

Chapter 51 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I gasp air back into my lungs after a moment of real fear when I couldn't pull any in –

It aches as it fills me, having been so roughly knocked out of me in the first place –

God damnit, I think, shaking a little with the shock of falling off a horse for the first time, of the sudden violence that caused it –

I roll over on the ground, pulling myself to a seated position, pressing my eyes closed as I work to steady my breath.

Someone is there next to me, almost instantly – I feel a hand on my shoulder, a tremulous voice asking if I'm okay –

When I open my eyes, I'm shocked to see it is Kent kneeling next to me, concern written in every line of his face.

“Are you serious?” I shout at him, anger mixing with the fear running through my veins. I brush his hand off my shoulder. “We would all be fine if you didn't rush in here like a crazy person! What the hell –“

Suddenly, I remember my horse and spin my torso around, looking behind me to see Heathcliff at the other side of the arena, looking at us with wide and frightened eyes.

I push myself to my feet in a moment, heading towards him –

“Fay,” Kent says behind me, grabbing for my arm. But he's too slow, and I'm able to pull out of his grasp, glaring at him over my shoulder as I hurry over to my poor horse.

Behind him, I can see Jerome starting to stand up as well, a hand on his jaw, looking anxiously between us.

Still, I don't have time for that. I slow myself as I cross the ring to Heathcliff, knowing that he'll shy again and be further spooked if I run at him in a rage. So, instead, I force myself to adopt a casual stroll, talking soft nonsense to him as I approach.

I see the horse physically relax when he sees how calm I am – or at least, how calm I'm pretending to be. When I hold my hand out to him, he stretches his neck forward, pressing his

nose into my palm, trusting me. I take a moment, then, as I take his reins in my left hand, to stroke his neck and tell him how pretty and wonderful he is, hoping to calm him even further.

But the whole time I'm being nice to my horse, I'm getting angrier and angrier inside.

Who the hell does Kent Lippert think he is?

Well, something inside me prompts, the most dangerous man in the city, for one.

But I quickly dismiss the thought because seriously, who the hell storms into a riding lesson and punches the instructor?

I glance at the two of them, then, and see that they're standing right where I left them, Kent staring worriedly at me. Jerome, though, is anxiously looking at Kent. He could very easily lose his job over this, we both know it – just because he put his hand on the wrong girl's knee.

But who the hell was Kent to decide who could put their hands on my knees?

He's not my fiancé, or my father. He's just some jerk who thinks he owns me.

God damnit, but I hate him right now.

I try to continue keeping my body calm as I walk Heathcliff forward towards the gate at the entrance to the arena, which is still standing open. As I pass him, Kent puts out a hand, apology on his face. I know that he's sorry – but not because he hurt me, or Jerome. No, Kent is sorry because he lost the control that's so damn precious to him.

"Fay," Kent calls after me, shaking his head, but I ignore him, walking Heathcliff towards the stables.

I pass Jerome in the same manner, giving him a dirty look as well. He still presses his hand to his face, which is expressionless as he watches me pass.

I'm not blameless in this, I know. I let Jerome continue, I liked the way it felt when he paid attention to me, flirted with me, told me I was pretty and let me wonder what it might be like to let him teach me how to ride the way Western girls ride. What it might be like to kiss him at a campfire under the stars.

But he knows better than that, and so do I.

I'm no cowgirl, even if I wanted to be. It's an impossibility.

Because I'm the daughter of one major crime lord and the fiancé of another. Where the hell did Jerome think this was going to end? Where was the happy ending here, for either of us?

I'm fuming as I get Heathcliff into his stall, as I begin to take off his saddle and tack. Out of the corner of my eye I see Jerome pass the stall too, walking to the front of the stable where he had parked the car a few hours ago.

Jerome looks worried, as he goes, and catches my eye, but he doesn't say a word to me.

I'm just so mad in this moment, as I continue to care for my horse. So angry and sad at myself all at once. And sore, physically sore, where I fell on my chest and stomach.

Poor little rich girl, I think bitterly, my inner voice rich with sarcasm. Seriously, Jerome aside, what the hell did I think I was playing at? And what business did I have feeling sad, when so many people – Jerome included – had it so much worse than me?

After all, he was going to get the brunt of the punishment for this. I was going to skate on by. Because – again - I'm the daughter of a major crime lord, and engaged to another. And Jerome is a nobody. I feel horribly guilty as I think about it, where my choices lead him.

"Fay," Kent's voice surprises me, then, as he lets himself into Heathcliff's stall.

I'm too angry to speak and just glare at him before continuing with my chores, hanging up my saddle and then collecting my brushes to groom Heathcliff after his ride.

"Fay," Kent is angrier this time, clearly insisting on my attention. But he can damn well wait until I'm finished with my horse.

When I don't reply, I can hear the anger grumble in his chest. But he leaves the stall, leaving me alone to finish my work. In silence, I brush my horse, clean his feet, and check his water and hay to make sure that he's all set for the night.

I'm grateful to see, as I give Heathcliff his final parting kiss on his nose, that my horse has come out of everything unscathed. He, unlike me, is again perfectly calm, happily relaxing in his stall.

But when I lock his stall door behind me and see Kent just outside of it waiting for me, his arms crossed, I could burst into flames I'm so damn mad.

"What the hell were you thinking," I hiss at him, striding right up to him so that we're only inches apart, glaring up into his face. "I could have been seriously hurt – Jerome could be seriously hurt –"

I can see what my accusations do to him. His temper was clearly hanging by a thread when he arrived here today – but now? He totally loses it.

"God damnit Fay," Kent says through clenched teeth, advancing on me, his chest bumping into mine and forcing me back a few steps. "He was touching you –"

“What do you care if he touches me!” I yell at him, working to hold my ground as he advances. “Who cares – it was just a little flirting – what, every time someone flirts with me you’re going to punch them in the face?!”

I widen my eyes then, feeling a little reckless. “Well then get ready, Kent,” I seethe, “because your knuckles are going to get really sore.”

