

Chapter 121 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“I’m sorry, Fay,” Alessi says again, leaning across to me and reaching out his hand to take mine, true sorrow on his face. “You are a lovely girl, I like you very much. I know this cannot be easy to hear, but it is...business.”

“I’m sorry,” Daniel says, putting his hand out to stop Alessi’s from reaching me. “What, precisely, are you trying to imply here by bringing Fay into it?”

Alessi blinks at Damoe; and then sits back in his chair, glaring at his nephew for being difficult when we all know precisely what he means. Alessi just doesn’t want to say it aloud – that if my father is dead the marriage to me will, of course, no longer be worth anything at all, strategically.

“This is ridiculous,” Kent snaps next to me, ripping his hand out from beneath Natalia’s, but Alessi and Daniel ignore him.

“Daniel,” Alessi says, lifting a hand in a plea for Daniel to understand, “we love Fay – she is a wonderful girl. But we will find you a new bride – one who will be a true wife to you –“

“Truly, Daniel,” Natalia says, looking at him with that simpering, motherly look I’ve come to hate. “It is clear that you and Fay are friends, but that you have no true intimacy between you,” she says, not able to stop the little smirk that lifts the corner of her mouth. “We will find you a bride who really lights a fire in you and benefits the family –“

Kent suddenly stands up next to me in a rage, knocking over his chair as he throws his napkin viciously at the table before leaning close to Natalia, starting to hiss something cold and furious at her in fluent, fast Italian. I know, instinctually, that ordering Kent to break ties with Alden is bold move on their part, but doing it this way? Making a demand of him, in front of Daniel and me, without any discussion?

It’s a checkmate.

And Kent, I know, will not respond well to that.

Before I make any move myself, though, Daniel gets to his feet as well, grabbing my left hand and pulling me with him.

“Fay,” he says, obliging me to look up at him, though I can feel Alessi’s eyes on us. He raises my left hand high so that it is poised between our faces, so that I can see my engagement ring – a Lippert ring – glittering there. “Do you want to end our engagement?”

“N-no,” I whisper, looking up at him, hoping it’s the right answer.

“Good,” he snaps, clenching his jaw and turning to stare hatefully at his uncle as Kent and Natalia begin to fight in earnest next to us, their Italian so blazingly fast that I don’t know how they even understand each other.

Alessi stands as well now, calmly reaching out to Daniel as if in a plea for him to understand. But Daniel just shakes his head at him and starts from the room, pulling with me as he goes.

“Come on, Fay,” he snarls. “We’re out of here.”

And I set my own jaw as I follow Daniel down the short set of stairs, never letting go of his hand and not looking behind me for a moment as we storm towards the front door.

Out front a light rain starts to fall as Daniel speaks briskly with the valet, asking him to hail a cab, which the valet does with quick efficiency. I don’t say a word as the cab pulls up to the curb, my jaw clenched and my body starting to shake a little – I don’t know with what, anger? Betrayal? Cold?

Daniel – ever solicitous – slips off his jacket and sets it lightly around my shoulders.

I look up at Daniel with gratitude and see him looking down at me already, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, Fay,” he says as the cab pulls up, moving forward to open the door for me. “I can’t believe that just happened – you know I’d never –“

“It’s okay,” I say, cutting him off as I climb into the car and move over so that Daniel can get in too, though I know the appropriate thing to do would be to let him close my door and move around to the other side to climb in himself. I don’t care about what’s appropriate, though – I just want to get out of here. Fast.

Daniel slides in with me and I lean against him as soon as he pulls the door shut, wanting his steady presence and his warmth. He wraps an arm around me as he gives the driver orders, though the address he tells him is certainly not home.

“Where are we going?” I ask, looking up at him.

“For a drink,” Daniel growls, glaring forward at nothing as the cab pulls away from the restaurant. “I need a drink.”

I nod and settle against him, realizing that I very, very much want that as well right now.

A drink sounds absolutely fucking perfect.

When we pull up to the address, I hesitate to follow when Daniel opens the door and steps out.

“Daniel,” I say, looking around at the dirty, apparently abandoned alley. “Are you sure this is...”

“Just come on, Fay,” he sighs, putting his forehead in his hand. I nod, trusting him and climbing out of the car as Daniel leans through the passenger window to hand the driver some cash. Then, once the driver pulls away again, Daniel walks to a steel door that’s painted a rusty shade of red, banging on it twice.

To my shock, the door opens quickly to reveal a short woman dressed in her own tuxedo, a red carnation pinned to her lapel.

“Ah, Mr. Green,” she says, smiling up at him with a slow smirk. “Welcome back.”

“Thank you,” Daniel murmurs, walking swiftly past her and pulling me with him by the hand. We walk about five feet forward, passing through a velvet curtain, and then my head is instantly on swivel as I gasp and look around at the incredible room, realizing that we’re in an elaborate, secret speakeasy.

“Ohhh!” I say, my face breaking into a happy smile as I take in the gorgeous mahogany bar on the left side of the room and the small, discreet booths that are built into the other three walls. And then I gasp when I look up to take in the gigantic crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling as well as a second row of balcony seating, where people mingle much more than the intimate pairs downstairs.

Daniel pulls me over to the bar, where two seats seem to be waiting for us. I’m still marveling as I slide into mine.

“Daniel,” I breathe, taking in the velvet wallpaper, the intricate oil paintings on the wall that depict a variety of half-dressed people in salacious situations. “It’s incredible here…”

He doesn’t respond, though, and when I turn to figure out why I see the very handsome bartender coming towards us.

“Hello, Mr. Green,” the bartender says, giving Daniel a slow and frankly intimate smile. “Welcome. What can we get for you tonight?”

“Manhattan,” Daniel replies, sharp, and then turns to me.

“And tequila,” I say, unable to help smiling at him, the charm of this place temporarily overwhelming my shock and rage at Natalia and Alessi.

The bartender gives us a cute wink and heads away to get started on our drinks, and then Daniel turns to me.

“I’m so sorry, Fay,” Daniel breathes, reaching out to run a hand down my arm, which I suddenly realize is still covered by his jacket. I slip the garment from my shoulders, tucking it over the back of my chair.

“It’s not your fault, Daniel,” I say, but he doesn’t let me get any further.

“It never should have happened,” he growls, looking away from me and staring into space in that same way his father does. “I could kill them.”

“Well,” I say, quirking my head to the side a bit. “You could kill them. Considering that’s what they suggest you do to my father.”

Daniel, shocked, just turns to me and stares.

Chapter 122 – The Green Room

Chapter 122 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Daniel blinks at me for another second, I think a little appalled at my suggestion that he kill his uncle, before he sees the irony on my face and realizes that I’m making a dark joke. A bad joke, admittedly, but one I hope will break the tension.

Thankfully, Daniel does laugh, shaking his head and dropping it a little as he tugs at the bow tie around his neck. “It’s so insane, Fay,” he sighs, and when he continues to fiddle with the tie I brush his hand away and untie it for him.

“It is,” I say, leaning in to put a hand on his cheek and make him look at me. “Honestly, Daniel, there’s so much we don’t know. And nothing else we can do about it, at least until tomorrow. So should we just…”

“...Get really drunk? And not talk about it?” he finishes for me, and I grin at him, glad that we’re on the same page. “Hell yeah,” he says as the bartender comes back and places our two drinks in front of us.

We both grasp our glasses and clink them together as the bartender moves away, smiling at each other.

“To our engagement,” I say, feeling a little hysterical, “which has survived, somehow, despite all odds.”

“Our engagement,” Daniel agrees, smiling with one half of his mouth as he shakes his head and downs his drink, signaling to the bartender for two more. I laugh and toss my shot of tequila down, savoring the burn in my throat, wanting the relaxation and tender oblivion that it promises.

And then, impulsive, I lean closer to Daniel and press my mouth lightly to his, kissing him because I love him and because I’m grateful for him.

The kiss is sweet, short and easy, but Daniel laughs when I pull away, glancing around the room. “Come on, Fay,” he murmurs. “Cool it, or you’ll ruin my reputation here.”

I stare at him for a moment, confused, and then slowly I start to look around the room and realize that everyone around us at the bar or the little booths...everyone is sitting in same-sex couplings.

“Oh my god,” I breathe, my face breaking into an excited smile as I whip my face back to Daniel, thrilled. “Did you bring me to a gay speakeasy!?”

“Welcome to Green’s,” he says, giving me a little smirk and raising his newly-delivered second Manhattan to me. “The most discreet, private, and expensive gay club in our fair city.”

“Ohmygod,” I say again, so fast and excited that it’s all one word, looking around again, absolutely buzzing with curiosity. “Do you come here all the time? Why do they call you Mr. Green?”

