who he is.

Ivan.

Ivan.

That name has been rattling around Kent’s kitchen for weeks now – Kent’s top enemy, the guy my father blamed for blowing up his party – the one who tried to kill us.

As my face goes pale, Ivan laughs a little and withdraws his hand. But his face stays friendly as he studies me. “I see my reputation proceeds me,” he says, smirking a little.

“Um,” I say, staring at him with wide eyes, not knowing what else to say.

Because in front of me is one of the most dangerous men in the underworld, second only perhaps to Kent himself.

Ivan, the young Kingpin of the city’s heroin trade.

And he just told me that he’s throwing his hat in the ring, if I want to consider him a potential replacement for my fiancé.

And – if I’m being honest with myself? For a second, I consider it.

Because he is really, seriously cute.

Chapter 47 – Most Eligible Bachelorette of the Underworld

Chapter 47 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Ivan laughs at me then, at my speechlessness, and I can't help myself – I laugh too, putting my head in my hands.

“Yes,” I say, blushing terribly. “I have heard of you. And I have to say, it has not all been good things.”

“Oh, come on,” he says, still laughing a little. “It can't have been all bad.”

I peek out from between my fingers and raise an eyebrow at him letting him know that, yeah. It's all been bad.

“What,” he says, joking, “nobody told you about my striking good looks or my debonaire sense of style when they were telling you about my success in the drug trade?”

I shake my head slowly, finding myself laughing again. I can't help it – he's terribly charming.

“Well,” he says, giving me a sexy little half-smile. “Now you know.”

Ivan catches the eye of a waiter and holds up a hand. “Two shots of tequila,” he says, definitive. The waiter nods, walking the short distance to the little bar and interrupting the bar tender to get the order in right away.

“What –“ I say, my eyes following the waiter. “No, I can't –“

“Oh, come on, Fay,” Ivan says, leaning back in his chair. “Relax. I can tell you've just had the surprise of your life. You need a little something to settle the nerves.”

The waiter comes back and Ivan takes the drinks from him, sliding him a folded bill and giving him a wink. I can tell by the waiter's pleasure that it's a gigantic tip.

I hesitate, but Ivan winks at me as well and holds the shot nearer to me.

So, I take it from his hand, shrugging. The truth was, I could use a little bit of a relaxant right now. If I'm the unwitting bachelorette in my father's little setup, then I'm not sure I want to do it sober.

“Bottoms up,” I say, taking the lime off the edge of the glass and holding it up to toast Ivan. He does the same, and then watches me slowly lick the salt from the rim of the glass and toss my shot back before doing the same.

The tequila is sharp in my throat and sinuses and I can’t help it as my whole body shudders. I make a face, then, at the taste of it, sticking out my tongue and pressing my eyes closed.

I can hear Ivan laugh at me. “The lime,” he says. “Bite the lime.”

I do, and, indeed, it brings some relief, the acid of the lime chasing away the sharpness of the tequila on my tongue.

I laugh as I open my eyes again, meeting Ivan’s smile with my own. He gestures to the waiter again, ordering another round, and I lean back in my chair, letting him.

I’m a little surprised at myself, then – a feeling that’s becoming oddly more familiar as the weeks pass. Fay of a few weeks ago would have run screaming when she found out that she was doing shots of tequila with the wunderkind head of a mafia organization. With Kent’s worst enemy.

But Fay of today? Honestly, I’m kind of enjoying myself.

“See?” Ivan says, leaning closer to me. “You’re already more relaxed.”

“You’re right,” I murmur, looking around at all of the people in the circle – at all of my suitors, apparently. I shake my head at the ridiculousness of it all, at the wasted effort.

After all, I’m engaged to Daniel, and I’m very happy to be.

...Right?

The waiter comes and delivers our second glass of tequila. This time, it’s Ivan’s turn to introduce the toast.

“To Fay,” he says, raising his glass. I smile and raise mine along with him. “The most eligible bachelorette of the city’s underworld. Too bad she’s already got a rock the size of a golf ball on her hand. More’s the pity for the rest of us.”

My glass shakes a little against my mouth as I laugh at his joke before downing the contents, holding my lime at the ready as I do.

When we’re finished, I settle back in my chair, leaning a little closer to Ivan so that we can talk quietly.