“You are engaged to my son, Fay Alden!” Kent grinds the words out from between his teeth. “If you even so much as look at another man, it is an insult to my family –“

“Oh come on, Kent,” I say, laughing again, which I can tell really gets him going. His teeth are bared now, his brows drawn together with fury. “You’re going to pretend that this is about Daniel? That you punched Jerome for Daniel’s honor?!”

I cross my arms then, shaking my head, and laugh in his face.

“You’re really going to pretend,” I say, pushing it, “that this wasn’t about how you want to be the one to –“

He grabs me then, unable to stop himself, fisting the front of my shirt in his hand and pulling me close to his face.

“You are mine, Fay,” Kent says, his words violent, possessive, dangerous. “No one touches you.”

Our faces are close in this moment, our bodies pressed against each other, so close that I can feel his rageful heart pounding in his chest. But it’s no match for mine.

“Really, Kent?” I say, my challenging words no louder than a whisper. “We’ll just see about that.”

Then, roughly, I push him away.

Surprised, perhaps, Kent lets go of my shirt.

I move away from him, but I don’t run. I’m not finished.

“Well just see about that,” I repeat, fixing my eyes on him. “Because my dad has introduced me to some really nice guys lately. And maybe I want to see precisely where they want to put their hands.”

Then, still holding his gaze, I walk past him. Right out of the front of the stables, to where Jerome is sitting in his car.

I pull open the passenger side and Jerome gawks at me, glancing worriedly over his shoulder.

“Fay, I –“ he says, nervous to see me here.

“Drive,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest and staring out the windshield.

“Seriously, Fay,” he tries again, so I turn to glare at him as well.

“I said. Drive.”

A command. From the mafia lord’s daughter. The future Donna of the Lippert clan.

Without another word, Jerome does as I say and drives me home.

Chapter 52 – Honey

Chapter 52 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent is as cold as ice the whole ride home.

On the way there, he had been burning with fury, his mind racing, desperate to lock her down, to burn down everything, if necessary, in order to secure her allegiance any way he could.

And he had...he had just lost it. Twice, at the stables, he had lost his temper, lost his mind.

He was unsettled, in truth, at his reactions to the day’s events. His entire life – since his father died – everything had been about control. Control of himself, foremost, because from that spun control over his house, his family, his community, and then his world.

Control was the center of his success, his power.

And around her?

God damnit, for some reason, around her he just loses it.

Kent grips the steering wheel tighter as he considers it, remembering the rage he let slip loose when he had watched the boy put his hand on her thigh. Because, Kent knew, it was his thigh – his to control, his to decide who touched it and when.

For some reason, with Daniel, Kent felt no such jealousy. Probably because he knew...well. He knew that Daniel was no real threat.

But Jerome – this handsome, smooth-talking young guy. Kent had been an idiot to ever assign Fay to his care. What the hell did he think was going to happen?

And then the second time – when he had grabbed her – grabbed her shirt and pulled her against him -

Kent scowls at himself, disgusted at his weakness. She was learning his ticks, learning how to manipulate him, learning how to bring him to the edge and just tip him over. And he was falling for it, every time.

Because, god damnit, a large part of him wanted to lose control with her. To do more than just grab her shirt, pull her against him –

He wanted to throw her down when she laughed at him, to wipe that laugh off of her mouth by pressing his own to it, to show her who was in charge.

But he knew he couldn't – he couldn't go that far. When he teetered on that edge, his whole world teetered with it. He had to bring her back under his control, had to have this on his terms.

Nothing else was a real option.

And so, when he pulls into the garage at his house, Kent is all solidity, all icy control. It was a mistake, rushing off to the stables when he was on edge. He should be like this all the time, perfectly in command.

He won't do it again, that's for damn sure.

Instead, he would take Fay in hand the old-fashioned way. By force, if necessary.

Kent walks into a quiet house. He's surprised by this – he knows that it's full of people, but everyone is, apparently, walking on eggshells today.

Fine. That's just fine by Kent.

He strides into the kitchen, seeing a group of people at the back table.

The boy is one of them, sitting with the old guys, who give Kent looks just tinged with shame. Not enough to really stand up to him, but enough to let him know that they knew he had lost control.

Kent clenches his teeth and then strides to the fridge, taking out a package wrapped in butcher paper. Then, he walks over to the boy, whose eyes go wide with fear.

“There,” Kent says, tossing the wrapped steak on the table. “Put that on your bruise, it will help the swelling.”

The boy hesitates, not taking his eyes off Kent, and then reaches for the packet.

“Thanks,” Jerome says, his voice quiet.

“Tomorrow,” Kent says, looking beyond him towards the back garden, “you wash the cars. Every single one of them.” He returns his gaze to Jerome’s face. “And I’ll check to make sure they’re detailed.”

Then Kent walks away. He can hear the approving sounds of the old men talking to the boy then, patting him on the back.

“See?” One says. “You still got a job, kid. Don’t worry – in time, he’ll forgive ya.”

Kent pretends not to hear, but he’s glad he got the message across. He didn’t want the kid to think that he’s out of hot water – not yet. But at least Jerome knows he’s not going to end up in a shallow grave by the road somewhere.

Not that Kent isn’t tempted. It’s just not worth the fuss.

Kent makes his way towards the back door, pausing next to the little window that overlooks the little patio, which stands helpfully open. He glances out of it, seeing the shine of Fay’s red hair, hearing Daniel’s voice.

Then, Kent rests his back against the wall next to the window, listening.

“I don’t know, Daniel,” Kent hears Fay say, and then to his surprise he hears her sniff. “I just – I don’t know if I can do this.”

Kent blinks in surprise at the thickness of Fay’s voice, clearly choked with tears. She had been a hellcat twenty minutes ago, laughing in his face, challenging him to watch her let other men touch her.

And now she’s in tears?

Kent hangs his head a little, shaking it. He does not understand this girl.

“It’s okay, Fay,” Daniel says softly and Kent hears some movement – perhaps Daniel taking the girl in his arms, comforting her. He grits his teeth to think of it.