“Be cool, Fay,” Daniel laughs, putting a hand on my shoulder and obliging me to sit back in my seat as he hands me my drink. “As I said, I’ve got a reputation here.”

“Are you Mr. Green?” I ask, my eyes wide. “Do you own this place?”

“No,” he replies, grinning at me. “Every member is Mr. Green. It’s supposed to be anonymous. It’s kind of...the one place in the city where I can go to a gay bar and...not worry about who sees me.”

“Oh,” I say, my eyes going wide as I realize how important that must be for someone like him. “Well, I love it,” I say, grinning widely. “Thank you for bringing me!”

“Well, who can I trust if I can’t trust my fiancé,” he says with irony, taking a big gulp of his drink.

“Beards are notoriously trustworthy,” I point out with a happy sigh, nodding along with him.

And then, over the course of the next few hours, as we laugh and chat and talk about nothing and everything all at once, Daniel proceeds to get very, very drunk.

I drink with him, of course, but I start to notice that when I’m on my second drink Daniel’s on his fourth. And on my third, his seventh. Daniel’s bigger than me, of course – he can handle more than I can – but still, I start to see his eyes go half-shut as the night passes and his words slur together. I don’t chide him, realizing that this is what he wants, perhaps needs, after our stressful evening.

Daniel is...sensitive, I know. And while this is my first time at this “maybe my dad will get whacked for power” rodeo, it’s something he’s dealt with all his life. And perhaps the strain on him...I guess it makes sense, in a way. That he’s just so sick of it that all he wants to do is wipe it from his mind.

And there is something about it that I find tempting – the idea that I could wipe it all out, too, for the next few hours, and face none of it. But there's something else in me that wants to stay sharp, that isn't finished with the night.

And as I see Daniel's phone, resting on the bar, continuing to light up with text after text, I realize what it is.

"Give me that," I say, reaching for the phone as Daniel signals the bartender for another round.

"Ignore him," Daniel suggests lightly, waving a dismissive hand. "Fuck Kent. Fuck Natalia. Fuck 'em all."

"Don't be ridiculous," I murmur, entering Daniel's password (which I obviously have memorized) and clicking open his texts to find at least six from Kent demanding to know where we are.

I quickly type out a reply:

Hey, it's Fay. Daniel and I went out for drinks to blow off steam. We're safe. We just...don't want to be around them right now. All right?

I wait a few moments and am pleased when a text comes right back.

All right. Come home tonight. I want both of you here, safe.

I send a little star emoji back, purposefully vague, and then slide the phone back onto the bar.

"Seriously, Fay," Daniel says, and I look up to realize that he's been watching me. "Seriously, fuck Kent. He's ruining our lives. Why do you even care if he knows where we are? Why do you care about him at all?"

"Daniel," I reply, frowning at him a bit. "He's your dad."

"He's a dick," Daniel insists, and I laugh, shaking my head. "What," Daniel continues, leaning into me a bit, "are you going to deny it?"

"No," I say, crossing my arms and studying him. "But...I admit that I am less willing to talk shit on your dad than I used to be."

"Because you have a crush on him," Daniel murmurs, sighing ruefully and taking a too-large gulp of his new drink. "Which is still weird and gross."

"Slow down on that, Mr. Green." I advise, taking the drink out of his hand and placing it back on the bar. "Besides, it's not like your dad wasn't on our side tonight, Daniel. He was just as pissed at Natalia and Alessi as we were."

“Yeah, but only because it benefits him,” Daniel sighs. Then he looks up at me, his face perhaps a little too serious for someone so drunk. “Seriously, Fay,” he says, looking at me closely. “You don’t think he’d kick you to the curb just as easily as Natalia did if it stopped benefitting him? As easily as he did Fiona?”

I bite my lip, hesitating, not knowing the answer and a little afraid of it.

“Fay, he dated Fiona for years,” Daniel insists. “She was practically family. She was like –“ his voice breaks a little here, taking my heart with it, “she was like a mom to me. And then poof,” He snaps his fingers in the air to emphasize his point. “Gone.”

“Daniel,” I sigh. “Fiona was...my cousin. She was betraying your dad, reporting back to mine. Telling him Kent’s secrets.”

Daniel goes a little bit pale at this information and turns back to the bar, reaching for his drink. “Okay well,” he murmurs, “that makes more sense then. But still, Fay! He cuts ties. You are not safe, just because you’re sleeping in his bed.”

“I didn’t think I was,” I sigh, and as I say it...I wonder if it’s a lie.

Because honestly, sometimes?

Sometimes that’s the place in the world where I feel safest, the only place that makes sense.

The other night, Kent called me his peace – his refuge. And honestly I wonder if that’s what he is becoming for me as well.

But before I can consider it, I notice that Daniel is sliding out of his chair a little bit, his eyes half-closed.

“Whoaaa, boy,” I laugh, jumping up from my seat and helping him sit up.

“I’m fine,” Daniel insists, yawning and swatting me away a little, looking for his drink.

“I know, sugar,” I murmur, grabbing his phone off the bar again and dialing the first number in his recent call list. “Let’s get you home.”

Twenty minutes later, I smile as I see Jerome come through the curtain.

“Well hello, Mr. and Mrs. Green,” Jerome says, looking us over fondly as he wanders over to the bar, his hands tucked neatly in his pockets. “My, aren’t you a sight.”

“Just Mr. Green, tonight,” I say, standing up and tucking myself under Daniel’s arm so that he can lean on me. “Mrs. Green held it together.”

“Did she?” Jerome asks, looking at me suspiciously as I stumble a little in my high heels.

“Comparatively, yes,” I say, raising my chin proudly and making him laugh.

“You guys all right?” Jerome whispers to me, curious and concerned. “The three of them came home and it was...a lot of yelling in Italian.”

“We’ll make it,” I say, giving him a sad little sigh. “It...was a bad night.”

“Okay,” Jerome says, nodding, trusting me to fill him in when he needs to know.

“Hey, ‘rome,” Daniel slurs, finally looking up to see his boyfriend there.

“Hey, handsome,” Jerome says warmly, and I’m both surprised and pleased as Jerome steps close to my fiancé, reaching out to run a hand through Daniel’s dark hair before moving to duck under Daniel’s other arm. I’ve never seen them be this sweet to each other before. I almost blush to see it, the real affection between them on full display.

“Ready for bed?” Jerome asks Daniel softly.

“With you?” Daniel says, looking over at him as if I don’t exist at all. “Any time.”

Jerome grins at his boyfriend, nods to me, and then together we get Daniel out to the car.

Chapter 123 – Through the Wardrobe

Chapter 123 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Jerome and I get Daniel into the house with relatively little trouble, though Daniel’s loud humming of the Gilligan’s Island theme song has me looking anxiously up the stairs. The absolute last thing I want right now is Natalia coming out of her bedroom to scold me for getting her baby boy drunk.

“Come on, Danny,” Jerome whispers as we work our way up the stairs, the nickname making me burst into a ridiculous smile. “Help us out a little, here,”

But Daniel patently refuses, dragging his feet and making us work for every step. I’m panting a little when we get to the top of the stairs, which makes Jerome raise a critical eyebrow at me. “A little out of shape, Fay?”

“Hey,” I return, glaring at him. “You didn’t have to do it in heels.”

Jerome laughs a little and starts towards Daniel’s bedroom. I go with him but he stops and shakes his head at me. “I got it from here,” he says, giving me a small smile.

“Are you sure?” I ask, unlooping Daniel’s arm from my shoulder.

“Yeah,” Jerome says, turning his head to look at his boyfriend. “Trust me. I’ve got it.”

And so I watch them go, a little jealousy curling in my belly at the intimacy between them. It just seems so simple, in this moment – how good they are for each other, even though their situation is impossible. How well they just...fit. Despite the impossible odds.

And suddenly, as I turn into my own room and press the door shut behind me, I want a drink. Very badly.

Because while everyone else spent the evening enjoying their wine, and then getting obliterated at the bar so they didn’t have to feel their emotions –

I spent my night watching Natalia’s every move and then babysitting Daniel.

So now? It’s my turn.

And I know precisely where I’m going.

Smiling a little, and feeling a little dangerous, I bend down to quickly peel off my shoes, tossing them on my bed before heading directly for the wardrobe.

I regret that move, a little bit, by the time I get up the stone steps to the door which leads to Kent’s room – mostly because my feet are freezing. I hop from one to the other as I hesitate outside his room, suddenly wondering if this was a good idea. I mean, should I have texted first to check and see if he was free, or even awake?

What if he’s not even there? Or – I gasp a little as I realize that he might not be alone –

What if – what if Natalia is in there – trying to seduce him –

Oh my god, what if she succeeded and I walk into...

