

Chapter 101 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“The pleasure is all mine,” I say, pitching my voice lower and holding Alessi’s gaze. “But who, may I ask, are you?”

“Fay,” Daniel says, coming to my side and wrapping a happy arm around my waist. “This is my Uncle Alessi, my mother’s brother,” he tells me, and I raise my eyebrows, surprised by the news and pretending to be excited about it. But in reality, I find it unnerving – neither Daniel nor Kent has said very much about Daniel’s mother, Lenai, and I certainly didn’t know she had a brother. Especially one who makes Kent go pale like that.

“And this,” Daniel says, turning towards the beautiful woman, who looks at me like a hungry cat peering at a little canary, “is Natalia, an old family friend. My mother’s maid of honor, actually, at her wedding.”

“It is a pleasure,” Natalia says, moving slowly towards me and taking both of my hands before placing careful kisses on both of my cheeks. “You are very beautiful,” she says, looking me up and down after she straightens, “a good fit for our Daniel, yes?” she says, turning to beam at him in that adoring way Italian mothers look at their sons. She quickly looks back to me, though. “American?”

“Fay was born in America, yes,” Kent answers quickly before I can open my mouth. “But her father’s family is Sicilian, like us. Her mother...” he hesitates, and I realize that he doesn’t know.

“Scottish,” I supply sweetly, holding Natalia’s gaze and gesturing towards my red hair.

“Ahh,” Natalia says, nodding and still studying me. “And you can cook?”

I blink, surprised at the question. What the hell does that matter?

Daniel, at my side, laughs a little. “That’s something Fay’s working on,” he lies smoothly, smiling down at me and giving me a squeeze.

Natalia nods sharply, still holding my gaze. “We will teach you to cook,” she says, folding her arms over her chest deliberately, “like a real Italian woman, before you marry my godson. He needs a good wife.”

I smile a little, intimidated, and then nod, agreeing to her terms. But honestly, the last thing I want is to be trapped alone in a kitchen with this woman. She scares me.

A lot.

“So, not that I’m not thrilled to see you,” Daniel says, smoothly changing the subject as he pulls me closer to his side, supportive, “but what are you doing here? Was I –“ he glances at his father, “was I supposed to know you were coming?”

“No,” Natalia says, definitive, turning her cool gaze on Kent now. “We are a surprise.”

“Yes,” Alessi says, likewise shifting his attention back to Kent. “My father has been...interested. In your progress these past few months. He sent us here to,” he shrugs here, apparently finding the words, “do a little tiny check. See how you’re doing. See if we can be of any help.”

Kent’s eyebrows lower over his eyes as mine shoot up, realizing the depth of what Alessi is saying. Whoever his father is – someone important, I suppose – he’s sending these two to monitor whatever Kent is doing with his underworld business.

And whoever is watching the Mafia King, and sending along his auditors? He must be a big fish indeed.

“Well, I’m so glad to see you, and so glad you’re here,” Daniel says, pretending to be oblivious to what they just said and beaming at the two of them. “We’ll have to throw a party! And show you some of the sights, while you’re here!”

“The sights,” Natalia coos, looking back at Daniel with those fond mother’s eyes, coming forward to take his face in her hands and squeeze his cheeks a little. “So cute, you American boys, with your idea of beauty. Daniel, darling, we left all of the sights in Sicily and in Italy.” She drops his face and claps her hands, laughing a little. “You will come home,” she states, definitive, nodding towards me but not looking at me, “you bring your bride, and then we show you the sights.”

Daniel laughs with her, agreeing, but I find my gaze shifting to Alessi, who is staring down Kent with a slick little smile on his face. They stare at each other in silence for a moment before Alessi speaks.

“Yes, Kent,” he says slowly, “your Daniel has a good idea. Why don’t you throw us this party. Tomorrow night. Invite...everyone. We are family, after all.” He shrugs. “We want to see the family.”

I watch Kent grit his teeth as he processes Alessi’s demand. “Of course,” he says after a moment, his voice unreadable. I’m still watching them when Daniel drops his hand from my waist, moving to Natalia’s side to take her suitcase by the handle.

“Come one,” he says, still smiling fondly at his uncle and...well, someone who acts quite a lot like an aunt, even if she isn’t biological family. “Let’s get you settled upstairs.”

“Such a good little host,” Natalia says, pinching his cheek and smiling at him. Then, she shoots a little glance my way. “Though it is usually the hostess’s job to settle guests...”

I feel my cheeks go red as I realize her critique. But she’s already halfway up the steps before I can do anything about it. “There are more suitcases in the car, little Fay!” Natalia calls over her shoulder. “If you want to be useful!”

My mouth drops open and I start, not knowing what to do, but Alessi leans towards me. “Don’t pay too much attention to her,” he says, smiling and shaking his head. “She is...ah, what do you call it here?” he takes a moment to think, looking up at the ceiling, and then snaps his gaze back to mine. “Ah! Yes. A bitch.”

I burst out laughing at this, and Alessi laughs with me, coming to link his arm with mine, patting me on the hand. “Come come,” he says, “you will be my little friend, I will keep you safe from her. Do you have any espresso here, after the long flight?”

“Yes!” I reply, smiling at him, relieved that at least one of these new visitors likes me. I turn towards the kitchen and Alessi turns with me. “Come on, I’ll be happy to get you something.” Alessi smiles at me and nods and we both walk towards the kitchen. Before we pass through the door, though, Alessi calls to Kent over his shoulder.

“Ah, Kent,” he says, a sly grin sliding over his lips. “You’ll get the bags, yes? Thank you, brother. Such a big help.”

I don’t even glance at Kent over my shoulder as we head into the kitchen, not wanting to give anything away. But I know, in my heart, that he must be boiling with rage.

Kent is as good as his word, putting all of his best people to work planning a party to welcome Natalia and Alessio, even though they didn’t bother to let him know that they were coming. As a result, I don’t see much of him during the rest of the day.

Luckily, Daniel stays by my side like a little burr, perhaps intuiting that I need his help navigating the innerworkings of his family. He also soothes me after each of Natalia’s verbal barbs which come...frequently. We have dinner together as a family the night they arrive, in the back garden. Natalia shoos everyone out of the kitchen so that she can make us an Italian feast of fresh pasta and fish, complimented with amazing cheeses and cured meats that she and Alessio brought us from Sicily.

Kent comes late to dinner and doesn’t say long. While he’s there, he doesn’t say much. He nods and laughs when appropriate, but excuses himself quickly, saying that he has work and planning to do. I watch him go with a little regret. I’m still mad at him, but he was stressed out yesterday - I have no idea how he’s handling the surprise arrival of these intense Italians on top of everything else.

“This one,” Natalia says, jolting me out of my reverie by placing a creamy soft cheese in front of me, “is illegal in your silly country. Unpasteurized,” she says, patting me on my shoulder and gesturing for me to eat. I take a bite, groaning at how delicious it is. “Good girl,” she murmurs, moving away to bring more dishes to the table. “Eat more, it will help you put some meat on your body. Grow some tettas.”

Daniel snorts, almost sending red wine through his nose while I gape and look down at my body. I mean, my boobs aren’t gigantic, but...I’m slim...

“Do not listen to her,” Alessi whispers, leaning over to nudge me familiarly with his elbow as he sips his Campari cocktail. “She is trying to see if she can get under your skin. She will be more impressed with you if she cannot.”

“Fay’s tough,” Daniel says then, winking at me across the table. “She can handle it.”

“I don’t know,” I murmur, taking another slice of the delicious cheese and eating it. “Maybe I need more meat on my bones to survive all of these knives she’s throwing at me...”

Both Daniel and Alessi laugh, making me smile.

I’m glad that I have both of them on my side. At least, for now.

Chapter 102 – Family party

Chapter 102 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

The next afternoon, Daniel gets ready for the party with me in my room, and we’re alone for the first time since Alessi and Natalia arrived. He stayed up late with Alessi, drinking and laughing, while I begged off to bed by myself to be alone for a minute.

Today, Daniel and I had taken our guests out to see the sights, as Daniel promised. Natalia was, predictably, unimpressed and kept calling our beautiful city a “horrible cage of rats.” I’m finally relaxing from the experience now as I do my hair, curling it gently in the way that Fiona showed me so that I can let it sweep down over my shoulders like a femme fatale. My makeup is already done to match, and I’m starting to feel powerful – exactly how I’m going to need to feel if I’m going to stand next to Natalia all night.

“So, what’s this all about, Daniel,” I ask him, looking at his reflection in the mirror so I don’t have to turn around. “Why are they here, really?”

Daniel sighs and looks at me seriously. “Something’s up, Fay,” he says, shaking his head. “They wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t. Don Bianci – my grandfather – he hasn’t sent anyone to check on

dad since mom died. We must seriously be in hot water if he's sending Natalia and Alessi here together."