“He just...he pisses me off, Daniel,” she says softly. “And then I say things I don’t mean – and I do things I’d never do, just because I know it pisses him off –“

Daniel laughs at her here, just a little, in a comforting way.

“Yeah, he has that effect on people,” Daniel says softly. “Though, I have to admit, you’re the only one I’ve ever seen respond like that. He has most people shaking in their boots –“

“Oh, I’ve got plenty of that going on too,” Fay says, and she laughs a little as well, sniffing again. “I just...I don’t know. Something comes over me.”

There's a pause in conversation, and then Daniel presses her. "So, what are you going to do? What's next?"

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"Do you still want to...go? To run? Leave this life behind?"

Kent blinks, surprised. She was considering running?

Foolish girl, he thinks. There was nowhere she would go that he wouldn't find her. And the trouble she'd cause him as he hunted her down – god damnit, he'd be livid –

But that. Kent checks himself, realizing that he's growing angry again, that it is precisely this side of Fay that fills him with this kind of rage. When she's unpredictable, and stupid, and follows what she wants instead of what he knows is good for her.

"I don't know," Fay says softly, distracting Kent from his thoughts and bringing him back to the conversation. "I don't know...if there's anything to run to," she says, thoughtful.

Kent nods, agreeing.

"Not back home? Or to France, like we talked about?" Daniel asks, curious.

"I just..." she says slowly. "I don't know if that world exists for me anymore. Or, maybe it's that the old Fay, the person I used to be? Who fit into that world? I'm not sure she exists anymore."

"I'm sorry," Daniel says, and Kent can hear the guilt in his son's words. "It's all my fault."

"No," she says, quick to assuage him. "I'm not sure...honestly, Daniel, I'm not sure I dislike the person I'm becoming in this world."

Kent is surprised by this, his eyes opening wide.

"The old me is gone," Fay continues, "but...the new me? She's not half bad. I just wish...that your father realized that. That I want to be here. Honestly, I said some stuff to him today about – well, about wanting to explore the relationships with the jerks my father introduced me to the other day."

She laughs then – she must see something on Daniel's face as he reacts to her words.

"No, Daniel," she says, her voice a little more cheerful now, "I didn't mean any of it. I just said it to piss him off. I just wish that you dad would figure out that I want to be here, with you, and with...I guess with him. I don't want to be on my father's side. I would be more than happy to pledge myself to the Lippert family. I'm just not going to do it because he forces me to. God, if he were just...a little bit kinder to me."

“More flies with honey,” Daniel says, his voice understanding. “That I do get. But I’m not sure that my dad will ever understand something like that. Allegiance, in response to kindness? It’s not something that makes sense in his world.”

“Well,” Fay says, a little pity in her voice. It rankles Kent to hear it. “That’s really a shame, isn’t it?”

“Enough,” Kent mutters to himself, pushing up from his spot against the wall and striding out of the kitchen, towards his office.

As much as he hates to admit it, their quiet conversation outside...it’s given him a lot to think about.

The next morning, a car takes Fay to the stables, as requested. It’s not Jerome driving this time and she stays quiet on the journey there. She’d been miserable all night, but a smile tugs at her lips as the driver pulls up to the barn.

As Fay gets out of the car, her mind elsewhere, she does a double-take when she sees a flash of long purple hair -

What –

“Oh my god,” Fay says, standing shocked and still as Janeen peeks her head out of the barn.

And then the sisters both scream, flying across the ground towards each other, colliding and wrapping their arms around each other, holding tight, each hardly able to believe that the other is real.

“What are you doing here,” Fay asks, unable to stop the tears streaming down her cheek.

“I can’t believe you have a horse!” Janeen says at the same moment, laughing.

Fay steps back, holding her sister at arm’s length. “Seriously,” she says, shaking her head and marveling at her sister. “How did you get here?”

“Lippert,” Janeen says with a little shrug. “He came by the club last night and asked me if I wanted to see you. We struck a little deal.”

Fay shakes her head, unbelieving. Of all of the people in the world who she thought would help her reconnect with her sister...

The last on the list would have been Kent.

What the hell had changed?

Chapter 53 – Sisters Meet Again

Chapter 53 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I can't stop smiling at my sister as we slowly walk around the fenced paddock of the stables, Heathcliff happily walking alongside us, my hand loosely holding the lead to his halter. Janeen, unfortunately, is less happy about the company than Heathcliff is.

"Are you sure he's not going to like, rear or something?" She asks, looking at my horse from the side of her eye. "Or kick me?"

I laugh at my sister. "Seriously, Janeen, calm down – he's a big softie! And he needs his exercise."

Janeen narrows her eyes at him as Heathcliff looks at her curiously. When he reaches his nose curiously out towards her she flinches back, making me laugh more.

"So, he just...bought you a horse?" Janeen asks. "No questions asked?"

I shrug. "Money is...different, in these circles. They have so damn much of it that giving people expensive things is more about the gesture than what the thing itself is worth. Or something like that."

Janeen raises her eyebrows at me, smirking a little. "Look at you, little rich girl."

I wrinkle my nose at her. "Don't be jealous."

She laughs at that. "I'm not jealous, Baby Fay – I'm making stacks on stacks at the club every night." She flicks her hair back haughtily. "Maybe I'll get a horse of my own."

But she flinches again when Heathcliff gives a little whinny, making me laugh again.

Janeen and I spend the next few hours together, walking Heathcliff around the property. We let him run and roll in the arena as well before taking him back to his stall for a good grooming. I'm pleased when I'm able to convince Janeen to take part in brushing Heathcliff at least, giving her a curry comb and showing her how to use it.

While we work, we talk. I tell her all about my life in the Lippert house, about meeting my biological father, about Kent's warnings about my place within the mafia world. I don't hold anything back, grateful to again have a sister to whom I can tell anything.

"I'm sorry," I say, at the end of it all. "About...what I said to you, and to dad, when we first found out about all of this stuff. It wasn't fair, and it was just Kent doing his Mafia Don thing, trying to get control of me."