Dying, suddenly desperate to know, I press as lightly as I can on the door, which swings open the barest crack on silent hinges.

But I scowl as I’m greeted with the sight of Kent, sitting in his bed with a book open in his lap, looking directly at me over the thick black frame of his reading glasses.

“Seriously?” I sigh, pushing the door open and leaning against the frame. “You knew I was here?”

“Did you think you were quiet?” Kent asks with a smirk.

“Well, kinda,” I reply, rolling my eyes a little.

“Stomp, stomp, stomp, pant, gasp, sigh,” Kent says, laughing. “Don’t expect to be hired to my stealth team anytime soon, Fay.”

“Don’t expect me to apply for it, Kent,” I shoot back, narrowing my eyes at him a little. But then I find myself starting to grin with glee as I take a good look at him sitting there all sexy in his underwear, reading his book.

“What?” he asks, frowning, suspicious of my change in mood.

“You have reading glasses?” I ask, my smile growing wide.

Kent smirks and pushes them back up on his nose, looking at me through them now. “Don’t try to shame me about these, Fay,” he commands, his voice low and rough enough to make my stomach twist with anticipation. “I look damn good in them.”

“Oh,” I say, flicking my hair back over my shoulder. “I would never shame the elderly about their age-related impairments. My daddy raised me right.”

Kent laughs at this, really laughs, a sound that makes me stand straight and truly smile now as he reaches out a hand to me, beckoning me forward. I swiftly cross the room to Kent, thinking that it’s a little ridiculous and unfair, how happy it makes me to be able to make him laugh like that. Kent Lippert, laughing. I may be one of only a few people to have ever heard the sound.

But as I put my hand in his and let him pull me across his body, I also think that he usually finds ways to make it worth my while.

“Baby Fay,” he murmurs, smirking down at me, “making fun of this old man.” He considers me for a moment and then says, quite seriously, “I could have you killed for that.”

“Oh, come on,” I murmur, curling my body close against him. “You can think of a more creative punishment than that.”

“Damn right I can,” he growls as he tucks his face low against my hair, making me laugh now.

But before I can retort, Kent pulls away from me a little and looks at me seriously again. “How are you?” he asks. “And Daniel? Are you two all right? I know tonight was…” he lets his sentence trail off, just shaking his head. But I don’t mind – we both know precisely what he means.

“We’re okay,” I answer softly, looking up into his dark green eyes. “Well, Daniel is stupid drunk, but –“

“What?” Kent asks frowning, and then he looks towards the main door of his bedroom as if he might get up and check. “Why did you let him –“

“Excuse you,” I say, putting a hand up to his face and forcing him to turn back to me. “Why did I let him? Do you think I have any control over what your son does?”

“More control than me,” he replies, raising his eyebrow. “Especially since you two skittered out of there and went out partying, letting me deal with the fallout –“

“Well one,” I say, holding up a single finger against his lips, “the fallout was happening in Italian, so I am useless there. And two,” I say, adding another finger, “our escape plan had drinks. So, yeah. We were out.”

Kent kisses my fingers and shakes his head at me, letting the subject drop as he tightens his arms. “I’m glad you came down, Fay,” he murmurs, bringing his face close and nudging my nose with his. “We should talk about what happened – come up with a plan -”

“Nope,” I sigh, stretching my arms over my head and smiling a little wickedly at him.

“What?” he asks, frowning at me even as he lets his hand on my back drift lower, his fingers grazing the top of my ass.

“Not tonight, Kent,” I murmur, taking his face in my hands and pressing a long kiss to his mouth. “I spent the night playing chess with Natalia and therapist to Daniel. Now? With you?” I grin at him, shaking my head a little, “I want a date.”

“A date, hmm?” he says, dipping that hand lower to take a firm grip on my ass, using it to pull me closer to him. “Why would I take you on a date?” he asks, bringing his mouth again close to mine but teasing me, not kissing me, not yet. “When I’ve already got you in bed?”

“Come on, Kent,” I whisper, biting my lip a little. “Can’t you get a girl a drink? I know you’ve got a bar in here,” I say, glancing around and then gesturing towards the paneled walls which I know hide all sorts of secrets.

“I’m a very serious man, Fay,” Kent says, shaking his head. “I would never keep liquor in my bedroom. So crass.”

“Liesss,” I whisper, and then I laugh as Kent slides himself out from beneath me, leaving me in a heap of sheets as he moves over to the wall across from us, one panel away from the secret coffee bar he showed me this morning. And then I bite my lip in anticipation of being proved correct as he looks back at me and, shaking his head, presses the panel.

I let out a little victorious squeal of delight and fall back against the pillows as the wall spins, revealing a very cute, very well-stocked mini bar. “I was right!” I cry, laughing.

“It was barely a gamble,” Kent murmurs, smirking and turning away from me and taking two glasses down from the little hanging rack at the top. He jerks his chin towards the closet as he gets started making two cocktails. “Go get changed, Fay,” he says with half a sigh. “I’m not letting you have cocktails in bed while you’re wearing Oscar de la Renta.”

“Oscar wouldn’t mind,” I say, pulling myself out of bed and passing behind Kent on my way to the closet, trailing a few fingers across his ass as I go.

And then I let myself into the closet, wondering what the hell a girl does wear to a cocktail date in bed.

Chapter 124 – Mini Bar

Chapter 124 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent only pauses for a second when he looks at me as I come back out of the closet, but it’s enough to make a slow smile creep over my face. I cross the room back to him and lean casually against the tiny bar, wiggling my hips a little in an attempt to get him to look at me again. The underwear set that I’ve chosen can...well, it’s so flimsy that it barely deserves to be called underwear.

But I look damn good in it. And Kent knows it, even if he’s pretending he doesn’t.

He shifts his eyes to mine briefly before returning to his process. “Do you mind, Fay?” he asks quietly, nudging my elbow away from its place on the bar. “It’s a small work area.”

“I do mind,” I sigh, leaning forward and allowing my elbow to take up more space as I place my chin in my palm, looking up at him. “What’s taking so long?”

“It takes a while,” Kent answers as he peels the rind off of an orange and rubs it around the edge of a glass already filled with a whiskey cocktail. “To make a nice drink.”

I pout a little as I look down at the glasses. “I wanted tequila.”

Kent smirks and shakes his head at me, taking a step back from the bar and handing me my drink after popping the orange peel into it. “You should have told me that,” he says, “before I made old fashioned.”

I look dubiously down into my glass, squinting one eye. “Is it any good?”

He laughs again and clinks his drink against mine. “Try it, Fay. You might like it.”

I sneer a little as I lift the glass to my nose, sniffing the drink. “That’s what you said about the fois gras,” I mumble. “And that was gross.”

Kent just smirks at me and takes a long sip of his drink before starting to walk away back towards the bed. I straighten up as I watch him go, my eyes darting directly to the elastic of his

underwear waistband, to the place where it presses delicately against his tanned skin. And it's certainly not because of the whiskey that my mouth begins to water.

Still, I take a long sip of the drink, considering it as Kent tosses his reading glasses on his bedside table and sits down on the bed, relaxing against the headboard with one foot flat on the mattress, his leg bent at the knee.

"What do you think?" he asks, and I swirl the drink around in my mouth before swallowing.

"Well," I say, looking consideringly down at it. "The whiskey part is gross, but I like the sugar."

Kent just smirks at me and raises one hand, beckoning me closer with a curl of his fingers as he moves his own cocktail to the table next to him. I obey, but I stoop down to grab the little bottle of tequila that I see at the bottom of the bar on my way.

"Fay," Kent groans, reaching for me as I come close and pulling me on top of him so that my knees straddle his lap, a bottle of tequila in one of my hands and my whiskey cocktail in the other. "Honestly, girl," he says, pulling me closer to him with two hands on my waist, "I can dress you in La Pearla and give you a cocktail made with twenty-year-old Bourbon, but you'll still want tequila and tell me your favorite part of the drink I made is the two cent's worth of sugar."

"What did you expect, Kent," I murmur, tilting my head back to finish off my cocktail as he lowers his face to my chest, pressing his lips to the swell of my breast, "the first time we met was in a prison, the second was in a strip club. My sister's strip club, none the less. I never promised class."

Kent laughs again and looks up into my face. "Pearls before swine," he murmurs, but I can tell he doesn't mean it. That he likes me just like this.

"Hey," I whisper with a little snarl, bringing my mouth close to his, "call me a swine again. See what happens." But I don't give him the chance, kissing him before he can speak, opening my mouth to him and letting him tug me flush against him, my stomach against his chest.