“So,” I say, actually relaxed, looking at him from beneath half-lidded eyes. “How did a nice boy like you get mixed up in all of this organized crime, anyway? Were you born to it, like me?”

“Nah,” he says, smiling at me indulgently and leaning a little closer as well.

Then, to my surprise and pleasure, he begins to tell me his life story.

I find myself paying rapt attention to Ivan’s story for the next half hour, sipping on the glass of tequila that the waiter again delivers, savoring the bite and the taste. He’s actually really, really interesting – a totally self-made guy, climbing up through the ranks with nothing but sheer will, determination, and cleverness.

Despite myself, I’m impressed. Before all of this I had thought I liked the kind of prince-charming guys who would politely deliver you a rose and ask you, tentatively, if you’d be interested in being courted.

But as I listen to Ivan, and let my eyes rove over his muscles and his tattoos...I wonder, a little, if my tastes are changing.

As I consider it, my mind flashes – unwillingly - to Kent for a moment as well. He doesn’t have any tattoos, I note, or at least, none that I can see - but otherwise, these two are pretty similar...

I dismiss the thought, though, bringing my attention back to Ivan. He sees me focus on him at that moment, a slow smile building on his face. He intuits, I think, that I like what I see. That I am, begrudgingly, impressed.

I bite my lip, letting him see me do it.

His words falter for a moment as his eyes flash to my front teeth pressed lightly against the red flesh of my mouth. Then his eyes flash back up to mine and he smiles, continuing his story. Pretending that he wasn’t distracted, though we both know he was.

Damnit, I think. I like that. I like that, maybe, a little too much.

“What the hell is going on here!?”

I gasp a little - the words surprise me – and jump in my seat, looking up at the fire-lit person standing in front of me –

Firelight? When had the sun gone down –

My eyes focus, then, and I realize that it’s Daniel standing there – his shirtless form a little sweaty from all the volleyball.

“Daniel,” I say, sitting up straight – not knowing, really, how to react.

“Come on, Fay,” he says firmly, angrily, grabbing my arm and pulling me up from my seat. “We’re leaving.”

“Hey man,” Ivan says, frowning and standing up. “We were just talking –“

“Whatever,” Daniel murmurs, dragging me forward.

Shocked, I let him pull me, glancing back at Ivan – not quite saying sorry, but, in fact, a little sorry – and embarrassed – to be dragged away like this –

“Daniel,” I say, pulling against the hand wrapped around my upper arm. “Let me go.”

“No, Fay,” he says, still pissed off. “Do you even know who that was? Who you were talking to?”

“It’s just Ivan,” I say –

“Just Ivan?” Daniel repeats, whirling on me.

I look around, embarrassed to see that everyone is staring at us. I open my mouth to respond but Daniel keeps going.

“Just Ivan?” he says. “My dad’s greatest enemy? The guy who tried to kill us not too long ago?”

My mouth just hangs open – I honestly don’t know what to say –

“You will release my daughter’s arm, Mr. Lippert,” a voice says, and I turn my head to see my father standing there, glaring at Daniel with a heavy gaze.

Daniel grits his teeth and doesn’t release me. “Thank you for the lovely evening,” he bites out towards my father. “But we’ll be going now.”

My father doesn’t say a word, just looks, again, at Daniel’s hand. To my surprise, Daniel hesitates, and then drops my arm. “Come on, Fay,” Daniel says, not looking at me and storming off towards our car. “We’re leaving.”

I glance after him and then back at my father, torn. “Um, thank you,” I say awkwardly. “Thank you for a lovely afternoon.”

Then, I hurry after Daniel, our guards following after us.

As I reach the car, though, just as I’m about to climb in, I take a moment to glance back at the beach.

Ivan is standing there, right where I left him, watching me. He raises one hand in farewell.

I can’t help the little smile that pulls up at my lips as I give him one long, final look and then climb into the car after my fiancé.

Chapter 48 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Daniel won't let go of my hand once we're back in the house.

"Daniel," I say, exasperated, trying to yank my hand free while he pulls me down the hall. "Let go – are you seriously going to tattle on me?"

He just shoots me a look over his shoulder, saying nothing as we arrive at the doors to his dad's office. He knocks loud, twice. I sigh, shaking my head at him while we wait.