Janeen just shrugs. “Don’t worry about it. Dad and I figured it out, a few days later, when we cooled off. You know we love you – nothing is ever going to change that.”

I feel tears prick my eyes as she says that. I did worry. I had been so cruel, and I wondered if they’d ever forgive me. It’s so refreshing to my spirit to know that they forgave me immediately and were just waiting for a way to get back into my life.

“So,” Janeen says, frowning a little and leaning against the stall’s wall. “What changed? Why did Lippert suddenly relent and open this doorway for me to be back in your life?”

“Well,” I say, studying my horse’s flank instead of looking her in the eye. “I don’t know, honestly. The last that Kent and I talked he was livid with me, telling me I’m his and I’d better fall in line. And then today, you’re here?” I look up into her face, confused. “He blows hot and cold on me. I honestly don’t understand.”

I frown when I see Janeen’s mouth pulling up into a little smirk as she crosses her arms, looking me over.

“What?” I ask, confused.

“What is the deal with you two?” She asks, her smirk deepening. “I mean, you’re engaged to this Daniel guy, but all day our conversation has been Kent Kent Kent.”

“Well,” I say, scoffing a little bit, “Daniel’s not really in control of the family and hasn’t been making a lot of decisions about my life – that’s all been Kent. Honestly, Daniel is really nice to me –“

“Really nice to you?” Janeen says, raising an eyebrow now, adding to her skeptical expression. “Honestly, the way you talk about Daniel, he’s just some nice little puppy you play with sometimes. The way you talk about Kent, though,” she laughs a little bit, shaking her head at me. “Are you sure he isn’t the fiancé?”

“Ew, Janeen,” I say, arranging the features of my face into an expression of disgust that, if I’m being honest, I don’t actually feel. “He’s like...old.”

She shrugs. “Some of my older gentlemen are my best clients.”

“Well,” I say, tossing Heathcliff’s comb into its bin and facing her directly. “Kent is not my client. So, you can end that line of thinking right there.”

“But why not, though?” Janeen says, leaning forward and smiling eagerly at me. “I can tell you like him – and he’s hot –“

“Janeen!” I say, getting upset and stomping my foot like we’re four years old again.

She laughs, but backs off. “Okay, sis,” she says, coming and putting an arm around my shoulders. “Whatever you say.” She pulls me with her out of the stall.

I open my mouth to protest further but she waves me off, looking towards the front of the stables.

“Look, I have to be getting back so that I can help dad with some stuff before work tonight.” She turns back to me then, looking me from head to foot. “You going to be all right, if I leave you here?”

I shrug. “I’ve survived this far, I’ll probably make it a few more days at least. Do I get to see you again?”

She gives me a smile. “Yeah, that’s part of the deal. Kent is going to let me see you on the regular, which I think is good. I miss my little sister. Any messages for dad before I go?”

I feel tears spring to my eyes again when I think of him. “Just tell him I love him?” I say, sniffing and working to hold them back. “And that I’m okay?”

Janeen nods, wrapping me in a hug. “Be careful here, Fay baby,” she whispers in my ear as she holds me tight. “The media has been saying a lot of shit about organized crime in the city right now. I think it’s getting bad – like some kind of war is brewing. You stay out of it as best you can, okay?”

She pulls back, then, looking me seriously in the eye. I nod eagerly, feeling every bit the little sister then, following my big sister’s advice. “I’ll be careful,” I say, giving her a smile.

“Good,” she says. Then, she glances down at my hand, where I’m wearing my engagement ring. “But if you do die, please make sure to leave me that in your will. I would retire immediately. Buy a yacht.”

I laugh, then, unable to help myself. She laughs at her own joke too, giving me a kiss on the cheek and heading out to where a car is waiting to take her home. God, I’m so glad to have my sister back. And so grateful to Kent for setting it up.

What ever could have made him do it? I head home, eager to find out.

Chapter 54 – Conflict

Chapter 54 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Fay knocks gently on the open door to Kent’s office that night, leaning casually against it. He looks up, his expression changing from one of irritation to surprise.

“Fay,” he says, folding his hands on his desk. “What can I do for you?”

“Can I come in?” she asks, tentative. Kent nods, waiting patiently as she comes into the room and seats herself primly in a chair across from him.

“I just wanted to say thank you,” she says, her voice soft and earnest. “For my sister. That was so wonderful, today, to have her back in my life for a little bit.”

Kent works hard to keep the smile off of his mouth. He’s surprised, really, by the pleasure he feels in hearing her apology. He likes it, he decides, when she comes to him to express gratitude. When she sits quietly before him, looking at him happy, grateful. Obedient.

Damnit, but it makes him want to buy her a thousand more sisters or horses or whatever it is that makes her happy.

“You’re welcome,” he says simply, leaning back in his chair and studying her. He waits for her to continue the conversation.

“Is there, um,” she says, squirming a little in her seat, “anything I can do? To pay you back?”

Slowly, he shakes his head no. He won’t ask her for anything, not now. But he’d taken her conversation with Daniel in the garden seriously. He hoped, in the end, that the payment for his kindness to her will be her loyalty. And her submission.

“Okay,” she says, smiling and looking awkwardly down at her hands. “Well, then. Thanks.”

He nods to her as she stands up and then he looks back to his computer, clicking through some files. He looks back towards her, though, when he hears a second voice.

“Fay?” Daniel asks, coming into the office. “What are you doing here?”

“Nothing,” she says, shaking her head and smiling at him. “Your dad just...did something really nice for me today. So I stopped in to say thanks.”

“Oh?” Daniel says, coming in further and looking between them. To Kent’s surprise, Daniel’s frowning. Why on earth does he have to be mad about?

“Go on, Fay,” Kent says to her, keeping his eyes on Daniel. “Let me have a word with my son.”

Obediently – good, just as he likes her – Fay flits off, heading up the stairs towards her room.

“What did you do, dad?” Daniel asks, standing in front of the desk, his hands in his pockets.

Kent narrows his eyes at his son, curious and unhappy about being questioned like this. “Why do you care?”