I wait for Kent to shudder a little, until he utters his first little moan, before I pull away, unlooping my arms from around his neck and pulling my left knee over his lap so that I can sit beside him, rather than straddle him.

"Hey," he growls, reaching for me, but I hold up one finger – with a little difficulty, considering I have my empty whiskey glass in that hand.

"Uh-uh," I say, pursing my lips. "One drink and then you think you can get me in bed? With no conversation? Not much of a date, Mr. Lippert."

Kent glares at me and snatches the empty glass from my hand, putting it roughly on the bedside table next to his. “You’re already in bed, Fay,” he growls, turning back towards me and rolling his body in an attempt to cover mine, to pin me to the mattress in the way he knows I like.

I’m tempted but – well, honestly, I’m a little serious. I want him – I always want him. But I also want...a minute with him, before we dive into all of that. A minute just to talk, to connect.

“Come on, Kent,” I say, grinning up at him as I place a hand flat against his chest, making him pause. “I’m cheap, but I’m not easy.”

Kent, glowering above me, raises a dubious eyebrow at me that makes me laugh, hard. But then he sighs and falls on his side, stretching his body out and propping his head up on his palm. “All right,” he says, curious. “What’s it going to take, Ms. Alden?”

“Well, you made me a cocktail,” I say, beginning to smirk as I lay my back flat on the mattress, my shoulders propped up against a pillow, and start to unscrew the top of the tequila bottle in my hand. “Now I’ll make you one.”

“Fay,” Kent says, suddenly worried and reaching for the bottle. “What are you doing – let me get a glass –“

“No!” I object, laughing and pulling it out of his grasp. “This is my drink – I’ll mix it as I please –“

“Oh my god,” he murmurs as he sees me hold the open bottle over my stomach. He reaches for the bottle again but I smack his arm away. “You’re going to get it all over the sheets - ”

“Well then you’d better drink quick,” I say as I pour juuuuust a little bit of tequila in the shallow well created by my belly button.

With a groan of dismay Kent dips his head to my stomach, and I laugh hysterically as he slurps the tequila off of me, thoroughly enjoying the movement of his lips and tongue against my skin as he does his best to get all of it up before it can drip onto his thousand-dollar sheets.

Chapter 125 – Viper

Chapter 125 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent succeeds, though – not a drop of tequila gets away from him. Kent glares up at me when he’s finish and, I think in his idea of punishment, drags his tongue in a long, thick lick from my belly button halfway up my stomach. “What the hell were you thinking, Fay,” he growls.

“I don’t know,” I say, still grinning at him. “I saw it on MTV once when I was a kid. I always wanted to try it.”

“Well don’t do it again,” he commands, bringing his face level with mine and then grabbing the bottle of tequila out of my hands.

“Hey!” I shout, grabbing for it, but he pulls away from me and raises the bottle to his lips, taking a long drink. Kent shakes his head as he swallows, wincing at the burn of the liquor before handing it back to me.

“If we’re going to be classless, Fay,” he says, turning his eyes back to mine, “at least be clean.”

“I can work with that,” I reply, grinning before raising the bottle to my lips and taking a long drink myself. Then, I tuck the bottle in next to me as I snuggle back against the pillows and smile at Kent, enjoying the warm and cozy burn of the tequila in my chest, feeling it already bringing a little peace to my tired brain.

Kent eyes the open bottle anxiously but I tsk him and give him a little shove on his shoulder. He just rolls his eyes.

“I didn’t agree to chaos, Fay,” he informs me, shaking his head at me yet again.

“I know, Kent,” I say, lifting a sympathetic hand to his face. “But that’s the price you pay to have me all curled up in your bed.”

“Worth it,” Kent murmurs, the words barely audible as he turns his face to press a kiss to my palm. But then he turns his attention back to me. “Are you sure?” he asks, “that you don’t want to talk about what happened tonight?”

“Do we need to?” I ask, suddenly hesitant. “I mean...” I wiggle a little bit, trying to sit up straighter. “Are you...going to like, kick me out of the house?”

“No, Fay,” Kent promises, his face suddenly very serious despite the fact that he did a body shot off of me thirty seconds ago. “She can make demands all she wants, but this?” he says, nodding between us. “This is not hers to arbitrate.”

“Okay,” I say, relaxing back against the pillows. “Then, can we talk about it tomorrow? Can we just...have tonight?”

“Yes, Fay,” Kent murmurs, smiling at me. “If that’s what you want.”

And since it is what I want, I raise the tequila to my lips again, taking a sip before pressing it to Kent’s mouth. He holds my gaze as he takes the bottle from my hand, only breaking my eyeline as he tips his head back to take a steady drink. And then, when he lowers his head again, we talk.

And talk.

And we continue to talk, long into the night, way past the point when I'm sure Kent would have preferred to go to sleep. At first Kent just answers whatever random questions I can come up with, which get deeper and more poignant as we go. And then, after we've had enough tequila to make my brain pleasantly fuzzy, he begins to offer stories of his own.

And to my shock, Kent tells me all sorts of things about his life. Things I'm sure hardly anyone knows – which Daniel himself might not even know.

He tells me about his charmed childhood at his father's side, how he grew up with the best of everything before his father was brutally murdered in a mob hit when he was just a kid. He tells me about how he saw it happen. How he'll never forget the sight of his father's blood.

And then Kent tells me about how his world fell apart after his father's death. I bite my lip as I listen to him tell it, not wanting to remind him that it is precisely that fate which Natalia wants to give me by having my own father murdered. But Kent meets my eyes as he tells me about how his mother scrambled to hold their life together, how his uncle stepped in to help, and I know that he understands. I know that this story is a promise that it won't be the same for me.

“You know him, you know,” Kent says, taking another swig of tequila. “My uncle Gino.”

“What?” I ask, shocked. “Is he – he's not dead?” I've heard of him before, of course – just briefly, I think from Daniel – the man who helped Kent's mother hold the family together for him while Kent was sent to Italy to be raised by the Bianci family.

“No, he's not dead,” Kent says, laughing and grinning at me. Then he gestures towards the rest of the house with the bottle. “You see him every morning, Fay. At breakfast.”

“Oh!” I say, my eyes going wide. “Oh.” And then I slap a hand against my forehead, laughing at myself. “Seriously!? That's your uncle Gino, at the table with the old men?”

Kent laughs at me, shaking his head. “Who did you think it was?”

“Well, I don't know,” I say, rolling my eyes at him. “It's not like you or Daniel ever had the grace to introduce me.”

Kent just shrugs and offers me the bottle of tequila, which I take and sip from, watching him. “You could have introduced yourself. Kind of rude that you didn't.”

I laugh and smack him on the shoulder. “Come on, Kent! You know how shy I am, and how scared I was when I first came into this house.”

“Shy,” Kent scoffs, disbelieving, as he lowers his face to my shoulder and presses a kiss there. “You're not shy, Fay. Not really.”

“What?” I ask, shocked and a little confused.

“Seriously, Fay,” he continues, placing little kisses on the skin all along the line of my shoulder. “You stand up to me on a regular basis, you had the brass to walk past Natalia at a glacial space even though you were an hour and fifteen minutes late to dinner, you have a second mafia boss so eager to see you he crashes my family party –“

“Ohhh,” I say, swatting at Kent. “That’s not the same thing at all – I also blush like a damn lobster every five minutes and feel my knees go weak anytime even frowns at me –“

“Not true,” Kent says, lifting his head to look me seriously in the eye. “Not anymore, at least. Shy, Fay – that’s not what you are at all. It’s just that at some point you got the idea that you were weaker, or less capable, or less deserving than other people. But your real heart? Beneath it all?” He shakes his head at me again, tapping a finger at my chest as a little smile pulls at his lips. “You’re a viper, Fay.”

I blink at him, completely shocked by his words, by his...well, by his compliment. And a little twist of pleasure rises in me at this idea that this is how Kent sees me.

And, because I’m me, I immediately blush. Kent laughs when he sees it.

“See!?” I say, my blush deepening in my embarrassment. I raise my hands to my cheeks, trying to block it from his sight. “Kent, I can’t be a viper when I do this whenever anyone says something nice about me –“

“You can,” he says, pulling my hands away and pressing a kiss to each of my blushing cheeks, “if you would just start believing the compliments. Or believing it of yourself before someone has the grace to inform you of it.”

“Oh, I can’t do that,” I sigh, leaning back against the pillows and covering my face with my hands.

“Why not, Fay?” Kent asks softly, his voice curious. “You’re the only one who doesn’t know your power the moment you walk into the room. Fiona saw it immediately. So did I. It’s why Natalia can’t stand you. No one doubts you as much as you do.”

“Really?” I breathe, pulling my hands away from my face and looking up at him. “Is that honestly how you see me, Kent?”