Honestly, it's not that I think Daniel is being ridiculous – if I had found him flirting with someone who had tried to kill us only a little bit ago, I would be equally pissed. I just don't really want to have this conversation with Kent.

The door pulls open, Kent on the other side. He takes one look at us before stepping back and allowing us to enter. Daniel doesn't drop my hand, but not because he's trying to give me any love and support in the face of his father's judgment. I'm his prisoner and he's not letting me go.

Daniel pulls me over to stand in front of Kent's desk as Kent walks around the other side. None of us sit.

"What happened," Kent demands, folding his arms over his chest.

"Fay," Daniel glares at me, saying my name like it's a dirty word, "had a nice intimate chat with her new buddy Ivan tonight. Drinks too. And it looked like it was going somewhere."

Kent frowns at Daniel then, surprising me. "So what?" he asks his son, shrugging a little. "Is this some kind of lover's quarrel? Your fiancé talked to another man, and you want me to do something about it?"

Daniel's jaw falls open at this. "Wha-" he sputters. "No, dad, that's obviously not the issue –"

Yeah, I think to myself, resisting the urge to roll my eyes, it's not the issue because you're not actually jealous – because you're not actually into me.

Daniel gestures to me then, his eyes still on his father. "Did you not hear what I just said? She was talking to Ivan. Your enemy."

Kent does shift his gaze to me at that moment and I can see him consider the situation, processing the details. I don't move a muscle. Instead, I just hold his stare, my hand still in Daniel's fist.

"Well?" Kent says finally, his face impassive. "What did he say?"

Daniel looks between us, agape. "Wait – are you serious?" He shouts at his father. "You're not going to do anything about it?"

Kent snaps his gaze to his son, glaring at him. "And what would you like me to do about it, Daniel? Go back in time and stop her?"

My lips twitch in pleasure at this. I, like Daniel, had been expecting Kent's anger to be directed at me. But apparently, at least for now, I'm off the hook. Still, I quickly wipe the expression from my face. I don't know where this is going, not really, and I don't want to incur anyone's wrath.

Daniel scowls, dropping my hand and crossing his own arms across his chest, looking like his father's double in this moment. I look between the two, struck again by their similarities.

"Obviously, dad, that is not what I want," he says, frustrated. "But she betrayed us tonight – and made me look like an idiot!"

Kent's eyes shift back to me. "Is that true?" he asks. "Did you make Daniel look like a fool?"

I exhale, exasperated, spreading my hands innocently. "I didn't do anything, okay? If anything, my father made Daniel look like a fool. The whole thing was a setup – he threw the party so that he could introduce me to all his friends' single sons. By the time I figured it out – what was I supposed to do, storm out of there?"

Kent nods slowly, figuring out the darker motives behind my father's little party, considering the consequences for himself.

"Besides," I say, shooting Daniel a dirty look of my own. "It's not like Daniel was playing Mr. Attentive Fiancé all night – he was off playing volleyball for hours. What was I supposed to do – just not talk to anyone because he wasn't at my side?"

Daniel and Kent both glare at me then and I realize, suddenly, that this is what they both would have preferred.

"Seriously?!" I exclaim, throwing my hands up in the air. "Are you guys serious? How the hell was I supposed to know any of this? I didn't know who Ivan was until we were already talking with each other – and, to that point, nobody told me I wasn't supposed to talk to some guy named Ivan anyway!"

I glare at both of them then, though neither flinch.

“Honestly,” I continue, exhausted by the whole situation, “you two, you hold me to some seriously unfair standards. I don’t know these people, I don’t know what the rules are. And yet you expect me to intuit them and act precisely how you want me to.”

I shake my head, my lips drawing to a firm line, and then I cross my arms over my chest, just as they’re both doing. There’s silence between us as we all glare around in a circle.

Daniel gives first. I see him sigh and loosen his arms, putting his hands in his pockets instead. He sees that I have a point and he looks down at the floor, a little ashamed of himself.

Kent, however, doesn’t give an inch.

“Leave us,” he says to Daniel, not looking at him.

Daniel opens his mouth to protest, but Kent cuts him off.

“Leave us,” he repeats, not taking his eyes off of me.