“Because she’s my fiancé, dad,” Daniel says, his voice growing angrier. “And you’ve been kind of a dick to her lately – what, now you’re buying her loyalty back? Her affection? What did you do, get her another horse?”

Kent smirks at his son then. “Why,” he asks, his voice even and a little cruel. “Are you jealous that you didn’t think of it first?”

“Dad,” Daniel says angrily, taking a deep breath and clearly about to start a tirade, but Kent beats him to it.

“I don’t know what the problem is here, Daniel,” Kent says, staring his son down even as the boy tries to lower over him. “But that girl’s allegiance is important to us. If you’re not going to stop her from running all over town, dating our enemies, letting our own guys putting their hands all over her –“

Daniel’s mouth dropped open at this. Fay had told him that his father had punched Jerome, but she’d conveniently left that little detail out of the story.

Kent smirks, glad to see his words have found their mark. “If you’re not going to keep the girl happy in our house, then...” he waves a casual hand in front of him, as if the solution is obvious. “I’m happy to step in.”

Daniel snaps his mouth shut, glaring at his father.

“Fine,” Daniel grinds out, angry to have been put in his place. “But you back off and leave this to me.”

Kent shrugs, pretending he’s happy to do it. But, ultimately, he knows that Daniel will fail at this task – it’s not really in him to keep a woman happy. And, deep down, Kent knows that he wants to be the one to do it.

“How are plans going for the wedding?” Daniel asks, rueful.

Kent raises an eyebrow at this. “Finally curious about your own wedding, then? Frankly, it’s bizarre that two such young people – people in love at that – have never asked any questions about the plans. The location. The ceremony. The honeymoon.”

Daniel wrinkles his nose a little at this. “You planned our honeymoon for us?” he asks, a little appalled.

“Two weeks in Italy,” Kent says softly. “You’re going to have a lovely time.”

Daniel scowls, knowing then that he’s been beat. His father was right, of course – he had been neglecting the girl.

“The wedding is a month away,” Kent continues, smirking a little at the look of defeat on his son’s face. “You still have time to take a larger role in convincing her that loyalty to the Lippert family is her best choice.”

“Fine,” Daniel snaps, looking his father in the eye. “I’ll do it. Can you...” He hesitates, then, realizing he was just about to ask his dad to arrange dinner out with Fay tonight, to use his connections to get a last-minute table for him somewhere nice.

“Yes?” Kent asks, still smirking. “Can I...”

“Nevermind,” Daniel says, turning away from him. He can do this himself.

“Have a nice night,” Kent calls after his son as he walks out of the office. Kent’s glad, in the end. It’s about time Daniel was shamed into taking on some responsibility. Even if that responsibility was just making his damn girlfriend happy. Kent rolls his eyes at this thought. You wouldn’t think that he’d have to work so hard to get Daniel to do that.

If he were in his place...

Well. Kent turns away from the thought, not needing to go there right now.

But it nags at him, pulling his mind away from his work.

Because...

Well, damnit, why didn’t Daniel work harder to keep her happy? And what was going to happen when Daniel lost interest in it, as he certainly would, and let her attention wander again. If Daniel wasn’t the right man for the job, who the hell was?

Kent instantly knows what the answer to that question is: him. He’s the one who wants Fay in his back pocket. He wanted her for the leverage she represented to Alden and because...well. Because he wanted her. But did he really need Daniel to play the middle man in this?

Impulsively, Kent gets up from his chair and leaves his office, jogging up the stairs to Fay’s room. As he walks to her door he finds it open. He pauses there silently, watching her sort through her closet, considering a choice between dresses.

“Where are you going?” Kent asks, and he takes a visceral little pleasure when he sees her jump, startled, and look around at him with those wide blue eyes.

Chapter 55 – Negotiations

Chapter 55 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

“Oh!” I says, and then I give Kent a big smile. I’m excited, after all. “Out, actually! Daniel just came by and asked me if I want to go to dinner.”

Kent smiles at me then, just raising the little corner of his mouth. “The black, then,” he says, nodding towards a little minidress still hanging in my closet. “That’s better, for a city dinner.”

I considers the dress, which is really just a scrap of fabric. I pull it out and look it up and down. “You don’t think it’s too…” I say, hesitating and looking up at him, a little embarrassed. “Well, slutty?”

Kent laughs a little at this, leaning against my door frame. “The whole point of going to a chic restaurant in the city is to wear a dress like that and make your boyfriend jealous when all the other men stare at you. That’s why a dress like that exists.”

I look back at the dress then, surprised and a little excited. I had never thought about it that way. I sneak a little glance at Kent, then, still leaning there in my doorway, wondering what he’d think if he saw me on Daniel’s arm, in this dress, the hem riding a little too high on my thigh. Then, I take it off the hanger and lay it out on the bed, the question decided.

I start to move over to my vanity but stop dead in my tracks at his next question.

“Do you want to marry Daniel?” he asks, blunt.

I just stand there, blinking at him, totally confused. “What?”

“Daniel,” Kent says, pushing the issue. “Do you want to marry him?”

Where was all of this coming from?

I take a moment to plan my next words. “I didn’t realize that I had a choice,” I say, keeping my voice quiet.

“No one will force you to say yes at the altar,” Kent replies, his voice low and husky.

Oh, I think, then, realizing very suddenly that this isn’t a real question about what I want. That this is a negotiation. I turn fully to him then, folding my arms over her chest.

“I don’t want to go to my father’s house,” I say, evading the question of marriage. “I want to stay here.” Because that, I think, is what this is really about. Kent, I know, could care less about whether or not I actually marry Daniel – our wedded life isn’t what interests him. Instead, it’s my allegiance.

“There are other ways,” Kent says, his eyes drifting down over my body, “of staying in this house. Of proving your loyalty to this family.”

My breath comes shallow, then, and I try to stand perfectly still as he looks me over.

“What are they?” I ask, my voice a timid breath. We’re getting dangerously close to some tricky territory with this question, with that look in his eye.