“It is,” he says, holding my eyes so that I’ll believe him for a moment before shifting his body so that his head is lower now, down by my shoulders. Kent dips his head again, kissing me in the hollow of my throat and then down my chest. “You’re a viper hiding in the skin of a fawn, Fay. It’s incredibly sexy. You’re just the last one to figure it out.”

I shake my head and smirk at the top of his head and burying my fingers in his hair as he moves his body even lower on the bed, pressing kisses to my stomach, letting his tongue stroke languidly across my skin. “I bet you say this to all the girls,” I murmur, a little disgruntled. “The fawn/viper line is a good one.”

“I have never said that to any girl,” Kent says, looking up at me quickly with a little fury in his eyes. “And I wouldn’t have said it to you, except you got me all drunk on tequila. Loosened my tongue, in all the worst ways.”

And then he lowers his face to my stomach again, tugging angrily at the lacy edges of my panties as he moves further down.

“Well, if this is the result,” I say, my breath starting to come in little pants as he licks lower, and lower, “then we’re having tequila every day...”

Kent nips me on the inner thigh then, punishment for my sass, and I give a sharp little yelp that quickly turns into a moan as he begins to lick me, languidly, precisely where I want him to lick.

Chapter 126 – Emergency Interruption

Chapter 126 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I’m shocked the next morning to see that I wake before Kent. I watched him set the alarm for an ambitious six hours after we fell asleep, which will be in about...five minutes, I see, as I peek at the clock now.

Part of me is tempted to wake him like he woke me yesterday – with my hands on his naked body, touching the secret places I like to touch. But as I study his sleeping face – his brows drawn together even in repose, his full lips slightly parted, his black stubble rough on his jaw and cheeks –

I find that the only thing I can really do is...

Well, stare at him.

Christ, I think to myself, shaking my head a little. He’s just...really fucking hot.

And then, almost as if he heard my thoughts, Kent’s shoulders twitch, and then he breathes in a deep breath, and his eyes begin to flutter open.

The first thing Kent does is focus on me as he blinks awake, and I blush as I realize that he’s caught me just...staring at him.

But before I can do anything else, Kent lets out a feral little growl and reaches out his heavy arm, wrapping it around me and pulling me close. I give a little shriek that makes him laugh as he nuzzles sleepily against me.

“Now who is the bat,” he murmurs, “who stays up all night, staring at me, obsession in her eyes...”

“Still you,” I say with a yawn, stretching my body against his and then burying my fingers in his thick hair as he begins, again, to kiss my neck, my shoulders, my chest, his stubble rough against my skin and...well, frankly, getting me a little worked up.

“Maybe,” Kent says, lifting his face to mine and looking me for a long moment in the eye before kissing me soundly. Far too soon he pulls away, glancing over at the clock and sighing as he reaches for it before it goes off.

He sits up, then, looking down at me. Studying me. “Are you ready for today, Fay?” he asks, his voice serious. “Do you have a plan?”

“No,” I moan, turning away and burying my face in the pillow. “It’s not today yet if the sun hasn’t come up – it’s still last night –“

He laughs and pulls the pillow away from me, tossing it to the floor and rolling his body over top of mine, grabbing me by the wrists and pinning my arms above my head. “Well, if it’s still last night,” he murmurs, “that means we’re still on a date. Is this what you want, Fay?”

And I think my breathing, instantly heavier as his weight pins me down to the mattress, is answer enough.

“What do you want me to do to you, Fay?” Kent murmurs, dipping his head to kiss my neck and then running the broad length of his tongue up the tender skin there, reminding me, intimately, of what he did to me last night.

I moan a little, not saying anything, letting him figure it out – or honestly, letting him do whatever he wants, because it’s all good –

But Kent pulls away and I stare up at him, confused.

“Tell me,” Kent demands, looking steadily down into my face. “How do you want me to fuck you, Fay? Because I’m going to fuck you now, as soon as you tell me how.”

And I gasp a little in surprise at the frank way he states this – not that it isn’t working for me, just - I blush and look away, because I’ve never had to do the talking before, and I have no idea what to say –

But Kent moves one hand from my wrist and places it on my cheek instead, turning me back to him. “No. Don’t blush,” he orders, making me look at him. “Tell me what you want.”

I blink anxiously up at him, not knowing –

“Do it, Fay,” Kent orders, flexing his hips hard against me so I can feel him ready for me – however I want him. Then he smirks at me, teasing as I give a little gasp. “You had lots to say last night when you were threatening to pour tequila all over my bed –“

“I did not,” I cut in, frowning at him. “I didn’t say anything – I was all action –“

“There she is,” Kent growls, pleased to have gotten some words out of me, and he flexes his hips again, making me gasp a little bit more. “Now, use that dirty little mouth to tell me how you want me. Now.”

“Flip me over,” I say, the words falling from my lips before I knew I was thinking them. A hungry little noise echoes in Kent’s chest as he moves the hand from my face and slips it beneath me, grabbing me from behind by my far hip and flipping me over in one quick movement, just as I asked.

“Now what,” he whispers, kneeling between my legs with his hands on my hips, using his thumbs to dig into the muscles of my lower back, starting to massage me just a little. I moan a little at the feel of it, of Kent’s strong hands loosening my muscles, at the feel of myself already growing wet for him –

“Now what,” he asks again, accompanying his demand with a sharp smack on my ass. I yelp a little, even though I liked it, but I feel his hand leave my skin and I know that he’s pulling it back, ready for another –

“Lay on top of me,” I say quickly, “I – I want to feel you – all of you – “

And he does it, slowly, lowering himself so that his stomach presses against my back, his arms on either side of mine taking the majority of his weight so he doesn’t crush me.

“Push into me,” I whisper, not waiting for him to command me again, because I can already feel him there – at my entrance – wanting to be inside me as much as I want him there. Kent groans a little as he obeys me, as he adjusts himself so that the head of his cock begins to spread me –

And then we both almost leap out of our skins as a hard knock comes at the door.

“Shit,” Kent breathes, pulling me to him in an instant and clamping an unnecessary hand over my mouth. Because I go still as a rabbit, shocking myself by not emitting a noise. We are both still and tense for a moment, but then the knock comes again.

“Through the passage, Fay,” Kent commands in a whisper, quickly standing up and hastily pulling the sheets off the bed to wrap around me. “There’s no time – they wouldn’t wake me if it wasn’t urgent.”

I nod, still not daring to say a word, and wrap myself up as fast as I can as I cross the room. I look over at Kent, who is pulling on his underwear as he heads for the door – not the one to his office, but one – I think – that goes to the kitchens. He holds my eyes for a long moment, giving

me a nod, and then he shocks me by pressing the fingers of his right hand to his mouth for just a second, kissing them before clenching that hand in a fist and moving towards the kitchen door.

I pause a moment in my surprise because – I mean, I could swear that that was the Kent Lippert version of blowing me a kiss. But I move through the passage door as quick as I can, pulling it silently shut behind me.

The next few minutes of tottering awkwardly through the freezing basement passage are not...my favorite moments of my life, as I spend one third of my time wishing I had some socks, another third ignoring the unfinished ache in my core, and the final third anxiously worrying that there is some kind of horrible disaster happening upstairs.

But as I pass through the wardrobe into my room, everything is...peaceful. Totally normal. I take a moment to listen quietly for any changes but eventually the tension unwinds from my muscles as I hear absolutely nothing.

Then, frustrated that what seemed like it was going to be some really great sex was interrupted for absolutely nothing, I scowl and head into my bathroom for a long shower.

Because the day has finally arrived, and I can no longer use tequila and sex to distract myself from the one big problem in my life: Natalia.

Natalia, the woman who wants my father dead and me gone with him so that she can take her place as Kent's wife.

But as I step into the steaming hot water of my shower, a little snarl curls on my lips.

Because if that's what she wants?

God damn it, but I'm going to make her step over my dead body to take it.

Chapter 127 – Breakfast in Pairs

Chapter 127 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

When I come out of the shower and move back into my bedroom I'm pleased to see that my clothes for the day have arrived – riding clothes, thank god - and even more pleased to see a little note on top. I scurry over and grab the little white envelope, ripping it open.

It's a simple, short note – as all of Kent's are:

Everything is fine.

I owe you.

I smirk, a little, at how coy he's being here. Because if anyone intercepted this note and read it before me, it's innocuous enough to mean anything. But those words at the bottom? I know precisely what they mean. Who knew three short words could get me so hot.

But I sigh and toss the note in my waste basket, knowing that I have to wait, and endure much, before I get to that more pleasant part of my day. But I get ready quickly – drying my hair and braiding it back and then changing into my crisp riding clothes, excited to finally have the opportunity to visit my horse instead of doting on Natalia and Alessi all day.