"Oh," I say, my eyes going wide. Don Bianci – finally I have a name to put to Alessi's father and Natalia's boss. I had gleaned, through our conversations the past day, that he's an incredibly wealthy and powerful boss in Italy – and Kent's father-in-law. If he's getting upset with Kent...

"This could go really well," Daniel continues, buttoning up his white shirt, "or, it could go terribly. A lot rides on what happens tonight. Alessi and Natalia want the whole family together so they can get a real picture of what dad is doing. And then, whatever they learn," he shrugs, shaking his head. "They'll decide to either support him in whatever way they can, or..."

"Or what," I say, my hands going still as I stare at Daniel.

"Or they'll replace him," Daniel says, looking at me seriously in the mirror. "My grandfather has a great deal of capital invested with my father. Dad is the boss and grandpa generally lets him do what he wants," he continues, "but if they decide that dad is seriously messing up..."

I nod, understanding him. "Grandpa," I murmur, grimacing a little. "Crazy that you call the most powerful mob boss in Italy grandpa..."

"Not to his face," Daniel says, grinning at me. "Then, it's nonno."

"Nonno," I say, laughing a little and wrinkling my nose. "That's even weirder."

Daniel laughs with me, shrugging, and then starts to put on his tie.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" I ask, finishing my hair and lifting a can of hairspray to set it just the way it is now.

"Just...make dad look good," Daniel says, turning his eyes back to me. "Which, I think, means presenting a united front to Uncle Alessi and Natalia."

"United front," I say, turning to him after I finish spraying. "By which you mean..."

"It would be better, Fay," Daniel says seriously, pausing with his tie and turning to me. "If we were...engaged. And nobody knew, at all, about...whatever's going on with you and dad."

I sigh, understanding and nodding. Then, seeing him struggle further with his tie, I stand up and cross the room to him, batting his hands away and taking the tie in my own hands, beginning to knot it for him. "But you know," I say quietly, looking up into his face after a second. "That us pretending to be engaged for appearances doesn't...actually change anything."

"Fay," Daniel whispers to me softly, looking down into my eyes. "You should let it change. Let me change it for you. We can go back to what we had –"

“Daniel,” I interrupt, pausing my hands and then wrapping them around the tie itself, using my frustrated grip to pull a little on Daniel’s neck. “Even if I wasn’t...” I hesitate, not wanting to say it to him aloud, “with your dad... you and me? It’s not fair to either of us.”

“Fay,” Daniel sighs frustratedly, shaking his head at me, “I’ve said it before – we could be so good together –“

“What about Jerome?” I ask, looking up at him, my expression serious. “It’s not fair to Jerome either.”

Daniel freezes for a second, staring at me – honestly, as if he’s never thought about it before.

“Are you in love with him?” I ask, genuinely wanting to know.

Daniel pulls away from me, turning his back, but I can see the tension in his shoulders. I wait, trying to be patient, but he just stands there – I think wondering himself. I clasp my hands together, considering that...maybe he just doesn’t know.

I’m still waiting for Daniel to turn back to me when the door opens and I jump a little bit, turning to look at Kent standing suddenly in the doorway.

“What the hell are you two doing,” he demands, “you’re not even dressed!” he exclaims, gesturing towards my pajamas. Then he looks at Daniel and scoffs at him, “your tie,” he mutters, stepping forward to do it himself. “Why can’t either of you tie a tie –“

“I can do it,” Daniel complains, the hint of a little boy’s whine in his protest, and I smirk as I hurry to the bathroom where my dress is hanging next to the shower. I put it there to let the steam unwind any last wrinkles.

“Fay!” Kent shouts after me, tense, as I peel my pajamas off and begin to slip on the dress. “You have about twenty seconds!”

“I’m coming!” I shout back, smirking a little as I pull the dress over my head and zip it halfway up my back, unable to reach any further. Then I hurry back out into my bedroom. “Can one of you...” I say when I’m back in the room, walking swiftly over to them and holding up the front of the dress with my hand. Then I turn and indicate the zipper, looking over my shoulder at them.

Both Kent and Daniel step forward to do the job but, realizing it simultaneously, they both stop and glare at each other. I can’t help the laugh that bursts out of me at this. “Seriously!” I say, turning my head away and shaking it. “It’s just a zipper!”

But then there’s the warmth of a body close behind me and I feel a tug at the fabric of the dress as someone zips me up. When I turn, I’m surprised to see Kent standing close. He stays there for a second – perhaps a second too long, from Daniel’s perspective, since Daniel angrily clears his throat.

Kent steps back, then, and looks me over from head to toe. “Shoes?” he asks, slipping his hands into his pockets.

I nod and spin around, looking for them, and I hear a little frustrated sigh come from Kent’s direction.

“Would you chill out?” I scold, smirking at him briefly before I spot the five-inch stilettos under my vanity, their red bottoms catching my eye. I quickly sit on my stool and pull them on before standing up and spreading out my arms. “Well?” I ask. “Do I pass muster?”

The dress is...gorgeous, simple, and serious. Kent has dressed me in a lot of different styles before, but never one that made me feel so...grown up. The black silk Versace dress has only two little spaghetti straps holding it up before it slinks its way down my body, the delicate invisible corseting below it giving me an incredible hourglass shape. The skirt of the dress spills to the floor but there’s a slit up the right side that goes almost to my waist, though there’s enough fabric in the circle of my skirt that you barely notice that sexy little fact unless I’m walking, or you’re looking closely.

Daniel raises his eyebrows at me, clearly impressed, and gives a thumbs up, but Kent does nothing. He just stands there, looking at me from top to bottom like a connoisseur before he nods. “You’ll do, Fay,” he murmurs.

I roll my eyes at him a little bit, wanting a little bit more than that, but he just smirks and turns, walking out of the room, snapping his fingers over his shoulder to let us know that he expects us to follow behind.

I move to follow but Daniel stops me with a hand on my arm. “Forgetting something?” he asks, and I frown up at him, confused. Then, from his pocket, he pulls out his mother’s engagement ring.

“Oh,” I say, blinking down at it. And then I sigh, putting out my left hand and letting him slide it onto my ring finger.

“Where it belongs,” Daniel says quietly, keeping my hand in his when he’s finished. “Ready?”

“Ready,” I say, smiling up at him.

“Off to war then,” Daniel says, and we walk out of the room hand-in-hand just as a shout comes from below.

“Daniel, Fay!” Kent’s voice rings out. “Come on! We don’t have all night!”

Daniel rolls his eyes at me and I laugh as we make our way down the stairs.

Chapter 103 – A Simple Family Gathering

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The party is already in full swing when we get there, which makes sense. Even though Kent is technically the host, there's no way he's not going to make an entrance. I walk in on Daniel's arm and find my breath almost immediately stolen at the beautiful scene before me – though I'm not sure why I'm so surprised. When Kent does something, he does it right.

“Wow,” I breathe, pulling a little closer to Daniel as I look around. “Incredible...”

Daniel shrugs, less impressed than me. But then again, he's been coming to parties like this since he was a kid. I nudge him with my arm, making him look at me, and then I whisper “so jaded,” teasing him as I wrinkle my nose. Daniel just laughs at me and shrugs, looking around and trying harder to appreciate it.

The party is being held in a beautiful rooftop garden in the center of the city so that buildings rise tall beyond the delicate arcs of greenery artfully placed along the rooftop's waist-high brick walls. The entire place is lit by candlelight and a quartet of musicians sit in an alcove, giving us a little music to pair with the night.

Kent, Natalia on his arm, moves away from Daniel and I to speak with a group of people who come forward to greet Natalia, and Alessi is likewise snapped up. Daniel nods towards the bar, raising a questioning eyebrow my way, and I happily nod. Halfway there, though, we're intercepted by a couple of young men around our age who Daniel introduces as his “cousins,” though I know that can't be right – Kent doesn't have any siblings. But these Italian families are so sprawling that I doubt they bother with differentiating second- and third-cousins from firsts.

The boys' conversation is chatty and cheerful, talking about old memories and childhood vacations, but there's not much room for me in it. So I tug on Daniel's arm a little and nod towards the bar again, indicating that I'll go get us some drinks. Daniel nods to me encouragingly, letting me go.

I quickly walk over to the bar and place our order – a red wine for me, a Manhattan for Daniel – when suddenly I feel a presence by my side. I turn and am shocked to see Natalia standing close, looking at me rather than the bar tender.

“What did you order?” she asks, cold, not bothering with a greeting.

“Um,” I hesitate, suddenly on guard and doubting the order – even though I know it's what we want. The bar tender is back with our drinks before I can answer, though, so I nod towards the glass of wine and the whiskey.

“Red wine,” Natalia sneers, looking at the glass with distaste. Then, she turns the look on me. “In the summer?”