“Use your imagination,” Kent says, dragging his eyes up to mine. Then, as if he can’t stand it a moment later, he turns away from me, heading back down the stairs.

I let him go, but step to the edge of the banister to watch him as he heads back downstairs. I see that his hands are clenched into fists, his knuckles white. The only thing belying the tension behind that strange question he just asks.

And frankly, I would consider it.

Did I want to marry Daniel?

What were the alternatives? Were any of them anything I could actually accept?

“Are you ready?” Daniel asks, coming out of his room in a chic suit, looking so much like his dad at that moment that I just stare at him. He blinks at me, confused.

And I realize that there is absolutely no heat between us, between Daniel and I.

But me and Kent...

Damnit, we could start a forest fire, if we weren’t careful.

What the hell was I supposed to do with that?

The next morning I get up very early, stretching my arms over my head as I consider my plans for the day. The stables, for sure, but...well, I hope that if I can catch Kent early, maybe he’ll let me go visit my sister and my dad this afternoon. I haven’t seen my dad in so long, and my visit with Janeen just made me miss him so much.

I climb out of bed swiftly, then, eager to get started.

Dinner with Daniel had been really nice and – well, Kent had been right. The dress he suggested really had drawn the eye. Not that Daniel really noticed. Instead, the experience just solidified for me just how much of our marriage will be a cozy friendship instead of.

Well, instead of something else. Something spicier.

As I pull on my tight riding pants, I consider Kent’s words last night. Is marriage to Daniel really my best choice in this world? Did I really want to trade my hand in marriage – my own trump card, apparently - for something I’m sure won’t truly fulfill me emotionally?

If there are other ways to demonstrate my loyalty to the Lippert family – and keep the benefits of my life here – shouldn't I explore them?

My mind surprises me, then, by turning to Ivan.

He had told me himself that he was throwing his hat into the ring. And, well. He noticed me in ways that Daniel certainly does not. I have to admit, too, that I'm definitely drawn to him.

Was there something there, in that option?

I bite my lip, considering it as I pull my boots on. He's still Kent's enemy. What would it mean, really, to consider Ivan as a romantic option? What would it cost me, in terms of my connections to the Lippert clan?

I sigh, finally getting my boot on and hunching my shoulders for a minute. These questions are way too big to be asking without coffee. My mind on a caffeine boost, I walk to my door, pulling it open, ready to head downstairs.

I'm shocked, though, to see someone already there.

I jump backwards as the figure hurries past me and then down the stairs. He's got a hoodie pulled up over his head, so I can't see who it is, but he's certainly young, and with the height and broad shoulders of a guy.

Suddenly, I hear the noise of Daniel's door snicking shut down the hall and my mouth drops open as I put the pieces together.

Oh my god.

Oh my god.

Daniel had a guy in his room last night!

I giggle a little to myself, pressing my hand over my mouth to contain the noise. He'd told me he was interested in someone, but I hadn't realized he was sleeping with them. How long had this been going on?

I take a few steps into the hall, peering down the steps, but whoever it is has disappeared. I shake my head, then, starting down the stairs myself as I consider that this is certainly not a mark in the be-loyal-to-Daniel category. Clearly, he's not being loyal to me – not even really pretending to be.

Oh well. A problem for another time, I think, walking down the hall and pressing the door open to the kitchen.

It's very early, but there are still a few people here, getting their day started. I walk over to the espresso machine and make myself a cup, looking around for Kent. I hope I get to ask him about a trip to see my dad before the day has a chance to piss him off.

I screw my mouth to the side, though, disappointed when I realize that he's not here. I lean back against the counter on which the espresso machine rests, taking a sip of my hot drink and considering my next choices.

To my surprise, Jerome pushes through the door to the kitchen and smiles at me, coming right over. "Hey," he says. "Stables today?"

I nod eagerly. "Yeah, I'm just looking for Kent first – I wanted to ask him –"

His grimace stops my words, though. "Ohhh," he says, "sorry, Fay. But he's already gone."

"What!" I exclaim, my shoulders slumping in my disappointment. "Man, I got up early and everything! I thought I would catch him."

"Sorry," he says, putting his hands in his pockets. "Yeah, he's got a lot of business today and wants to get started early. But!" He gives me a big smile here. "He wants me to take you to the tables. So," he gives me a deep, mocking bow, "I'm at your service, my lady."

"What?" I say, shocked. "Seriously? You?"

He laughs and straightens up, nodding. "I know. I was surprised as you are. He gave me that look that meant touch her and you die, though. So." He shrugs, "best behavior and everything. But looks like I'm back on good terms with the boss."

"He's so crazy," I murmur, looking down into my coffee. "One day he's punching you for hanging out with me, the next he assigns you to hang out with me. I can't make any sense out of him."

"Maybe he likes it that way," Jerome says, shrugging again. "Keeps people on their toes with the chaos of his moods."

"Well," I murmur, setting my cup back on the machine and pushing the buttons again for a refill. "If we've got all day, might as well have a luxurious breakfast."

Jerome nods eagerly in agreement and heads off to ask whoever is cooking today to make us something. Then, we sit down at my usual table, chatting passively. About thirty minutes into our meal, Daniel joins us, the two greeting each other casually as Daniel comes and gives me a kiss on my cheek.

Huh, I think, looking between them as Daniel sits and they begin to converse easily. I didn't even know they knew each other.

Chapter 56 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Jerome drives casually down the country roads close to the stables, singing along with the old country music from the 50s and 60s that's playing on the radio. I smile, watching and listening to him. Who knew that a guy trying to work his way up in a mafia family could sing so well.

And knew so much Patsy Cline.

I shrug, looking out the window, enjoying the view when suddenly Jerome slams on the breaks.

"Shit," he mutters as our car skids to a stop, beginning to fishtail a little.

I gasp, grabbing on to the handle above my head and the center console to hold myself steady. My vision, of course, snaps directly to the road, anxious to see what the hell is in our way.

My eyes go wide with shock when I see it.

A bright red Ferrari, situated sideways in the middle of the road, blocking any traffic that might come by on either side.