After all, they've taken away any reason I had to be kind and solicitous to them. And now I can just do as I please.

I pull on my tall riding boots and nearly skip down the stairs towards the kitchen, hungry for breakfast and eager to start the day. Some of the things that Kent said last night still echo in my mind – that he sees me as a viper, for instance, disguised as a fawn...

And even as I shake my head at the idea as I push the door open to the kitchen – I wonder what would happen if I just decided to believe him? If I just accepted it, instead of fighting against it, and tried to... I don't know, embrace it? To see the viper in myself, instead of the shy and frightened nerd I always assumed I was?

I'm lost in the thoughts of this as I make my way to the espresso machine, so lost that I don't even notice the old man standing next to me until I've already loaded the coffee and pulled the levers that I know will make me my favorite drink.

"A double this morning, Fay?" a creaky old voice beside me asks, and I jump a little as I spin towards him. But then my face breaks into a smile.

"Uncle Gino," I say, giving the man I now know is Kent's uncle – the man who raised him, who saved Kent's family - a wide grin. "Good morning – am...am I...oh god," I say, grimacing as I look around at the coffee station, "please don't tell me that I cut in front of you –"

But he laughs and pats me on the shoulder. "No, girl," he says, shaking his head. "I already have mine." And he raises a tiny cup towards me in a little toast, which brings me great relief. "Are you going to see that horse of yours today?"

"Yes," I say, my eyebrows going up as the machine next to me hisses and steams. "Do you – do you know Heathcliff?"

"Helped Kent pick him," Gino says, giving a deep nod towards the kitchen. I turn my head to see Kent standing in there, dressed in his suit and speaking to some of his men. "That boy doesn't know as much about horse flesh as he thinks he does. Women, on the other hand..." he says, nodding appreciatively and raising his eyebrows at me.

I laugh and shake my head at him. “I won’t tell him you said that,” I say, reaching for my little cup when it’s finally filled with coffee.

“Knew I could trust you, girl,” Gino murmurs, patting me again on his shoulder before hobbling over to the table of old men, who all raise a hand to me as I look their way. I smile back and give a little wave before heading towards my own table, where I can see Daniel already sitting.

When I slide into my seat across from Daniel, I note that the table is smaller today – that he removed the two extra seats where Natalia and Alessi have been sitting since they arrived. I open my mouth to say good morning to him and ask about that choice, but then I my words fail me when I see Daniel slumped over his plate of eggs, his skin pale and almost green in places.

“Whoa,” I say, picking up my coffee cup and raising it to my lips. “Rough night, Danny?”

Daniel lifts his head and glares at me a little. “Who told you to call me that?”

I laugh a little wickedly and blow on my coffee before taking a sip. “No one. I just heard a little bird call you it.” I wrinkle my nose at him. “I think it fits.”

Daniel just growls something noncommittal and looks down at his plate again.

“Aww, come on, sugar,” I say, leaning forward and taking his hand. “Are you really feeling this poorly?”

“Yes,” he sighs, sitting back in his seat but keeping my hand in his. “But Fay – we have to...”

“I know,” I say, squeezing his hand and looking at him seriously. Because he’s right – we need a plan. Daniel takes a deep breath and leans forward to whisper to me, all the time getting greener, as if he might barf all over his plate.

“Fay,” he whispers, “I don’t know what my dad has planned – but I have no intention of breaking this engagement or letting Natalia have a place in this family. I went to my dad’s room this morning and he agrees –“

“Oh,” I say, perking up a little bit and feeling a relieved. “That was you?”

“Yeah – wait,” he says, looking at me narrowly. “How did you...”

And I bite my lip, realizing what I just let slip.

“Were you...there?” he asks, glancing around to make sure that he isn’t heard – but the kitchen is full, and quite loud, and the Italians aren’t here yet, so I’m fairly sure we’re safe. “What,” he says, scrunching his face a little with distaste. “Did he like – shove you in a closet to keep you secret?”

“No,” I reply simply, sitting up straight and keeping my mouth shut. But I can’t help giving Daniel a sneaky little grin that lets him know that I’m keeping my secret on this one.

“Okay,” he says, dropping my hand and covering his face with his palm as he leans back in his chair. “Now I’m really gonna barf –“

I laugh and lean forward to tease him more, but a plate slides in front of me before I can say another word and I look up to see Kent standing there.

“All right?” he asks, looking between us.

“Daniel’s going to barf,” I say, giving Kent a little smile before reaching for my fork and eagerly stabbing at the pile of eggs on my plate.

“Daniel,” Kent says, slipping his hands into his pockets and turning towards his son, “needs to learn his limits.”

Daniel just flaps a hand at his dad, who chuckles a little and opens his mouth to say something more, but at that moment the door to the kitchen swings open and Natalia and Alessi walk in, looking bright and fresh. All three of us turn to look at them and I consider, passively, that you’d never know that they ordered a hit on my father last night.

Kent swallows whatever it was he was going to say to us and turns away instead, his demeanor going cold. “I’m busy today,” Kent calls over his shoulder to Daniel and I as he walks towards the kitchen, ignoring Alessi and Natalia as he goes. “But I have my phone. You two call if you need anything.”

“So, is this how it’s going to be?” Daniel murmurs to me as he watches Natalia and Alessi take two seats at another small table behind us. “Just...a stalemate?”

“If it is,” I say, sighing and turning back to my plate, “then you’d better eat up. We’re going to need all of our strength.”

Daniel looks down at his food and I swear I see him gag a little bit – I can’t hold back my laughter. I do notice, though, that Natalia turns around to look at me when she hears it – disgruntled, I think, to see me having a happy morning with my fiancé when she basically told us the engagement was off last night.

I act like I don’t see her, though, pretending I’m above it.

“It’s going to be weird, Fay,” Daniel says, shaking his head, so serious that I meet his eyes.

“We’ll get through it,” I say firmly, holding his gaze and nodding to him. “We just need a plan.”

“Well, I’ve got my summer off,” Daniel says, giving me a little grin. “Let’s get to work.”

Chapter 128 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

The days pass quickly now that I no longer have entertaining Natalia and Alessi tying me up, and they start to fall into a familiar pattern. Breakfast with Daniel, then mornings and early afternoons at the stable, burning off my anxiety and my energy. Late afternoons are spent in my bedroom with Daniel as we pour over Kent's strategy books and talk about our next moves.

And nights?

Well. Nights are where my real education happens.

Other things have changed in the house as well. For one, I finally got a lock on my door.

"Really?" I breathed as Kent came up about two weeks ago with the handyman to have it installed. "I get privacy?"

Kent just glared at me a little. "When have you lacked for privacy, Fay?" he asked. But I just rolled my eyes at him and gestured to both the door and the wardrobe, neither of which had a lock and both of which were available to him twenty-four hours a day. But he just smirked and ignored me.

"This isn't the reward you think it is," he informed me, coming over to where Daniel and I were sitting on the bed, books and a chess board spread out between us. "It's – wait," he says, blinking and refocusing on our study materials. "What are you two doing?"

"We're studying, Dad," Daniel said with a little shrug.

"But the semester is over for summer," Kent reminded him, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Autodidacticism is a legitimate form of education, Kent," I said loftily, bouncing down onto my bed and leaning back against the pillows, grinning at him. He flashed me a little glare of annoyance before leaning forward and looking at our collected books. Then, he gave a surprised blink as he realized that they were his books.

He paused for a moment, considering, but then he just straightened. "Put these back where you found them, when you're finished," he said. And then he turned to glare at me. "Exactly where you found them."

I gave him a sarcastic little salute and rolled my eyes; his glare just intensified. But I smiled, knowing that he'd make me pay for it later. And I very much looked forward to that.

“So,” Daniel said, nodding towards the handyman, who was finishing up. “What’s up with the lock?”

“You’re going to start sleeping in here,” Kent informed him, nodding towards my bed. Daniel and my mouths dropped open.

“Why?” Daniel asked, a little appalled at the idea.

“Because you’re engaged,” Kent growled, glaring at him. “I bought more time with the Bianci’s – set up meetings with Alden so that he can convince the Italians that he’s a bigger player than he honestly is and that we don’t need to take him out. But in the meantime, you two need to start convincing everyone that you’re in love.”

“Oh,” I said, my eyebrows going up. And then I bit my lip, looking down at my hands in disappointment, thinking that this meant...

“Nothing else is changing, Fay,” Kent informed me, interrupting my thoughts, and I snapped my gaze back up to Kent to see a small smile on his face. He just nods towards Daniel. “You’ll just have to let him in on the secret.”