“Um,” I say again, hating myself in this moment for not having a better retort. But I love red wine...

“Take this back, per favore,” Natalia orders the bar tender. “The girl will have prosecco, and so will I.” The bar tender doesn’t hesitate, doing as Natalia says, and I sigh discreetly through my nose. I don’t look at Natalia, a little pissed at being countered like that, but she places an elegant finger under my chin and obliges me to turn my face to look at her.

“You will like it better, eh?” she says, nodding to me and taking back her hand once I meet her eyes. “In the summer, you must drink light. Red wine is for winter nights. Unless it is sangria, and then it is for day.” She shrugs, as if this is obvious.

“I can handle my own drinks, Natalia,” I reply, working to keep my voice even as the bar tender delivers two sparkling glasses of prosecco.

“Clearly,” Natalia remarks, smirking at me. “You cannot.”

I roll my eyes a little and reach for my and Daniel’s glasses when suddenly Natalia reaches for my left hand, quick as a whip, a little hiss on her breath.

Shocked, I turn to her as she clasps my hand, pulling it closer to her so that she can stare at my ring.

“He gave it to you?” she asks, looking up into my face with wide eyes. “This engagement ring?”

I hesitate, a little shocked. “Yes?” I reply, hoping it’s the right answer. “Daniel thought it would be...good. For me to have his mother’s ring.”

I’m a little shocked by Natalia’s reaction as she turns her eyes once again to the sparkling diamond and then drops my hand as if it’s a hot coal. She turns her face up to mine again, glaring at me as she grabs her drink. “Don’t be a fool, girl,” she sneers. “That ring was never Daniel’s. If you have it, it’s because he wanted you to.”

And then Natalia spins and walks away faster than I’ve seen her move before, her elegance and poise ruffled for a moment. As she walks, though I see Natalia straighten her shoulders and smooth out her steps, as if our strange encounter never happened.

“Hey,” Daniel says at my side, and I jump a little. I had been so focused on Natalia that I didn’t see him coming.

“Hey,” I say, giving him a brief little smile, and then I reach for his drink on the bar and hand it to him, taking my glass of prosecco as well.

“What was that all about?” he asks, looking after Natalia’s retreated form. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen her...perturbed before.”

“She got upset,” I say, turning and frowning after her, “when she saw my engagement ring.”

“Oh,” Daniel says, raising his eyebrows and then nodding with understanding. “Well, that makes sense,” he says, giving a little shrug and putting his arm around my waist, guiding away from the bar and towards a little bench underneath a rose arch, where we’re alone.

“Why does that make sense?” I ask, sitting down next to him and taking a sip of my drink, not really tasting it.

“Because,” Daniel says, grimacing a little. “That ring has...more history than we’ve told you before.”

“What?” I breathe, my eyes going wide. I look down at the ring again, shocked. “Is it – what’s wrong with it?” I know that it was Lenai’s engagement ring – and, somehow, I had assumed that it came from her family, a Bianci heirloom passed from bride to bride, and Daniel only got it because he was the only boy.

“Nothing’s wrong with it, but...” Daniel hesitates. “Well. Let me start at the beginning.”

I sit next to him, tense, desperately wanting to know but having no idea where the hell this is going.

“That’s my grandmother’s ring,” Daniel says, gently taking my hand and admiring it. “Dad’s mom.”

My mouth makes a little surprised “o” – I hadn’t realized that this was a Lippert heirloom.

“My grandmother gave it to dad when he was eight and she shipped him off to Italy, after his father was killed. She knew that he would be safe there, and the ring with him. She told him to protect it with his life, and to give it to the woman he would marry.”

“Oh,” I say, looking down at the ring again with new appreciation. “I mean, it’s always been beautiful, but I had no idea it had such a...complicated story,” I say, my words a little awed. I look up at Daniel again, who is watching me closely. “So, then he gave it to your mom?”

“Well, yes,” Daniel says, a little awkward, looking away from me and running a hand through his hair. “But...he gave it to Natalia first.”

“WHAT!?” I hear myself shriek, and the party goes a little quiet, everyone turning to stare at me.

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Daniel laughs as if he's said something incredibly funny and my reaction is totally normal, looping an arm around my shoulders and pulling me close. "Laugh," he orders in my ear, a little urgent. "They'll look away."

I do as he says, not nearly as good of an actress as he is, but – then again – he's had his whole life to practice. But he's right, after I give a little laugh as if Daniel has said something that's a little scandalous but ultimately hilarious, his family gives us a couple of confused smirks and then turns back to their business.

When they've all looked away, I snap my face back to Daniel's, my expression totally serious.

"Spill," I demand. "Now. Tell me everything." I drain my glass of prosecco, needing to bolster my courage.

Daniel sighs and shakes his head. "I don't know all of the details, Fay. What I heard is from my Italian cousins when I would go and visit them in Italy, and even what they knew was hushed up. It was apparently a big scandal."

I nod, urging him to go on as I slip his Manhattan out of his hand and take a sip, deciding I need even more courage. Daniel gives me a little chagrined frown as if he was looking forward to that drink, but he doesn't take it back.

"Dad was destined for mom – engaged to her at birth to unite the families, as I was to you. And my grandfather – he was incredibly good to my dad. When dad went to Italy, he went basically as a pauper – his father, the head of the Lippert family, had been killed, and my mom had nothing. So, the fact that nonno respected the engagement, when he could have married his eldest and favorite daughter to someone else, was...a big deal. Dad should have been grateful."

Daniel sighs, shaking his head, and I nod, understanding. "But he wasn't?" I ask, needing to know more.

He shrugs and shakes his head, unwilling to commit to that idea. "He was grateful, Fay – he was just..." Daniel sighs and looks over to where his dad stands with a group of his family, Natalia again by his side. Kent is easy to spot, of course, being the tallest in the room.

"He what," I prompt, frustrated by his pauses.

"He was in love with Natalia," Daniel says simply, turning back to me and laying it out plainly. I feel my blood go cold in my veins. "They – they tried to elope to Rome. But they were caught, and dad was punished, and..." Daniel shrugs, indicating that he doesn't know much more, "a

year later, he married mom. And Natalia stood next to my mother at their wedding, and since then she's always been a close family friend. That's all I've got."

"Ohmygod," I murmur, mushing the words together in my shock as I stare at Natalia across the room, slumping in my seat a little and raising Daniel's drink to my mouth again to take a sip. "That explains so much..."

"It does?" he asks, looking over at Natalia curiously.

"Um, yah," I say, glaring at him a little for being so dumb. "Why Natalia never got married? Why she looks at Kent like that when she thinks he's not looking? Why she's doing her utmost to prove that she's the perfect Italian woman, wife, and mom? And then, Daniel - why she looks at you with such adoration, and treats you like you're the son she never had? Because you are the son she never had."

Daniel's eyes go wide at this realization and he looks at her again, shocked to think that...well, yes, in some alternate universe, Natalia would be his mother, not Lenai. And that perhaps Natalia wanted that very badly.

"Plus," I add, my voice a little bitter now, "the way she sticks to your dad like a little burr? Look at her, standing next to him, like she's ready to take him back the moment he gives her any sort of hint that he wants her."

"Really?" Daniel asks, turning that wide gaze on me now. "Do you think Natalia's going to make a play for him, after all this time?"

I sigh a deep breath and gesture towards where she's draping herself on Kent's arm, laughing up at some joke he made.

"Come on, Daniel," I say, my voice derisive. "Your dad is not that funny."

"No, he's not," Daniel murmurs, seeing it himself. "Oh weird," he adds, turning back to me. "My fiancé and my auntie, both competing for my dad." He scowls and snatches the drink out of my hand now, draining it. "And no one going for me."

"What," I ask, laughing at him now. "Do you want Natalia to go for you?"

"What?" Daniel gasps. "Ew, no, Fay —"

"Because," I continue, laughing now, "you're not technically related, and with how messed up this family tree already is, it could work —"

"Gross!" Daniel exclaims, standing up and pulling me with him, both of us laughing now. "Come on, we need a refill," he says, guiding me back over to the bar. We're both still giggling at the idea of Daniel getting together with Natalia, and I'm egging him on by imitating her Italian

accent and thinking of things she'd say to him on their wedding night – how she'd boss him around, and the things she'd complain about - when someone comes up behind us at the bar.

“What’s so funny,” Kent asks, surprising us, and Daniel and I turn as one, bursting into laughter when we see him standing there. Kent frowns at us, but not in a mean or angry way. Honestly, he looks a little pleased to see us having fun, but just...displeased to be left out?

Or maybe frowning is his default expression. I don’t really know, and I’m laughing too hard to care.

“Nothing,” I say, wiping my eyes free of a few tears of mirth as the bartender delivers my glass of red wine. “Just...a stupid joke,” I continue, my giggles fading. Daniel nods, smiling at his dad and taking a sip of his second Manhattan.