Daniel just shakes his head and leaves without another word, not even looking at me. I watch him go and then turn back to Kent.

“You’re on dangerous ground, Fay,” Kent says, his voice low.

“Wha – why?” I ask, honestly confused. “Because I still can’t see anything that I’ve done wrong – I just went to a party and talked to my father’s guests. If you didn’t want me to do that, then you shouldn’t have let me go to the party!”

Kent slowly shakes his head at me then. “No, Fay,” he says evenly. “You misunderstand. You’re not on dangerous ground with me. You’re on dangerous ground in this world.”

I frown at him, confused. So, he obliges me with an explanation.

“You see, Fay,” Kent says, unfolding his arms and looking down at his desk. “Your father changed the game tonight, and you let him do it.”

He takes a handful of change from his pocket and scatters it on the desk. I look between him and the money, confused. Then he slides one penny forward out of the mix.

“The only thing that was protecting you in this world, Fay,” Kent continues, “was your engagement to Daniel. As a soon-to-be member of my family, you had my protection.”

He takes two quarters, placing them next to the penny, blocking the penny off from the rest of the change.

“But,” he continues, “tonight your father opened the opportunity for you to show the world where your allegiance lies. And, in leaving Daniel behind,” he moves the penny around the

quarters so that it mingles again with the rest of the cash on the table, “you’ve left yourself open. For anyone else to claim, should they wish it.”

I stare at the cash on the table, realizing, suddenly, the seriousness of what happened tonight.

“You see, Fay,” Kent continues, picking up a little dime and holding it towards my face. “Your dad, in this world? He’s not a penny like you, but he’s small shakes. And he’s getting weaker. I want him on my side, because he has resources I’d like to use.”

Kent puts the dime back on the table, mixing it with the rest of coins. “But,” Kent continues, “Alden’s trading you,” he slides the penny to sit next to the dime, “to the highest bidder. For his allegiance. Seeing if he can get a bigger fish than me to bite.”

I look up into Kent’s eyes, then, understanding.

“Ivan is that fish,” I say quietly.

Kent nods and I look back down at the desk, the money scattered there.

“I’ll let you think on it, Fay,” Kent says quietly. “About where your allegiances lie. About where it is that you want to be in this world.”

I don’t look at him then, but I hear his footsteps cross the room. Hear him open the door, hear it close behind him.

I stare, instead, at the coins on the desk. I reach forward to touch the penny, thinking deeply about where it is that I do want to be.

Again, I’ve greatly misunderstood and miscalculated the complicated politics of this world. A party is never just a party, and I’ve again fallen into that trap.

One thing in Kent’s little metaphor doesn’t quite add up.

I reach out, picking up the little shiny penny that represents me, my eyes glancing at my million-dollar engagement ring as I do.

If all of these men are going through all of this effort to figure out where I land, then I’m certainly not a one-cent piece. I’m certainly not the least valuable coin on the table.

And everyone – Kent, my father, Ivan, Daniel even – they all want me to think that I am, that I am some penny or some pawn.

But what I’m starting to realize, through all of this, is that I’m worth much more to them, and to myself, then they’d like me to believe.

After all, if a pawn crosses the entire chess board...she becomes a queen.

I smirk, slipping my penny into the pocket and quietly leaving the room. I head upstairs to bed, not bothering to say goodnight to anyone.

Chapter 49 – Bosses Meet

Chapter 49 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent climbs out of the second of three cars that take him and his captains to the meeting. He has shown up in force today, his overblown security force a deliberate message to Alden. Kent is done being pushed around and will rally his superior forces to stop it, if necessary.

Climbing the short few steps into the strip club, Kent remembers the last time he was here. When he had followed Fay into the Champagne Room, saw that pig of a man pressing her up against the cocktail table, ready to do as he pleased with her.

That moment had set his blood on fire. He had acted mostly on instinct that night, thinking he was helping a pretty young girl who didn't deserve to be wrapped up in Dean's particular brand of sexual depravity.

Little did he know what a diamond he'd found in this rough space.

Kent and his crew enter, heading directly for the back of the club, ignoring the pounding music and the dancers lighting up the stage. Instead, Kent's crew works their way towards a back door where one of Kent's security detail is already waiting.