And then, with a little nod, he left the room.

Daniel turned to me, confused. “What secret?” he asked, a little betrayed.

And then, as the handyman finished and closed the door behind him as he left, I took Daniel’s hand and asked a very simple question. “Did you ever read *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*?”

And so, ever since then, Daniel comes into my room every night and, after giving me a chaste little kiss on the cheek, he rolls his eyes and holds the wardrobe door open for me so that I can scurry down the secret passage to his dad’s room. And then every morning, when I climb back out, I wake Daniel up with another little chaste kiss and a cup of coffee that I bring him from his dad’s espresso bar.

“You know this is weird, Fay,” Daniel says to me today, after about two weeks of this pattern. “Super weird that you go fuck my dad every night and bring me coffee in the morning after I sleep alone in your bed.”

“Don’t be jealous,” I scold, plopping down on the bed with my own little cup, “just because Jerome doesn’t have his own secret passage.”

Daniel grumbles discontentedly and I grin, knowing that I’ve hit the nail at least a little bit on the head there. Daniel, I know, misses his sneaky midnight visits from Jerome.

“They can’t stay forever,” I say quietly, reaching out a hand to rest comfortably on Daniel’s knee. “Natalia and Alessi have to go back to Italy at some point.”

“Not until this is finished,” he sighs, looking down into his cup. “And I can’t believe it’s still stretching on.”

“I know,” I murmur, but at that moment a knock comes at the door and I move towards it to receive our clothes delivery for the day. Kent has started sending Daniel’s clothes as well, since he has less access to the walk-in closet in his room, and Kent wants Natalia and Alessi to see Daniel and I walk out of my room every morning holding hands and appearing as if we’ve spent every moment of the night together.

Daniel dresses more quickly than me, as he does every day – his clothes are easier to pull on than riding pants and tight boots - and then he sits and talks quietly with me as I do my hair and makeup. Then, when I’m ready, he takes me by the hand and unlocks the door and we step out into the hallway just as Alessi is passing my door.

“Ah,” Alessi says, stopping to smile at both of us. “The young lovers emerge.”

“Morning, Alessi,” I say cheerfully, stepping close to Daniel and resting my head against his shoulder. I’m more aware of Alessi now – more aware that even though he’s nicer to me than Natalia is, that he’s still very much on her side. But still, I have no real reason to be nasty to him – not now. Not yet.

“Beautiful Fay,” Alessi says, stepping forward to give me a kiss on the cheek before we all start down the stairs together. “And how did the two of you sleep?”

Daniel gives a soft little laugh, meant to suggest to Alessi that we didn’t, which makes Alessi smile. “We slept very well, Alessi,” Daniel adds as we pass through the kitchen door. “We hope you did as well.”

Alessi tells us about his evening as we all move towards the coffee stand, but I find myself distracted, as I am most mornings when Natalia makes it to breakfast before we do. Because when she does, she’s always in the galley at Kent’s side, her arm wrapped tight around his.

I do my best to glance away from them and not narrow my eyes, because honestly I shouldn’t. The Fay that I’m playing – the one who is Daniel’s fiancé – has no real reason to object to Natalia and Kent getting together, besides the relatively minor objection of a bossy mother-in-law.

But the real Fay, the one who climbs into Kent’s bed every night?

I want to rip her face off every time she drags a finger down his chest, looking up into his face and laughing her stupid little tinkling laugh.

Chapter 129 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

But I clench my jaw and look away from Natalia clinging to Kent's arm, knowing that we've made a decision about how to play this. And that I've got to stick to it.

"Let her," Kent said to me a few weeks ago as we laid tangled in the sheets of his dark room. "Let her think that I'm considering her as my wife, Fay."

"Are you?" I asked, hoping that my voice didn't betray my terror at the idea. That I could lose him to that horrible woman –

"No," he had insisted, taking my chin in his broad hand and making me look at him. "No, Fay, I don't want her. But...until this settles, until we come up with a solution that makes the business secure without the Bianci's insisting on a second marriage pact to solidify it? Let her burn herself out spinning her wheels. Let her think she's getting somewhere with me. Let her try."

I tore my chin from his hand, then, turning my face away and scowling down at the bed. "But what if she succeeds?" I grumbled, a little alarmed at the level of jealousy I'm feeling at the idea of it. "What if she wiles you away with her stupid Italian charms –"

Kent just laughed and slid his hand from my shoulder all the way down my back to land on my ass, which he gripped tight in his palm. "How could she do that," he murmured, dipping his head to lick a long stroke between my breasts, "when I've got you here, hogging my bed –"

"What!" I shrieked, slapping at his back and laughing. "I do not hog the bed –"

"You do," he murmured. "You spread out like a starfish – it's horrible –"

But then I wiggled down on the mattress so that his body was leveled above me, his weight pressing me down, just the way I like it. I made him look at me, right in the eyes, not letting him get away with distracting me. "Promise me, Kent," I whispered, trying desperately not to wear my entire heart on my sleeve. "Promise me you won't leave me for her."

And he did.

Kent whispered his promise against my lips, and then a dozen more times as he worked his way down my body, pressing a kiss against my skin after each one.

He promised until I forgot what he was saying entirely, so swept away in him that I forgot everything I knew, forgot even myself as I tilted my head back and moaned his name.

And so, as Daniel hands me my second cup of coffee of the day and we make our way over to our little breakfast table, the most I can do is try to ignore the way Natalia presses herself to Kent's side, as if she's already his bride. Ignore the way he looks down at her consideringly, as if he's really thinking about what it would be like to have her there all the time.

"Careful Fay," Daniel whispers to me in a little sing-song voice as we sit down. "Your jealousy is showing."

And I scowl a little as I sink into my seat, taking a deep breath and working to wipe my face clean. "Am I that obvious?"

"To me," he says, giving me a little shrug. "Maybe to Jerome," he says, glancing over at his boyfriend who stands in the kitchen watching us carefully. "But you've got to be careful here. Because in this world, you never know what's going to happen next."

"I know," I sigh, and as it turns out the next surprise is on its way as Natalia saunters over to us, the two plates of our breakfast in her hands.

"Good morning, love birds," Natalia says, giving us a big fake smile and kissing Daniel on the cheek after she places our breakfast neatly before us. "I have a surprise for you tonight!"

"Really?" Daniel asks, looking up at her interestedly, his face warm and fond. I watch him, a little jealous at his ability to play nice so easily.

"Yes," she says, tapping his nose with a motherly finger. "I have made a little party for you two! You will be meeting some others of the young ones from good families," she says, smiling at both of us. "And your Ivan will be there," she adds, nodding to me and giving me a little wink. "I know how much you like him."

My mouth falls open a little at this, at her nerve. Ivan – I haven't spoken to him in weeks, not since the party. He texted a lot at the start – but now we've gone silent.

"Oh," Daniel says, glancing between us. "Thank you, Natalia, but I'm not sure we should –"

"Ohhhh," she says, leaning down and wrapping an arm around his shoulders in a little hug. "You'll go! You'll have fun! You two – spending all day wrapped up in that room, reading books after Fay goes and plays with animals all morning!" She stands sharply up and rolls her eyes at us. "You need a little life – have some fun. You leave it to me. I arranged it all."

And then, before we can object, she just laughs and walks away.

"Are seriously we doing this?" I ask Daniel, leaning forward so he can hear my whisper.

He glances for a moment at his dad, who studies us with chagrin as Natalia moves back to his side. "I think we have to," he murmurs as Kent gives us a small nod.

I groan and slump back into my chair, not wanting to do this at all.

Honestly, I liked the pattern that we'd set up in the past few weeks – waking up with Kent, riding my horse, plotting with Daniel, and then back through the wardrobe? It was nice.

But leave it to Natalia to throw a wrench in the plans.

“Bowling?” I murmur as we pass through the door into what I actually admit is an incredibly chic two-lane vintage bowling alley in the basement of one of the city's best restaurants. You can tell it's been lovingly maintained and that the rest of the room has been designed thoughtfully as a complementary cocktail lounge.

“We are youths,” Daniel says, smirking down at me. “Youths like the bowling, remember? At least, in Natalia's mind.”

I sigh and fiddle with the engagement ring on my left hand, looking around anxiously.

We're some of the last to arrive, and I see that there are already about twenty people here. I've met some of them, while others are complete strangers. But my eyes go, of course, directly to the blonde at the back corner of the bar, speaking intently with a dark-haired girl I don't know.

“The Russian dolls are here,” Daniel murmurs to me as we step further into the room. I smirk at our nickname for the five daughters of the Russian mob boss I've never met. “And they're incoming...” he continues.

I rip my eyes away from Ivan to the group of girls headed right towards us, Mila at their head.