“Red wine?” Kent asks, frowning at my choice as I take the glass off of the bar.

“Oh god,” I moan, slumping my shoulders and looking up at him. “Not you too. Can’t anyone just let me drink what I want to drink?”

“Do what you want, Fay,” Kent shrugs, his frown deepening. “I just thought on a summer night that something like a glass of prosecco –“

Daniel and I lose it again and Kent just rolls his eyes, deciding to ignore us. He pushes past us to the bar to get a drink. Daniel loops his arm through mine. “Come on,” he says, “let me introduce you to some of my actual aunts and uncles –“

“Ones you don’t plan to marry?” I prod, grinning.

“Oh, I didn’t say that,” he replies, giving me a dirty little smirk and leading me over to a group.

Before we can arrive, though, there’s a disturbance at the door – raised voices that ring wrong against the laughter and happy chatter that fills the party. Daniel and I stop in our tracks, turning to see what’s happening, and for the second time that night I feel my blood go cold.

Because standing at the door to Kent’s family party is a large group of people who I’m sure were not invited.

And at the head of the group, in a grey Gucci suit, is my father.

And standing a step behind him in black Armani, his crisp white shirt already unbuttoned and his eyes already on me, is Ivan.

“Well, Lippert?” my father calls to Kent, who has turned away from the bar and is glaring at the group standing at the door. “Are you going to turn us away from this happy affair?”

Everyone is absolutely silent as Kent pauses for a second and then slowly, with perfect deliberation, begins to cross the floor. He stops about halfway, leaving about twenty feet between him, and my father, and my...

My what? My maybe-boyfriend? The lion tamer I make out with sometimes at taco stands and my dad's mountain house?

"Of course," Kent replies to my father's question, his voice at once even and dangerous. "Come have a drink, Alden. You're going to be family soon enough as it is. Bring your...friends with you," Kent concludes, slowly raising his glass of whiskey to his lips and taking a casual sip.

Every line of Kent in this moment is a graceful warning that they can enter...

But they're on his turf now, and playing by his rules.

Chapter 105 – Family Politics

Chapter 105 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

The people blocking the door step aside and the new guests begin to fill in – about twenty of them. Some of the people are familiar to me but some are totally new. While everyone else fills in, I'm surprised to see my father standing still, narrowing his eyes at Kent, apparently confused.

And then he shifts his glance to me, on Daniel's arm, and I realize that...Kent just publicly re-established my engagement to Daniel without Alden's permission, even though my father has been offering me around as a potential marriage option to other powerful families – Ivan included –

I quickly glance around the room, trying to get a read on it –

I see Ivan's blonde head moving away from us through a group of people, walking with a dark-haired girl –

But, more pressing, I see Natalia and Alessi approaching Kent, their eyes curious and a little eager, as if they're hyenas finally getting to the heart of their prey.

And Kent is staring at my father, locking eyes with him, daring him to counter his word that Daniel and I are engaged, that the alliance between the Lippert and Alden families that has lasted for twenty-two years has finally broken apart.

I know immediately what I have to do and I move, pulling Daniel with me to my father's side.

“Papa!” I say, giving a happy little laugh and throwing an arm around his shoulders, still keeping a hold on Daniel with my free hand. I stand on my toes to give my father a warm kiss on the cheek. “I’m so glad you could come – I didn’t hear word back from the invitation!”

My father starts a little at my sudden hug but then wraps his arms around me, fond. “It is good to see you, girl,” he says, smiling down at me in a fatherly way. And despite how much he’s pushed me recently, I’m reminded – suddenly – of the fond father that I saw in the images of his wedding to my mother, the way he looked at me when I was a child. And I realize that he’s perhaps been waiting for a hug from me for a long, long time.

I smile at him, then, not able to help it.

“Sir,” Daniel says, breaking the moment a little, but not in a bad way. He offers his hand to my father with a charming smile. “It is good to see you again.”

“Daniel...” my father says, hesitating just for a breath as he looks at Daniel’s hand. My father then glances towards Alessi and Natalia, who have drawn close to Kent. And I realize, quite suddenly, that he knows precisely who they are. “Yes,” Alden concludes, apparently making a decision as he releases me to take Daniel’s hand in a hearty shake, pulling him in for a hug as well. “It is good to see you as well, son.”

When Daniel pulls back, my father wraps an arm around my shoulder and he, Daniel and I walk as a trio towards Kent, Alessi, and Natalia, who stand waiting for us.

“Dad,” I say, doing my best to play the gracious hostess, “forgive me, I’m not sure if you’ve been introduced –“

“Alessi,” my father says, squeezing the arm around my shoulders in thanks and putting out a warm hand towards Alessi, who shakes it happily. “It’s been years – so good to see you again, and you looking so well.”

“You, however,” Alessi says, giving him an amiable grin. “You have gotten a little fat, yes? Too much of these American cheeseburgers?”

My eyes go a little wide at Alessi’s gall but my father bursts into rich laughter, and so I laugh a little as well. When I look at Daniel, I realize that he’s doing it too – all three of us faking it, all three playing the game.

“You’ve got me there,” my father says, shaking his head in apparent mirth. “And this beautiful specimen...” my father continues, looking towards Natalia.

“Natalia,” Kent says, gesturing towards her. “Of the Bianci family, in Sicily.”

“Another Sicilian,” my father replies, taking her hand and bowing low over it. “Like me.”

“It is always good to be amongst our countrymen,” Natalia replies smoothly, not friendly but not cold.

The four of them begin to chat lightly, then, and I quietly slip away from my spot beneath my father’s arm, moving to Daniel’s side. I nod back to the little alcove that we left, asking him as subtly as he can to take me there. Daniel glances at his father, who gives a tiny nod that I think no one else notices, letting him know he should.

So quickly, without fuss, Daniel and I move away.

“What the hell is going on,” I hiss to him, looking anxiously around the party – searching, if I’m being honest, for a blonde head of hair amongst this sea of dark-haired Italians, and failing.

“It’s an ambush,” Daniel whispers back, glancing over his shoulder. “That was well done on you, though, greeting your dad like that. It put us in a good position.”

“Good,” I murmur, stopping when we reach our little bench but not sitting down on it, instead smoothing my hands anxiously down the length of my dress. “What did you mean when you said it was an ambush?”

“Everyone who just came in is from a rival family,” Daniel replies, shaking his head a little and looking around at everyone. “They were not invited, but somehow figured out that Alessi and Natalia are visiting, and that they’d be here tonight. If I had to guess, I’d say these other families are going to make some kind of play to turn the Bianci family against my dad and towards them.”

“Christ,” I curse, clenching my teeth. “What can we do?”

“Nothing,” Daniel sighs, likewise anxious. “Or – get whatever information we can, I guess. And make sure we don’t fuck up.”

I look at him with worried eyes. “Not my strong suit,” I mutter.

“You’re better than you think, Fay,” Daniel replies passively, not looking at me and surveying the party instead. I see his eyes flash a little. “Seriously?” he whispers to himself. “They’re here?”

“Who?” I ask, eager.

“The fucking Russians,” Daniel replies, his voice low and angry. “The Kozlovs. Your boy Ivan must have brought them – they’re his biggest tie, besides Alden. God damn it.”

“Is that bad?” I ask.

“Yes, Fay,” Daniel replies, looking at me a little angrily. I glare back, because how the hell was I supposed to know that when no one tells me anything. “They’ve notoriously got the weakest

hold in the city's underworld. It used to be Ivan, but he surpassed them when he got in the drug game. But if they're willing to come here, in open defiance of my dad?" Daniel shakes his head, worried. "They're feeling bold."

"Which ones are they?" I ask quietly, and then – as I suddenly spy Ivan moving towards me through the crowd with a beautiful brunette on his arm – I think that I can probably guess.

As the two approach, the music changes, going from pleasant background music to an orchestral tango, causing the party guests to clear from a dance floor that I hadn't realized was there. A few couples take to it, beginning to spin around expertly.

As Ivan approaches, his trademark smirk already on his lips, he holds my gaze without wavering. I feel my eyes narrow at him as I shake my head, but I can't help my own lips from twitching up towards a smile, even as I stand with my arm clasped in Daniel's.

"Fay," Ivan says, nodding to me and then shifting his gaze to my fiancé. "Daniel. I'm so pleased to hear that you two have...patched things up."

"We were never apart," Daniel snaps in reply, causing Ivan to shift his eyes back to mine, his smirk deepening.

"Really," Ivan replies, his words slow enough to be infused with a deep doubt. "Fay gave me a...different impression."

Daniel glowers at Ivan and my heartrate picks up as I sense that rare temper rising in him. My eyes go wide as I feel Daniel ball his fist next to me and I realize that Daniel is about five seconds away from punching Ivan right in the face.