The security agent nods to Kent, letting him know all is well, so Kent pushes through the door.

Alden is there already, waiting, as Kent knew he would be. Kent had delayed deliberately, had let the man wait.

"Lippert," Alden says, tapping his fingers against the low coffee table set in front of him that has a spread of food and drinks already laid upon it. The room was nice, for a strip joint – the nicest they had. Leather seating ranges around the room with purple and chrome accents.

Alden has brought his own small crew – certainly fewer than Kent's numbers. They look around anxiously as Kent's people fill the room.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," Kent says, still standing, looking down at Alden. Letting him know precisely his place in the relationship.

Alden sneers at Kent, just a little, his lip twitching with displeasure. He understands everything Kent's late arrival, his increased forces, and condescending manner are trying to say to him. And he doesn't appreciate it.

"Sit down, Kent," Alden says, leaning back on his chair and pretending a casual attitude he doesn't actually feel. "You called this meeting, pulled me out to this rat's den in the middle of the day. What is it you want to say."

Kent does sit, one of his captains pulling over a chair for him.

"I want to know what you're playing at," Kent says carefully, leaning forward so an elbow rests on his knee. "I want to know why you're hosting parties at which your daughter is having intimate chats with Ivan."

"Intimate chats," Alden says, laughing lightly, trying to play it off. "It was just a little barbeque at the beach – they ended up sitting next to each other, by chance. These young attractive people – you know how they always seem to find each other."

Kent says nothing, simply narrowing his eyes at Alden. Letting him know he doesn't buy it.

Alden just shrugs, leaning back against his seat. "She's a beautiful girl, my Fay. Young men want to talk to her. I can't help that."

Kent carefully notes the possessive in Alden's sentence. His Fay. Kent rankles at the ownership there, but doesn't let it show on his face.

"What was Ivan even doing at your barbeque, Alden?" Kent asks, leaning further forward and putting on the pressure. "The last time we talked, you told me that he was responsible for the attempt on my life at that party you threw to introduce Fay to your family."

"A misunderstanding," Alden says lightly, waving a hand to dismiss it. "Ivan spoke to me, after he realized that the evidence was pointing towards him. Assured me, in no uncertain terms, that he had nothing to do with it."

"And you never thought to share that information with me?" Kent asks, turning his head to the side, his question taking on the edge of a threat. "Though surely you would have known that I would be interested."

Alden just shrugs, leaning casually forward and taking a chicken wing from a platter on the table. He takes a nibble of it before responding. "Well, Ivan told me that he wanted to tell you himself. Assure you in the same certain terms."

As if on cue, the door opens again, a young man pushing through. Unlike Kent and Alden, he's totally alone. He's dressed well, though he prefers designer sweatsuits to the traditional suit. He wears them exclusively in shades of black and grey, to compliment his monochrome tattoos.

“Sorry, if I’m late,” Ivan says, smirking at Kent, standing with his feet apart and his hands in his pockets.

Kent clenches his jaw and looks slowly between Ivan and Alden, rage festering in his stomach. As he does, every single one of his men puts a hand on the gun at their hip.

This was certainly not part of the plan. Alden was pushing the envelope here, letting Kent know that his allegiances have changed.

“Ivan,” Kent says, taking what control he can. “So nice of you to come.” The venom in his words lets everyone in the room know that he means precisely the opposite.

“It’s time you two talked,” Alden says as Ivan crosses the small room and takes a seat at the table. “There is too much bad blood between you, even though you should be in business.”

“I have no bad blood with him,” Kent says, leaning back in his chair and putting his hands in his pockets, looking purposefully at his captain to let him know to be ready in case this goes in the wrong direction. His captain gives Kent a subtle nod.

“Bullshit,” Ivan says, leaning back to casually rest his arm over the back of his chair. He fixes Kent with a confident stare. “I know you went to the Warden, told him to take me out. Told him I’m too green to handle my trade.”

Kent just blinks at Ivan, neither confirming nor denying. But inside, he’s pissed. Someone leaked the information, and someone was going to pay for it.

As if reading his mind, Ivan smirks at him. “Don’t bother looking within your people for who spilled the news. The Warden told me himself,” Ivan says, slowly leaning forward, looking Kent eagerly in the eye, “just before I cut his throat.”