And leaning against it, his arms crossed casually in front of him, is a young man in a fashionable designer sweatsuit. With tattoos all the way up his neck.

"Shit," Jerome says again, scrambling for the glove box, popping it open and pulling out –

Oh my god, a gun.

"What!?" I ask, my eyes following it with shock. "Has that been there the whole time!?"

Jerome ignores me, flicking the safety off the gun and expertly ensuring that the clip is full of bullets.

"Stay still, Fay," he murmurs, looking out of the windshield as Ivan stands up from his position leaning against the car, smirking at Jerome in the front seat. Then, his eyes slide to mine, and he cocks his head to the side.

A question.

I glance back at Jerome, the loaded gun in his hand, and make an impulsive decision.

Before he can stop me, I pull the handle on my door and push it open, putting one foot out.

“Fay!” Jerome yells, grabbing for me, but I’m out of the car before he can get a grasp on me. “Get the fuck back in here!”

“He’s not going to hurt me,” I say, bending down so that Jerome can hear me and see my face. “But you’re definitely going to get shot if you go out there with a gun –“

“You’re going to get kidnapped Fay!” Jerome exclaims, but I just shut the door in his face, hoping he listens to me.

Then, I start to walk towards Ivan, who gives me a sly little smile.

He’s not going to kidnap me. If he wanted me kidnapped, he wouldn’t be putting on such a show. No, this is him wanting to impress me.

“Would you mind?” I say, coming within about five feet of him. He watched me as I came, his eyes sliding over me from head to foot. “You’re kind of blocking the road.”

“Am I?” Ivan asks, glancing over his shoulder, feigning ignorance. Then, he turns back to me and gives me his most charming smile. “My bad.”

I just raise an eyebrow at him.

“Where are you off to?” he asks next, too casual.

“You know where I’m going, Ivan,” I say, shaking my head a little, unwilling to play his game. Clearly, if he’s here, he knew that I would be coming to Kent’s stables this morning. And he knew precisely what time I’d be here, and why I was going.

“You look cute,” he says, sliding his hands into his pockets. “A real equestrian, in that getup. Can you ride?”

“Barely,” I say, looking to my side at the pretty fields by the side of the road. Really, though, I turned away because I didn’t want him to see the little smile on my face that came as a result of his compliment. “But I like my horse. He needs his exercise.”

My face more under control now, I turn back to him, crossing my arms. “So do you mind?”

“Ah, come on,” he says, wrinkling his nose at me. “Let someone else exercise your horse today. Hang out with me instead.”

“Seriously?” I say, tilting my head as I look at him. “You think that if you block the path towards the thing that I actually want to do, I’ll just cave and go out with you?”

He gives me a naughty little smirk then. “Never failed me before.”

I can't help myself. I laugh. "Wait, so you've done this before? Just blocked the road until the girl you like goes out with you?"

"Well," he says, giving a shrug. "If someone is being a cock block, then I've got to pull the road block."

"What do you mean?" I ask, suddenly curious. "Who is cock blocking you?"

"Your new daddy-in-law," he says, leaning forward and grinning at me. "I've been trying to get in touch with you for days. But Lippert is blocking all my calls. My messages. All those poor carrier pigeons," he shakes his head in regret, "dead, for nothing but his pride."

"Really?" I ask, surprised. "You've...been trying to call me?"

"Why are you surprised at that?" he asks, smooth. "You're a gorgeous girl. And, well. At the beach I thought we had sort of...a connection. Or whatever."

I let him see my little smile this time. "A connection? Or whatever?"

"Whatever," he says, leaning forward further so that his eyes are even with mine, looking at me intensely. "Whatever you want, Fay Alden."

I can't help myself, then. The little butterflies that flutter around in my stomach make the decision for me.

"Fine," I say, taking three steps forward to join him at his side. "You'd better drive fast, though," I say, nodding back to Jerome in the black car behind me. "Because he's definitely going to shoot you if you don't."

Ivan laughs at this, raising a hand and giving Jerome a friendly wave. "What, that guy? Not a chance. He doesn't have the balls."

I see Jerome in the front seat suddenly go red with rage when he sees what I'm doing. He moves, fast, grabbing the handle of his door.

"Quick!" I shout, feeling a little reckless and liking it. I shove Ivan's shoulder, urging him to move. "Go, go!"

Ivan laughs, giving a little whoop and running around to the driver's seat of his car.

"Fay!" I hear Jerome shout behind me. But I've already got the ferrari's door open.

"It's okay, Jerome!" I shout to him as I throw myself into the seat. "We're just going out for lunch! Can you take out Heathcliff for me!?"

“God damnit, Fay!” he shouts, and I see him raising his gun. But I slam my door shut, giving a little shriek of excitement.

“Hold on, baby,” Ivan murmurs, throwing the car into gear and then slamming on the gas, the tires spinning as he turns the wheel hard, spinning the car back into the lane and starting to fly down the road.

I look behind us, then, through the little back window, still laughing as I see Jerome raise his hands to his hair, clearly freaking out. I don’t feel guilty, though – for some reason, in this minute, I’ve given totally over to the adrenaline rush. There’s no room for guilt.

“Did you just get him in big trouble?” Ivan asks, glancing at me as we pick up speed.

“Probably,” I murmur, still looking back until Jerome until he disappears around a bend. Then, I turn to Ivan, a big smile on my face. “What’s next?” I ask.

“Anything you want, Fay,” he murmurs, keeping his eyes on the road.

I bite my lip, then, considering the possibilities.

Chapter 57 – Tequila Afternoon

Chapter 57 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

That afternoon, I have a lot more fun than I’ve had in a long time. Perhaps made even more fun by the knowledge that when I get home, Kent is going to kill me.

So, I’d better live it up while I can.

“Another!” I call to the bartender, raising my hand to get his attention.

Ivan laughs at me, pulling my hand down. “You know you don’t have to do that, right? He’s been keeping an eye on you all afternoon. There’s no way he’s not going to notice when your drink is empty.”