Chapter 106 – Kingpins and Pawns

Chapter 106 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I open my mouth to say something – anything – but the girl on Ivan's arm is quicker than me.

"Daniel," the young woman says with a sweet smile, pretending she doesn't notice the tension and breaking it as she takes a happy step forward towards Daniel. "Do you remember me?" Her voice has a slight Russian accent – not at all strong, but the sort of thing you might unconsciously carry if you grew up American but lived in a Russian-speaking household all of your life.

Daniel takes a deep breath and then shifts his gaze to the Russian girl, smoothing his expression with effort. "Of course I remember you, Mila," Daniel replies with a genteel smile. He tucks his

temper fully away as he drops my arm and steps forward to give her a polite, familiar kiss on the cheek.

Mila laughs charmingly as Daniel kisses her, turning her face towards him as he pulls away so that their lips almost brush. I blink in surprise at this, and then look at her more closely, admiring the sheet of black hair that falls over her slim shoulders like a waterfall, her sparkling silver dress. And as I survey her, I realize that she hasn't said a word to me, or looked at me, once. I rankle a bit at the insult.

Daniel, perhaps realizing this as well, turns back to me and smiles. "Mila and I were friends in our teens," he tells me. "Our parents put us in dance class together." He grimaces a bit, laughing. "She was much better with me."

"Oh, Daniel," Mila says, laughing and still ignoring me as she takes a step forward to grasp his hand. "Come and dance a little with me, just for old time's sake —"

"Oh, no, I couldn't —" Daniel replies, laughing, embarrassed.

"Please," she pouts and my mouth falls open a little bit at how bold she is. "It would be so rude of you to deny me —"

Daniel, faced with insulting who I assume is the daughter of a Russian mob boss, shrugs and complies, stepping forward to her. "I'll be back," he calls to me over his shoulder as she pulls him away, "just one dance!"

As Daniel steps away, Ivan smoothly steps into the vacant place next to me. He doesn't look at me, but his cat-got-the-cream expression tells me all I need to know.

"Nicely done," I say, crossing my arms and looking up at him. "How much did that cost you?"

"Fifty bucks," he replies, watching as Daniel and Mila take to the dance floor.

"Rich girl like that?" I ask, surprised, "took fifty dollars to dance with Daniel?"

"No," Ivan responds, turning to look down at me and shifting his weight to knock his shoulder against mine. "Fifty bucks to the band leader to start playing the tango, which I know she can't resist. Playing on a lonely girl's teenage crush on the guy that her dad wants her to marry?" Ivan's eyes crinkle with humor as he looks down at me. "That was free."

"Cruel," I accuse, shaking my head at him a little but impressed despite myself. Ivan is, if anything, quite good at reading weaknesses before using them to move people around like pawns on his chess board.

"Worth it," he says, slipping a hand out of his pocket and, unseen, dragging his fingers down the length of my spine until his hand comes to rest at the small of my back. "I'd have paid much more, after all, for the chance to chat with my best girl when she won't return my calls."

“Oh, you called?” I reply, coy. “I’m sorry, I must have missed it.”

“Lies,” he whispers to me, but then he laughs a little. “I missed you, Fay.”

And, damn it, but that old butterfly fleeing rises in my stomach.

And I have to admit to myself – I missed him too.

“Come on,” Ivan says, shifting that hand on my back to my elbow and tugging me with him as he heads behind the little rose arbor next to us.

“Ivan,” I gasp, glancing around anxiously as he pulls me with him out of sight. “Stop! We can’t go back here!”

“Sure we can,” he replies, grinning back at me, a little danger dancing in his eyes. “No one saw – I made sure of it.”

“Ivan,” I growl, digging in my feet and trying to pull out of his grasp. “You’re going to get me – and everyone – in big trouble!”

Ivan stops and turns to me, still smiling but shaking his head. “Would you just trust me for a second, Fay?” he asks, a little exasperated. “I organized all of this – I’m the one who got your dad to come here tonight, and the Russians. Do you seriously think I don’t know how fucked we’d be if Lippert, or Alden, or anyone finds us sneaking away?”

His face drops now, becoming more serious – like it was that morning when we woke up, and he told me to run from the Lippert house. “I’m doing this for a reason, Fay!” Ivan insists, “I have to talk to you.”

I hesitate, but then I nod, trusting him. As much as Ivan is a player in this game, I do – for some reason - trust that he has my best interests at heart. And maybe I’m a fool for believing him – maybe he’s tricked me too – but I step forward, ready to follow. A genuine smile breaks out onto Ivan’s face and I can’t help the matching grin that crosses my own.

“Come on,” he says, turning again and leading me down a narrow outer corridor towards a secret alcove. “I bussed tables here when I was a kid – there’s a spot back here –”

Both curious and anxious, I follow Ivan to a little chef’s garden growing on the roof, a door down to the kitchens in the far corner. It’s lit by a couple of lanterns and there’s an unlit fire pit out here as well as some mismatched seating and a couple of ashtrays, suggesting that staff come back here for their breaks. Honestly, it’s cozy and charming.

“See?” Ivan says, sinking his hands into his pockets and giving me a shrug. “Told you.”

“Ivan,” I sigh, letting my shoulders slump a little and looking anxiously over my shoulder. “Seriously – what is it? They’re going to notice that I’m missing.”

“Come on, Fay,” Ivan murmurs, taking a step closer to me. “Didn’t you miss me? Just a little bit?”

“Ivan!” I protest, lifting both hands to give a little shove against his chest, too anxious now to entertain his flirtations. “Come on! You told me you needed to talk to me, so let’s talk!”

“Fine,” Ivan says, the teasing smile falling from his face to reveal genuine concern behind it. “Fay,” he asks, taking a step closer to me, “why haven’t you answered my calls? And more importantly, why are you still in that house? I wasn’t lying when I said Kent’s going down - you’ve got to get out of there, before you get wrapped up in it too!”

My stomach drops when I hear this. Honestly, I’d told Kent what Ivan had said, and Kent gave me every impression that he’d dismissed it as an idle threat designed to get me on Ivan’s side. But hearing Ivan reiterate it – when he’s taken the risk of pulling me from the party to reiterate it -

I have to admit, I’m anxious again.

But, I’m not willing to give into it just yet.

“What about the Bianci’s,” I ask, folding my arms and looking up at him. “Doesn’t that change anything? That they’ve come to show their support?”

“Well,” Ivan replies, looking closely at me, reading my every move and expression. “If they have come to show their support, then yeah. Maybe it does. So,” he pauses, watching me like a hawk. “Did they?”

“Of course they did,” I snarl, telling myself it’s only half a lie because I don’t know what they’re thinking or if they’re going to choose to support Kent, especially after Ivan’s little play tonight.

Ivan takes a second to watch me, to study every muscle on my face. Then, his lips curve. “Liar,” he says, laughing a little, making my scrunch my nose and mouth with frustration. But that just makes him laugh.

“See?” Ivan says, putting a hand on my waist. “You don’t know if they support Kent – which means they haven’t decided. Thanks, Fay. That’s helpful.”

“Screw you, Ivan,” I growl, putting my hands on his shoulders and shoving. “That’s a dirty trick – telling me you have something to say to me and then trying to get me to confess things –“

My shoves do nothing though – Ivan just uses his grip on my waist to pull me closer.

Chapter 107 - Consequences

Chapter 107 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Stop, Fay,” Ivan orders, his voice suddenly serious. He puts his other hand on my waist and pulls me closer to him. Angry, I shove him again but Ivan doesn’t relent, his grip iron. “Fay,” he insists, his tone matching my anger now. I stop shoving and look up into his face, furious.

“Let me go,” I command, my teeth clenched, but he just shakes his head slowly at me.

“I’m not fucking with you, Fay,” Ivan insists, his voice revealing his frustration. “You haven’t given me any information that I haven’t guessed myself. God damn it, Fay,” he grinds out, “don’t you get it? That it would be easier for me to let you go down with them? Do you think it’s making anything better for me that I fucking care about you?”

I stop protesting and look up into Ivan’s face, shocked. I’ve never – never heard him get angry before – never heard him confess this kind of real emotion. He gives me a little frustrated shake.

“What’s it going to take, Fay?” Ivan snaps at me, his breathing coming harder now. “To get you to go, to leave that house? Because I’m not letting them drag you down with them!” His voice is rough now, out of control in a way it never is. “You mean too much to me,” he confesses, staring into my face, shaking his head back and forth.

My mouth falls open a little in surprise. I mean, I know that Ivan and I – we have a connection. But honestly, with everything with Kent...