Kent clenches his teeth, staring at this boy, this kid – who has the fucking gall –

God damnit. Kent works hard to control his anger in this moment, to let none of it pass over his face. He wasn’t going to give these two anything.

But, it was a blow. He had worked hard to get the Warden on his side – had spent two months in jail to do it, damnit, had lost his vineyard in France to make that deal –

And out of it, he got nothing.

Alden and Ivan had teamed up, and with no Warden in his back pocket...

Kent suddenly realizes his extreme disadvantage in the world of organized crime. Unfortunately, Alden and Ivan were one step ahead of him, and had known of it days before he did – maybe weeks, even.

Kent stands then, in one swift and graceful movement. This meeting was over. He couldn't – wouldn't – sit here and negotiate, not without knowing precisely where he stood in this world. He needed more information, now.

“Leaving so soon?” Alden says, smiling up at Kent, pretending a concern that he certainly doesn't feel.

Kent doesn't answer, just nods to his men and heads for the door. They have to get out of here, before any more surprises reveal themselves.

“Kent,” Ivan calls, just as Kent reaches the door. Against his better judgement, Kent turns to listen.

“Tell Fay I said hi,” Ivan says with a smirk, and then a wink. “And that I'll be seeing her real soon.”

Grinding his teeth, Kent turns and heads out the door, walking in the center of his men. As a group, they head directly for the front door.

As they walk through the main room, a flash of purple hair catches Kent's eye and he glances at one of the dancers who, uncharacteristically, has stopped dancing on one of the side stages.

“Lippert!” she calls after him, her voice shaking with anger. He ignores her and keeps going. “Lippert!” she says again, louder this time, trying to get his attention. “Where the fuck is my sister!?”

Kent glances at her this time as he walks, getting a better look, but he keeps walking as he does so, unwilling to check his pace. He recognizes her, though. Janeen Thompson, Fay's sister. He makes a mental note of it.

The cars are still waiting where they left them, the drivers ready. Kent nods to his as he climbs into the passenger seat, letting him to know to head out. Fast.

As they roll away, Kent curses to himself under his breath, staring out the window at the passing city without really seeing it.

Ivan, with Fay's name on his lips. It made his blood boil.

She was the one card he had left to play, apparently. Alden had turned tail, switching his allegiances to this young kid after twenty-some years of allegiance to the Lippert family. And it severely messed with Kent's plans.

The only thing he had keeping Alden from making a real move was Fay.

Kent had to keep her at all costs. If he didn't, he could lose everything.

Chapter 50 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Fay!” Kent yells the moment he walks into his house, storming down the hall.

His household staff freeze and then scatter when they sense that something is wrong. Kent is passively pleased by this – they, at least, know their place.

Still, Fay doesn’t answer him. Kent calls for her again, heading up the steps at a brisk pace. When he arrives at her room he pushes open her door, not bothering to knock, ready to tell her to learn to come when she’s called.

But when he enters the room, she’s not there.

The bed is mussed and scattered with books, pens, and paper – as if she had just been sitting there a moment ago. But where the hell is she?

Angry, he turns, ready to search the rest of the house. Unfortunately for her, a housekeeper is skittering past at just that moment.

“Where is she,” Kent says, grabbing the woman by the arm, his voice harsh.

“Um,” she says, looking up at him with fear in her eyes. “She left. A few hours ago.”

Kent takes a step forward, glaring down at the woman. “Where did she go?”

The woman shakes her head frantically. “I don’t know,” she says, her voice going soft. “but she was wearing...those boots.”

Kent lets the woman go, realizing belatedly that his anger here is misplaced. He doesn’t say another word to her, just heads back down the stairs as the woman hurries down the hall towards the spare bedrooms.

Kent bangs through the door to the kitchen, striding over to the table of older gentlemen.

“Who let her go,” he demands, seeking answers.

The three men look up at Kent, their faces blank.

“What’s going on here,” one of the men says, leaning back in his chair, not frightened of Kent or the anger building within him. “Why are you taking this out on us?”

Kent just glares at him, not willing to tolerate this small talk. He just wants answers.

“She went to the barn,” another one says, equally casual. “She loves that horse. You know she does.”