“Mila!” I say cheerfully, stepping forward and intercepting her, not letting her make the first move and ignore me as she did last time. “So good to see you again.”

I wrap her in a light hug, pressing a kiss to her cheek which she falsely returns. “You're looking well, Fay,” she murmurs to me, giving me a slight smile, before hastily letting me go and moving to Daniel. But I turn and smirk to see that her sisters have already ranged around him, making it hard for her to find a place.

I watch them for a moment, considering that it looks like a feeding frenzy when a slab of beef is lowered into a piranha tank. Apparently, their father told the sisters that he wants one of them to land Daniel – but he doesn't really care which one. And now they're all determined to win.

I catch Daniel's eye for a moment and he gives me a helpless little shrug, which makes me laugh. So, I move away to the bar, letting him handle it. As I go I wonder what Natalia has promised Don Kozlov in exchange for one of his daughters marrying the boy she hopes will soon be her son.

Considering how hard they're going after him, it must be something good.

I sigh as I reach the bar, watching Ivan from the corner of my eye as he chats and laughs with the dark-haired girl, wondering who she is. But I place my order with the bartender and wait patiently. I know he'll come to me.

But even when the drinks are delivered, and I take one over to Daniel, and then come back to the bar to sit alone...

He doesn't.

And I look over at Ivan, staring more blatantly now at him as he talks to the other girl. And I clench my teeth a little, unhappy at how jealous I suddenly find myself.

Honestly, after everything he's said to me, everything he's offered, he can't even look at me now?

I know I'm being unfair – that I haven't given him any encouragement in weeks, haven't even texted him back. I'm aware that I have let him know with all of my actions that I am quite thoroughly Team Lippert now –

But as I watch him talking to this girl, smiling at her with his lopsided smirk, raising a hand to casually rub at the tattooed skin on his neck.

I realize that I fucking hate it.

Because Ivan? He's supposed to look that way at me.

Chapter 130 – Ex? Boyfriend?

Chapter 130 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Wow, Fay,” Daniel says, making me jump as he comes to stand next to me. “I thought you were bad at hiding your jealousy this morning, but it's got nothing on this.”

And I cringe a little as I look up into Daniel's face. He smirks down at me as I realize how completely obvious I'm being. “Sorry,” I murmur, taking his hand.

“It's all right,” he whispers, moving close to me and running a crooked finger softly down my cheek. “Everyone knows by now that you two had drama, so I think it's not abnormal for you to look a little jealous when he's talking to a new girl. But let's not forget the goal, right?”

“Right,” I say, smiling up at him and tilting my chin up in a silent request. Daniel smiles at me before he bends a little, pressing his mouth to mine in a slow, lingering kiss.

“Crazy in love,” he murmurs. “You and me? Crazy in love.”

“Yup,” I reply, grinning up at him and considering that at least it’s not a hard thing to pretend. Because I do love him – not that way, of course. But Daniel’s my best friend. It’s not difficult to let everyone see that and throw in a few kisses here and there.

The next few hours are torture, though. Daniel doesn’t leave my side, of course, but the Russian dolls still flock to him, telling annoying stories and each giving him obvious compliments in their individual attempts to stand out, to make him choose one of them.

I sigh a little inwardly as I watch these girls flirt with my fiancé. I pretend to laugh at their jokes, but really I just wish I could simply just tell them to give up because there’s not a chance in hell that he’s actually going to go for any of us.

Because, I know, Daniel and Jerome are still going strong, even if their midnight meetups have been temporarily disrupted.

But honestly weathering the affections of the dolls is the least torturous part of the night. The most torturous part is that Ivan doesn’t say a god damn word to me. He doesn’t even glance my way, even as I watch him take the girl’s phone and clearly add his number into it. He doesn’t even acknowledge my existence as he skips out of the party two hours before the rest of us do.

I scowl the whole ride home, and continue doing so as I climb the stairs with my hand warmly held in Daniel’s, my mind turning over every moment of Ivan ignoring me until Daniel closes my bedroom door behind us and turns the lock.

“Fay,” Daniel says, and I look up at him almost in surprise that he’s there. He frowns down at me. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I sigh, shaking my head. “I’m sorry, Daniel,” I murmur, stepping closer and leaning my head against his chest. “I just – I went into all of that expecting to fight with him, to have to beat him off with a stick. I wasn’t expecting...”

“Cheer up,” Daniel says, patting me lightly on the back before heading towards the bathroom. “At least I think we successfully convinced the Russians that I’ve only got eyes for you.”

“Yes,” I say quietly, watching Daniel pass through the bathroom door and waiting for him to shut it behind him. Then, once it’s firmly closed, I hurry to my desk and pull out the little burner phone that Kent never took away from me. I bite my lip as I hold it in my hands, considering my next move.

But then I think...fuck it.

And I send off a quick text.

Come and meet my horse tomorrow, I type. 9 am.

And a little smile curls on my lips as the reply comes almost instantly.

I'll be there.

A little whirl of excitement starts low in my stomach as I tuck the phone back into my desk and then walk to the bathroom to rap a knuckle on the door. "Daniel?" I call. "I'm going through, okay?"

"Okay!" Daniel calls cheerfully after me. "Sleep tight!"

The next morning, Jerome almost crashes the Lexus when he pulls into the parking lot of the stables and sees Ivan's red Ferrari parked there.

"Fuck," he whispers, quickly straightening out the wheel and then turning to glare at me. "What the fuck, Fay?!"

"What?" I ask innocently, trying to hide my smile.

"Fay," Jerome growls, quickly pulling into a spot as far away from Ivan's car as possible. "What the hell are you playing at this time?"

"Kent knows," I say evenly with a little shrug, speaking the truth.

I told him this morning. He hadn't been happy about it.

I had picked my moment quite carefully. "Um, Kent?" I had said, leaning casually against the open door to the closet as Kent got dressed. And then, when he had turned and looked at me suspiciously – probably because I haven't been so shy and hesitant around him in weeks – I had stumbled out with my whole plan to meet Ivan at the stables today, just to check on things between his organization and the Lippert family.

Kent walked slowly over to me, stopping only when he was so close that I had to tilt my chin all the way back to look up into his face. Then, he had gone completely still.

"What are you doing, Fay," Kent had growled. "What happened last night?"

"Nothing," I said, willing honesty into my face as I looked up at him. "Ivan and I didn't have a chance to talk – I promise, it's not – it's not a romantic thing. Daniel and I were cornered all night by the Russians."

And then I waited. If he told me not to go, I wouldn't go.

But secretly? I kind of knew he'd say yes. I had told Kent weeks ago about what happened at my father's house – about my father offering to take Jerome from him, about my father laughing when I suggested that Kent could keep me safe. And I could tell that the news had rattled him.

Kent had used the information, of course – had used my father's confidence to rattle Natalia, to suggest to her that Alden had something up his sleeve and that they needed to figure it out before breaking off the engagement with me. It had been clever, that method of gaining more time.

But my father and Ivan have been slippery these past few weeks – haven't given Kent much of anything, instead dancing around him and Natalia. They would take meetings, but they didn't commit to anything.

And I knew – I knew that Kent's frustration on this matter, his desire for more information, would beat out his jealousy.

"Fifteen minutes," Kent snarled, wrapping a hand around my waist and pulling me tight against his stomach. "That's how long you spend with him. And then Jerome escorts him off the property. Am I clear?"

Eagerly, I nodded. And then I wrapped my arms around Kent's neck, standing on my tiptoes and lifting my face closer to his, asking for a kiss.

"He doesn't put his hands on you, Fay," Kent said next, refusing to kiss me and glaring at me darkly instead.

"I never got my condo in Milan –" I said, smirking a little, trying to use a joke to lighten the mood.

But Kent just shook his head and wrapped his arms tighter around me, not biting. Slowly, the smile dropped from my face.

"Not a single touch," he growled, and then he waited for me to nod, agreeing to his terms before lifting me tight against him and sealing his mouth on mine. I clung to Kent then, overwhelmed a little by his order, his intensity, his covetous need to keep me all for himself –

And then I let him carry me to the bed, and lay me back down on the sheets, and show me just how much I belonged to him. I let Kent wipe away the idea of anyone else touching me again, ever. But even as Kent smacked my ass and left me panting against the sheets, heading back to the closet after making me cum so hard that I could barely remember my own name...

I still knew that I was going to do it.

That I had to meet Ivan, and talk to him, and know what this thing had been between us - even if just to close the door on us.

But as I climb out of the car and look over the roof to see Ivan leaning against the doorway of the stables, his hair falling casually into his face as his eyes lock on mine?

Fuck.

Fuck, but it feels like that door is still standing wide open.