I think, perhaps, I let myself forget how intense this actually is -

How real it is, apparently for Ivan - and perhaps for me as well -

“What, Fay,” Ivan demands, shaking me again and bringing me out of my thoughts. “What’s it going to take for you to believe me? Because I’ve tried being nice, and begging you, and giving you all of the information. And in response, you ignore my calls and apparently renew your ridiculous engagement to Daniel –“

“Ivan,” I protest, looking away –

“What, Fay?” Ivan asks again, pressing himself tighter against me and slipping his left hand down from my waist, crossing my hip and dipping into the slit in my dress. He moves fast, boldly sliding that hand around the back of my thigh and gripping me there, using his grasp to drag my leg sharply up and settling it over his hip, pulling my body flush against his as he bends over me, just a little.

“Is this what you want, Fay?” Ivan growls, making my breath come a little too fast. “Do you want me to be more aggressive, to make you listen?” He lowers his face close to mine now, staring at my lips. “Because I can do that. If that’s what it takes.”

And god damn it, but I don’t pull away.

Instead, I wrap my arms around his neck, half for balance, half for –

Fuck, because I want him to kiss me –

I feel my lips part as I close my eyes, giving in –

But then I feel Ivan flinch and almost drop me as I hear a woman’s cold laugh ring out.

“Shit,” Ivan curses, releasing my leg and turning away from me, frustrated, as I find my feet and spin to see Natalia standing there, shaking her head at me and smiling her wicked cat’s grin.

“Well,” she says, her eyes boring into me as I flush bright, bright red, my breath coming fast as I realize how fucking fucked I am right now. “I was looking forward to meeting this Ivan I’ve heard so much about,” she says, shifting her gaze to him. Ivan turns to look at her, his face still angry, his hands in his pockets.

And as he glares at her I’m shocked to see him...discomposed.

And suddenly I realize that this...this was not part of Ivan’s plan. Not at all. That he didn’t sneak me back here so that Natalia could follow us, and catch me, and screw up my engagement to Daniel as well as Kent’s relationship with my father. That somehow, Ivan has been outplayed here – that he either let himself go too far, losing control with me, or that he underestimated Natalia –

“A pleasure to meet you, Natalia,” Ivan replies finally, his voice lacking all of his usual charm. “But if you’ll excuse me, I have to go.”

“So soon,” she coos, cocking her head at him like she’s disappointed.

“Yeah,” he replies, glancing at me with his regret clear on his face. “I’ve got somewhere to be.” And then, to my shock, Ivan turns on his heel and heads through the far door that leads down to the kitchens. My mouth drops open a little as I realize that Ivan has left me – alone – to deal with this she-wolf.

Slowly, I turn back to Natalia, having no idea what to do.

“I knew it,” Natalia says the moment I turn to look at her, shaking her head at me but unable to suppress her smile. “I knew you were up to something, little Fay,” she continues, taking a few slow steps towards me. “I knew you didn’t love my Daniel – that you are a greedy slut who is in this for something else –“

And as she continues to approach and berate me and tell me how awful I am for betraying Daniel —

Something snaps in me. And I realize that I haven't betrayed anyone — that Daniel and I aren't actually engaged. And as much as Natalia treats me like a bug she wants to grind under her shoe....I'm actually just as much of a player in this game as she is.

After all, I'm the daughter of one Don and, as far as she knows, the future Donna of the Lippert family.

And I'm spending my nights in bed with the Don of the Lippert clan, who hired me to be his spy.

And who the hell is she? Some puffed up maid of honor? She's not blood, after all. She's an employee.

"Shove it, Natalia," I suddenly interrupt, not letting her finish her long string of insults designed to strip me down. I stopped listening, after all, about twenty seconds ago. I set my shoulders and glare at her. "I'm back here on Kent's orders, performing the duties that he assigned to me, which you interrupted. If you don't like it, take it up with him."

And then I shove past her, starting down the slim corridor back to the party. I don't even look over my shoulder to see if she's following behind.

As soon as I get back to the party, Daniel finds me, coming swiftly to my side. "Fay," he asks, looking me over anxiously. "Are you all right? Where did you go?"

"Ivan," I reply honestly, looking up at him, too tired to keep secrets. Natalia's going to spill everything anyway, the moment she gets Kent's ear. "He wanted to tell me some stuff. Natalia interrupted, though, and spooked him off, so I didn't get much out of him."

"Really, Fay?" Daniel asks, raising an eyebrow at me. "You want me to believe that you and Ivan were just talking?"

I look at him blandly and shrug one shoulder, letting him know that his suspicions are not far off. But, frankly, if he wants to question my methods — and, right now, I have to tell myself that they're just my methods, or else I'll go insane — then he's going to have to take it up with Kent as well.

Daniel sighs and nods, recognizing that it's complicated. He puts an arm around my waist and turns me back to the party. "Let's just get through this, okay?" he says, taking a deep breath.

"Sure," I sigh, putting on my best smile and letting Daniel pull me forward towards a group of people. As we towards them, I narrow my eyes at Mila across the room, who smirks at me.

"If you leave me for anyone," I murmur to Daniel, "Just make sure it's not her."

“What?” Daniel asks, and then he sees the direction of my gaze and laughs, pulling me closer to his side. “Seriously, Fay? After everything, you’re jealous because I danced with one girl?”

“I’m not jealous,” I correct. “I just...have a bad feeling about that one.”

And as the girl’s smirk turns into a wicked little grin that basically spells out I’m coming for him, I turn away from her and take a hold of Daniel’s tie, pulling him down for a kiss. A real kiss, not the pecks that we’ve exchanged before. Daniel goes still with shock at first and then he plays along, wrapping an arm around my waist and kissing me back.

It doesn’t mean anything to me, but I hope that this kiss spells out a clear message to that girl:

Go ahead and try it. He’s mine.

And as I pull away, smiling at my fiancé, I catch a look at Natalia standing behind us, her arms folded, watching me closely.

Chapter 108 – Tension

Chapter 108 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

We’re all absolutely silent in the limousine on the way home. Kent sits in the back corner of the car by the door, resting his forehead in his hand and staring down at his knees. While he’s still and silent, I can feel the tension radiating off of him – a mix of anger, and anxiety, and something else...maybe resentment?

I don’t know. I’m too pissed off and exhausted myself to figure it out. But I watch him closely regardless, looking for some kind of signal regarding his next move.

Natalia, seated next to Kent, her thigh just accidentally, casually pressed against his in the close quarters of the car, is likewise motionless, simply sitting with her tired eyes closed. Alessi, next to Natalia, and Daniel, on the long bench next to me, both stare out the windows, giving no hint about what they’re thinking or feeling.

I wonder if they’re all fuming, like I am. If they are, they’re probably doing a better job of hiding it.

The party went on for hours, until my cheeks ached from my fake smiles as I mingled with Kent’s family, everyone taking their time to greet and consult Natalia and Alessi. I went through the motions, playing my role as Daniel’s perfect bride, but I kept my eyes on Natalia the whole time. Just waiting.

I knew the moment when she made her move. I watched her do it.

I watched her tug Kent's sleeve, so hesitant, probably looking to anyone else like she just hated to be the bearer of bad news as she drew him away to a quiet corner. I watched her stand on her toes to whisper in his ear, her face motherly and anxious for Daniel's sake. I watched Natalia's hand brush up her own thigh as she told Kent all the details about how Ivan had me pulled against him when she caught us.

And I watched Kent raise his eyes to mine after just a few seconds of Natalia's report, focusing instantly on me as if he had already known exactly where I was standing and didn't have to search for me in this busy room. I watched his face go dark with anger as he listened. And as Natalia rattled me out in what I'm sure were the most scandalous terms she could think of – honestly, she probably did it in Italian, just for the effect - I held Kent's gaze even as his turned lethal. Through all of it, I kept my face totally impassive.

Because, honestly? I didn't do a damn thing wrong. I have nothing to apologize for.

Kent glared at me for a long moment before turning back to Natalia, thanking her quietly before moving away. And it was done.

I know that I'll have to face him sooner or later, and frankly I'm looking forward to it. Because, honestly, fighting with Kent? It's going to be way easier than parsing out what the hell happened with Ivan tonight.

I lean my head back on the leather headrest in the limousine and sigh roughly through my nose, trying to wipe my mind clean, to calm the hell down.

Perhaps sensing my mood, Daniel gently takes my hand and gives my fingers a little squeeze. I turn to look at him and can't help but give him a tiny smile when I see him give me a tentative little grin and a shrug.

It's over, I read on his face, so clear I can almost hear him say it. What's done is done. Don't let it get to you.

I nod, agreeing and taking a deep breath as I put my head on his shoulder and try to let it all go. I find myself staring down at the engagement ring on my left hand.

This ring, with such a complicated history. To which I am currently adding, I guess. Poor ring.