“Who took her,” Kent says, running low on patience. “She did not have permission to go.”

“Well, no one told her that,” the same man says, shrugging and turning back to his coffee. “The kid took her – the young one. Jerome. They headed out a few hours ago.”

Kent strides out of the kitchen then and through the door to the garage, grabbing a set of keys off the wall and heading for the last car in the row. He hardly ever takes the Bugatti, but – well. He wants to get there fast.

Twenty minutes later, Kent pulls into the drive of the stables. He’s running mostly on rage right now, hardly thinking through his actions, instead concentrating his energies on figuring out his next steps.

He has so much he has to sort through. He has to organize reconnaissance to figure out where the other families stand in regards to Alden and Ivan, he has to figure out just how far Ivan has actually gone within the drug trade – whether he’s taken down other bosses, or made alliances with them. Then, Kent has to take stock of his own position, his own forces – this could come to war, if he’s not careful with it –

But at the heart of it all, the beating pulse that echoes through every problem is Fay, Fay, Fay.

He has to secure her, now. Physically, so that no one can take her from him – god, if someone took her, held her hostage...

Kent shakes his head, unwilling to think of it. But beyond that, he needs to secure Fay mentally and emotionally as well, securing her loyalties so that she doesn’t betray him –

Because, god damnit, so much now depends on this girl –

Kent throws the car into park, stepping out and striding towards the stables.

The stable workers react in much the same way as his home staff did – getting out of his way as fast as they can and making themselves scarce, so that when Kent strides through the stable it looks like a ghost town. Only the horses are curious enough to peer at him over their stall doors.

When he gets to Heathcliff’s stall, though, it’s empty.

Which means only one thing.

Kent keeps going, passing quickly through the barn and heading for the training ring out back.

He sees her almost immediately, her flame-red hair flowing over her shoulders, seated on the beautiful red horse that he chose specifically because they were a match, a pair. Even as Kent strides forward, eager to interrupt, needing to talk to lock her down, he can't help but admire her progress.

Fay is going in slow circles around the ring, her horse trotting neatly as she raises and lowers herself in the saddle to match the horse's gait. Kent can see the smile and the joy on her face as she does it – a natural horsewoman, yes, but also someone who is seeing the results of her hard work.

As he nears, though, Kent frowns. He sees that her smiles seem to be continually directed to the center of the ring. Kent shifts his gaze, then, and is suddenly furious when he sees someone standing there in the middle of the ring, giving her directions.

Not her trainer, but, instead, Jerome.

Kent increases his pace, fueled by his anger at that boy. What the hell is he doing in the ring with her – he isn't trained –

As Kent continues forward, he sees Jerome call to Fay. She slows the horse and, smiling, walks him to the center of the ring, where Jerome waits.

The smile on her face – coy, sweet, as she laughs and jokes with that kid – the fucking kid he picked up to cover the most menial of the family's tasks – completely expendable –

And yet she's smiling at him, laughing down into his face, and he's –

Kent goes red when he sees it.

The boy first grasps the horse's reins, and then puts a hand out to rest on Fay's knee –

To slowly, leisurely stroke his fingers across her thigh, working his way upwards –

Fay glances at the touch, blushes, but doesn't push it away –

Kent rips open the gate to the riding arena, bursting through it.

Fay sees him first, her eyes going wide with shock and then her face going white when she sees the expression on his face, the fury in his eyes.

Jerome spins, reacting both to the sound of Kent's approach and to Fay's shock. He gasps, tearing his hand from its place on Fay's thigh and tucking it guiltily behind his back, his own eyes trained on Kent's raised fist –

Which, a second later, slams directly into Jerome's face, cracking across his jaw.

Fay screams, unable to stop her own fear and surprise, as Jerome stumbles and then falls back into the dry dirt of the arena -

Kent sneers down at the boy but then snaps his head up as he hears the horse screech, shying away in fear, his haunches bunching below him as he rears and then bolts, heading away from this violence, eager to get to the other side of the arena – or anywhere else –

Kent sees her face, then, and feels the horror within himself as she clings, first, to the horse's mane and then loses her balance, flying free of the saddle and through the air as the horse bolts –

She slams into the ground, face down, her heaped form laying still as Kent rushes forward.