Twenty minutes later the limousine pulls through the gate of Kent's house, looping around the driveway to drop us at the front. Slowly, still silent, we all climb out of the car. Alessi takes Natalia's arm, speaking to her quietly as he leads her up the stairs. As Daniel and I climb out we find Kent standing at the back of the car, facing away from us.

"Dad?" Daniel asks, his voice hesitant.

“Just...go inside, Daniel,” Kent replies, clearly keeping a leash on himself. I feel my anger flare up inside me again, apparently wanting something to latch onto, anything. Why the hell is Kent being mean to Daniel? Daniel, after all, was perfect tonight.

I open my mouth to say something but Daniel just takes my arm and pulls me towards the stairs. I scowl but follow, holding my tongue and glaring over my shoulder at Kent’s tense form as he looks into the night.

“Easy,” Daniel murmurs to me, like you would to a spooked horse, so I turn my glare on him.

“I’m fine,” I hiss, pulling my arm from his grip and using my hands to bunch up the skirts of my dress so that I can more easily climb the stairs. Daniel holds up his hands innocently, letting me know he meant no harm and I scowl at him.

Together, in silence, we enter the house and head up the stairs, Natalia and Alessi already gone.

“How do you think that all went,” Daniel asks quietly as we reach my room, glancing around the hall to ensure that we’re alone.

“I don’t know,” I sigh, wrapping my arms around myself. “I hope...I hope I didn’t fuck it up as much as Natalia clearly wants me to. Why does she have it out for me like she does?”

Daniel cocks his head to the side and considers me for a moment. “Actually,” he replies, “I don’t really know. That’s a good point. She has...not been on team Fay for a moment since she got here. And I don’t really know why.”

“Right!?” I hiss in response, glad that he finally sees it from my point of view.

“Maybe,” Daniel considers, looking away from me a bit as he gathers his thoughts. “It’s a hint about where the Bianci allegiances really lie. Perhaps...not with your dad.”

“Oh,” I say, my eyebrows going up as I take his point. Until now I had thought that Natalia’s objection to me was a completely personal one. But actually...that kind of makes sense.

Daniel and I are both a little lost in our individual trains of thought when we hear a door open down the hall. We both jump a bit and then swiftly head to our rooms, wanting to get inside before having another encounter with an Italian tonight. Daniel gives me a fond little wave as he gets to his door and I blow him a kiss over my shoulder as I scurry inside mine, leaning back against it as I push the door closed.

But then, alone in my room...

Ugh.

I grimace and cover my face with my hand, realizing that now that I’m alone...I have to finally face my thoughts and figure out what the hell just happened.

I groan and make my way to wardrobe, yanking the doors open and quickly sorting through it. Wanting something more casual than the silky sets that Kent supplies for me, I quickly throw on a little tank top and a cheap pair of pajama shorts that I ordered for myself from Amazon. Striding towards the bathroom, I leaving my gorgeous dress in a heap on the floor, too angry to contemplate it now or to feel sorry about wrinkling that stunning silk.

As I brush my teeth and stare at myself in the mirror, I realize that I honestly have no idea what happened with Ivan tonight, and it pisses me off that I still can't figure it out. What the hell was he playing at, pulling me away in the middle of a family party?

I sort through my memories of those few brief minutes, trying to remember everything – but it all happened so damn fast. I spit out my toothpaste, thinking closely about the way Ivan made sure everyone was busy before he pulled me back to that secret space. Did he really want it to be secret? And why? So he could kiss me, or so he could tell me something that he didn't want anyone else to know?

I groan as I head back into my room, throwing myself onto my bed, staring at the ceiling and trying to sort through everything Ivan did, every inch of it.

But as much as I try to concentrate, I find myself wondering, passively, what it would have felt like if we hadn't been interrupted – if Ivan had actually kissed me in that moment.

Not what it would have felt like physically – that, I know, would have been great.

But honestly, how would it have made me feel?

And what would it have meant for me and Kent?

Chapter 109 – Sneaky Link

Chapter 109 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I groan again, pulling a pillow over my face in my frustration, not wanting to ask these questions and hating that I can't stop my mind from going there. I'm still furiously upset and need to take out my emotions on something, so I kick my feet against my mattress again and again, hard, before falling back against it and continuing to stare at the ceiling.

The kicking didn't work. My mind is still racing.

What the hell was Ivan thinking? In the moment, I really did believe him when he told me that he just wanted to get me alone so that he could warn me, to tell me to get out of this house. And honestly, that's what my instincts still tell me now is true.

But Natalia did find us. Did Ivan plan that and just lie to me? Is he trying to drive a wrench between me and the Lipperts? Or between the Bianci's and the Aldens? He's played tricks like that before, like when he brought me to that mob bar and let me think that we were alone –

Or! Did Natalia just outsmart him?

God, what a mess – not only Ivan messing with my head like this, but Natalia finding out, and then telling Kent, making me look not only like I betrayed him but like I was deliberately embarrassing him and Daniel in front of his family -

I'm about to start kicking again, when suddenly I hear a knock on my door. For a split second I go completely still.

And then I snap up in my bed, my eyes darting to the bottom of my door where I can sometimes see the shadow of feet standing –

But there's nothing –

No, wait...

I jump up and hurry over to the little folded square I see sitting there. I fall to my knees in my eagerness to get it, dying to know precisely what it is, and as I grab it I realize that it's a little sealed envelope. For a second I consider pulling open the door to see who delivered it –

But I dismiss the idea, tearing the envelope open as my curiosity gets the better of me.

I pull out the little slip of paper and see only two short lines written there, in the same neat, tiny handwriting that I found in the books I read in Kent's room. My eyes eagerly pass over them, and then my brow creases with a confused frown.

Press the top right corner in the back of your wardrobe, hard. Then come downstairs.

Destroy this note.

What the hell?

Confused, but intrigued, I get to my feet.

I stalk to my wardrobe, throwing open the doors again and pounding a fist against the top right corner of the wood at the back –

And my jaw falls open when the wood clicks, a magnetic lock behind it releasing and revealing that the back of my wardrobe – which I thought was solid – is actually a god damn door.

I shake my head with rage at Kent for putting me in a room with a fucking secret passage that he never told me about. And then, my anger finding a new focal point, I dig my fingers behind the wood and swing it forward to reveal a very tight winding iron staircase that heads straight down.

“God damn it, Kent,” I growl, and then, crunching the note in my hand and not letting myself think about it, I climb through the door, pulling it closed behind me as I begin to storm down the stairs.

The iron is cold against my bare feet and I regret, for a moment, not bothering to put on any socks or slippers – but I let my anger warm me, building in me as I hurry downward, honestly getting a little dizzy as I wind my way down at least three stories –

I don’t hesitate when I hit the bottom, marching forward with my hands fisted by my side. There’s only one way to go anyway – down the long stone corridor that’s dimly lit with florescent ceiling lights and arched slightly so that I can’t see what’s at the end.

I pass door after iron door built into the stone walls, passively wondering what the hell Kent keeps in those, letting my imagination run wild and letting that fuel me even more so that when I finally come around the final bend, when I finally see him standing there in front of a set of stone steps, his hands shoved in his pockets, glaring at me already –

I’m good and steamed.

“What the hell, Kent,” I growl, quickening my pace, ready to rip into him. “You give me a room with a secret door?! Anyone could have broken in!”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Fay,” Kent snaps back, “obviously I’m the only one with access to this corridor –“

“This corridor?!” I return, raising my voice to speak over him. “Oh, you mean this bullshit mafia Narnia that I found on the other side of my wardrobe!? Am I going to meet some magical faun who’s going to cut my throat because I dishonored his family!?”

“God damn it, Fay,” Kent bites out, taking a step towards me, even more livid now than he was when he summoned me down here.

“What, Kent,” I seethe, my voice low and slow as I close the distance between us so that there’s just inches between our chests. I glare up at him, inviting him, frankly, to lay into me. I want this – want this fight. “What do you want to yell at me for now? Because I have done everything you’ve asked me to do. I’ve played all of the roles you want me to play – I’m your whore when you want me to be, your spy when it’s required, Daniel’s princess bride when I’m in front of your family!”

Kent opens his mouth to interrupt but I don’t let him, pressing forward. “I keep your secrets when you tell me no one can know about us,” I grind out, letting my anger race through me, “I even come when you whistle for me in the middle of the night! WHAT, Kent!” I yell up into his

face, grabbing the lapels of his suit to bring him closer, the stupid note he sent me still gripped in my hand.

Kent glares at me, hard, and then slowly he shifts his gaze to the crumpled note in my fist before dragging his gaze back to my eyes.

And then, a little bit of malice, knowing precisely what he's doing, Kent says his next words with perfect control.

"Not everything I asked. I also told you to destroy that note before you came down, Fay."

And I....

Fucking lose my mind.

I feel my eyes go wide with fury, with his gall – and I grip those lapels even tighter in my hands, my nails biting into the fabric as I tilt my head back and scream in frustration –

He grabs me, then, pulling me against his chest and slapping a hand across my mouth, working to muffle my noise –

"What the fuck, Fay," Kent barks, stumbling backwards and looking around as if someone's going to come find us –

My scream is cut short as I lose my balance, stumbling against Kent as he tries to find his footing against the stairs behind him. My weight falls totally against him and he throws out a hand to catch us against the wall, –

Then, once he finds his footing and we're steady and that I'm not shrieking anymore, Kent glares down at me again, livid. "What the hell, Fay," he whispers, his voice harsh. "This house is full – people are going to hear you and start checking rooms to find out who is screaming – are you trying to blow your cover tonight? Again?"

"Again?" I gasp, trying to push away from him. But Kent doesn't let me, holding me tight against him as if he's scared that if he let's me go I'm going to scream again. "Again, Kent?" I repeat, shaking my head as I stare at him, hating him right now. "I didn't do anything tonight except what you paid me to do –"

"You got caught –"

"It wasn't my fault!"

"You let him put his hands on you, Fay," Kent accuses, staring down at me – and I notice something different in his face when he turns to this point – something...I don't know. Something deeper, once a layer of his anger has been stripped away.

“That didn’t bother you before!” I counter, ignoring the change in his expression, my lips tightening. “When you sent me on an overnight with him, Kent –“

“That was before we –“

“We what?!” I shout, unable to help myself. “Spent one full night together, Kent? A night I’m apparently never allowed to mention, or tell anyone about, or talk to you about, except apparently in creepy secret basement corridors when you summon me?” Angry, hurt, I pause and shake my head at him. “Fuck, Kent,” I exhale. “What do you want from me?”

Kent goes silent, staring at me with his face shut down tight, not letting me in. And I stare right back knowing quite suddenly that beneath all of my anger is...

This...desperation.

I’m desperate. I’ve got to know.

And then Kent’s mouth curl in a sneer and I can see in his eyes the mirror of my own emotions. He, too, is desperate. And he also hates me right now, just a little bit.

“God damn it, Fay,” Kent whispers, the worlds shaking out on his breath. “I want you. All I fucking want is you,” he shakes me now, unable to help himself. “And it’s a god damn curse.”

And I open my mouth to throw something cruel back at him – but I have no idea what, and I never find out, because in the next instant he seals his mouth against mine as he pulls me roughly against his chest.

And, for the second time in about two minutes, I absolutely lose my mind.

Chapter 110 – The Staircase

Chapter 110 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

There’s nothing soft, or sweet, or polite, or playful about what happens next.

Kent’s mouth is hard on mine, all tongue and teeth and frustrated rage. I meet him at every stroke, pushing him back against the wall and tearing first at his suit jacket, trying to push it off his shoulders – wanting to feel his skin, but not knowing if I want to tear it with my nails or feel it pressed on mine –

But then I decide, quite suddenly, that the suit jacket is a god damn waste of time and I push him, hard, so that he falls on his ass against the stone steps behind him. Kent gasps in pain as he lands,

his anger flashing across his face as he glares up at me. He puts his hands down against the stone to thrust himself back up –

But he stops when he sees me pull my tank top up over my head, baring my naked torso beneath. And as I hastily push at the elastic waist of my pajama shorts Kent makes a snap decision and falls back on the step, his hands moving hastily to his belt. When my shorts hit the ground he's only halfway done, but I'm already moving forward, acting completely on instinct, placing one knee steadily at the side of his hip and working to throw my other leg over him –

“Damn it, Fay,” Kent mutters, pushing my leg back, still unzipping his pants and shoving them down. “Would you let me just –“

“Shut up,” I snap, throwing my leg over him anyway, ignoring his protest and taking his face in both of my hands. He gets his pants down over his hips just as I fully straddle his lap and kiss him.

Kent's neck bends backwards as I take control, as I hold his face between my palms and curve my body over him, slanting my mouth to the side and dipping my tongue deep into his mouth, loving the whiskey and tobacco taste of him. Kent moans against me, giving in, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me close. He lets me bend him back as far as I want, lets me lick him as deeply as I please, lets me do whatever I want for a change.

And then one of the hands tight around my waist loosens, moving quickly down over my ass and, after lingering a moment with a full grasp of my cheek in his palm, he dips that hand between us.

I know he's hard for me already – I can feel him beneath me – but Kent positions his cock against my entrance, holding himself steady there but letting me –

I pull my face away for a moment and open my eyes, looking down into his, surprised and making sure that –

That he's really letting me take charge.

He blinks once and nods just a little, just slightly. And then, gently at first, I lower myself down onto him.

But the moment I feel him start to press into me, I can't go slow anymore. I let out a heavy moan and, shuddering at the feel of him, I let gravity pull me down fully onto his thick cock, my neck arching backward and my face turning up to the ceiling.

Kent's whole body goes rigid as he feels me tighten around him, as I start to follow my body's commands and pulse my hips, moving him inside of me. And then, as I start to go molten around him, Kent moans between his teeth and leans back, looking up at me, driving his cock further up into me and letting me grind against him.

I let my head hang back, pressing my eyes shut as my breath starts to come in short gasps. I wrap one hand around Kent's neck for leverage as I begin to sweep my hips in long, deep strokes, digging my nails hard against his skin while the fingers of my other hand twist in his hair.

My release builds in me quickly, but I'm not surprised – with me on top, Kent fills me to a depth I've never felt before. I'm already gasping, Kent's hands hard on my hips, pulling me down tighter, moving with me and making every movement of my body rougher, sharper. I can feel his dick throb inside me, hard up against that place he hit when he fucked me in his office – that spot within me that wipes the world away and narrows my entire to focus on each pounding stroke.

Kent starts to meet me now, learning my rhythm, pulsing hard up into me every time I flick my hips forward. And then, as I come close to the edge of it, my back curling forward and my release breaking through –

A groan breaks from Kent's lips – a hard, desperate thing as he buries his face against my shoulder and I feel him spill against my inner walls, hot and thick –

And the knowledge of it – of the fact that I did that – that I was in charge this time, and that I made Kent cum, as he made me before –

Fuck, but it pushes me over, and I'm gasping as the release pulses through me, tension chasing joy and pleasure and need throughout my stomach, my core, my limbs, my mind...

I fall forward, pulling him close against me, his head tucked against my shoulder as I slap one of my hands hard against his back, my nails sliding over his skin as the final pulses of my orgasm trace through me, as I continue to shudder and take shaky breaths. Unthinking, I trace my nails a little way down the length of Kent's spine and he shivers under my hand. I smile at that, pleased, and do it again, eliciting a little growl from him that I like very much.

We stay just like for a minute while we catch our breath, my body straddling his lap, his arms tight around my waist, his forehead pressed against my shoulder as I pant and come back to myself. Then, realizing that there's a dull ache in my hips from being spread so far apart, I shift a little, but Kent tightens his arms, holding me still.

"No, stop," he murmurs, his whole body still tense under my arms. "Please, Fay," he whispers, and I open my eyes at the surprise of him...well, of asking me for something. Saying please. "Please," he repeats, "just...fucking let me hold you. For one minute."

I tense a little at his words but then...I relent.

Don't think about it, I tell myself as I allow my body to relax against his. My muscles unwind as I gather Kent closer to me, feeling him turn his face to lay it gently against my breast, moving one of his arms below my ass so that he's supporting my weight with it, holding me –

Actually holding me, not just letting me sit on his lap.

I tuck my own head down next to his, pressing my lips to the skin of his neck, his shoulder, before letting my cheek rest against him, closing my eyes and letting all of my anger and my tension fade away. Because this, now...there's no space for it here. Not anymore.

We stay that way, curled quietly against each other, for longer than a minute. For a long time, really. And suddenly I realize that I've grown quite cold because, without realizing it, I've begun to shiver a little bit.

"Shit," Kent murmurs as he feels me start to shake a little against him. He raises his head, pulling back and looking up at me. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," I reply, raising my own head and meeting his eyes, so close to mine. "Um, I think I'm just...cold?"

"Shit," he says again, shaking his head and unclasping his arms, letting me move away. "I'm sorry, Fay – I think I forget how cold it gets down here –"

"It's okay," I reply, understanding because honestly I didn't notice either – the front half of my body was quite warm, pressed tight against his –

I lift myself off of Kent and stand up quickly, turning to look for my clothes as I hear him stand and quickly fasten his pants. I spy my little pajama shorts on the ground and bend over to grab them, listening passively for the sound of Kent's belt buckling behind me, when suddenly –

I gasp as I'm suddenly spun around – and then I barely have a second to realize what's happening as Kent bends me over his shoulder, lifting my bare ass high in the air as he begins to carry me, fireman style, up the stone stairs.