A few hours ago, in the car, I had asked Ivan to take me somewhere Kent wouldn’t easily find us. He’d smirked and told me he had just the place, driving me across the city to the bad part of town. Then, he’d parked his sparkling Ferrari in front of a decrepit dive bar.

I’d been hesitant at first but he’d taken my hand, telling me to trust him, and pulled me inside.

I'd understood the minute we stepped in the door and my eyes adjusted to the light. With deep red booths ringing the walls and a meticulously polished mahogany bar, this neighborhood bar wasn't a dump – it was a well-kept secret.

And we've been here for about three hours now, drinking and laughing, chasing that reckless feeling that I've had since I made the snap decision to get into his car.

"Really?" I ask now, glancing between the bar tender and Ivan. "He's been keeping an eye on me – like, watching me? Why?"

"Because you're hot, Fay," Ivan says, leaning in to whisper it like it's a secret. I throw my head back and laugh, surprised and tickled by the answer. And, yes, well inclined to laugh now that I've got a belly full of tequila.

"Seriously," Ivan says, smirking at me. "Once he figures out that you're rich and funny, too, he's going to lock you in the basement and keep you for himself."

"Really?" I say, looking at him with wide eyes.

"Is he going to lock you up? Probably, Fay, but I've seen that basement and you –"

I giggle, but shake my head. "No," I say. "Do you really think I'm funny?"

"Fay," Ivan says, smiling at me with disbelief as he tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear. "Who ever told you that you weren't funny?"

I shrug, considering it. "I don't know," I say, shrugging. "My sister is funny. I just always thought I was the...other sister."

Ivan cocks his head to the side, his attention fully on me as the bartender delivers two more shots to us. "What's the 'other' sister?"

"I don't know," I say, looking deep into his grey eyes. "The nerdy one. The dork."

"Fay," Ivan says, shaking his head again. Then he leans forward, bringing his face close to mine, like he's telling me a great and terrible secret. "You are beautiful," he says, placing a hand on the side of my face, brushing his thumb over it tenderly. "And you're cute," he leans closer then, placing a kiss on that cheek.

I'm almost breathless when he brings his face back to where it was before, our noses almost touching.

"And trust me, you are funny," he says, surprising me by not kissing my mouth and instead pressing his lips to my other cheek instead.

I can't help but smile back at him, as he looks at me levelly again.

“And yeah,” he whispers, smirking, “you’re kind of a dork.”

I laugh uproariously at that, tossing my head back and shaking with the laughter that pulses through me. When I look back at him again, I can see him laughing just as hard, right along with me.

I almost can’t believe it, how much fun I’m having with Kent’s worst enemy.

Maybe Kent just has bad taste in men. Because Ivan is a blast.

We both pull ourselves back together, Ivan reaching for the drinks on the bar and handing me mine. I sip from it, staring at him, at his handsome face and the sexy pinup tattoo that wraps around his neck.

“You don’t think I’m a dork,” I say teasingly, taking my sip from my drink. “Because you wouldn’t like a girl who’s a dork,” I say, leaning forward, trying to bait him into coming closer. “And I think, Ivan,” I say, pausing and not bothering to stop the grin that stretches across my face. “I think you like me.”

“Really, Fay?” he asks, leaning forward again to bring his face close to mine. “Did you just figure that out now? The Ferrari across the road wasn’t enough?”

“No,” I say, narrowing my eyes, my smile dropping a little bit. I’m serious now, not playing anymore. “But I thought...I thought you were just trying to date me for...for who I am. For the connections you would make, if you took me away from Daniel.”

Ivan doesn’t flinch at that. Just holds my eye contact, his face steady. “Honestly, Fay?” he says, his voice as serious as mine now. “It started that way. But you are a surprise. Every extra minute with you,” he says, his eyes drifting down to my mouth, “has made me want to do this more and more.”

And then, slowly, he lifts his hand to the back of my neck, tangling his fingers in my hair, pulling me closer.

I exhale, my stomach turning over with anticipation, and close my eyes.

But.

The kiss never comes.

Instead, I feel Ivan’s grip loosen, and see the color change on the inside of my closed eyelids from purple to orange. I blink my eyes open, looking towards the now-open door leaking sunlight into the room as Ivan straightens on his stool next to me.

“Well, Fay,” he murmurs, looking at the six guys in suits who walk into the bar, their eyes on us. “Looks like you have a decision to make.”

They see us, then, and steadily walk over, their faces deadly.

“Fay,” the one at the front says. It’s a guy I’ve seen a hundred times in Kent’s kitchen having breakfast, but I don’t know his name yet. “It’s time to go home now.”

I don’t say anything, just quickly shoot back my shot, flinching and wiping my mouth with my arm.

Ivan smirks at Kent’s guys, placing his still-full drink back onto the bar. “Nice afternoon we’re having, isn’t it?” he says, cheeky.

The men ignore him, their eyes fixed on me.

I grimace and turn to Ivan. “I’d better go,” I say, sad to see it end.

“I get it,” Ivan says, hopping up from his seat and putting a hand out to help me down, which I accept. “If he’d sent one, I could take ‘em,” he says, “but six?”

I laugh a little, nodding in agreement, my eyes fixed on his face as I hop down from my stool.

“A pleasure, Fay,” he says, surprising me then by raising my hand, still in his, to his mouth and pressing a kiss to my knuckles, his eyes on mine the entire time.

“Thank you,” I say, fascinated by him, my words hardly more than a whisper. “It was...I’ll never forget today.”

“Hopefully you won’t have to,” he murmurs, letting my hand go and putting his in his pocket. “I hope that we have lots more afternoons, just like this.”

I smile at him, then, even as Kent’s guy gently takes my arm and guides me out of the bar.

Ivan’s face is the last thing I see before the door closes and I turn towards the street, blinking in the sunlight.

“Come on, miss,” the guy says, leading me over to a black SUV idling in the road next to Ivan’s car. “He’s not happy.”

“He never is,” I murmur, looking out the window at the bar as we drive away.

The trip passes quickly, lost in my thoughts as I am. I barely notice the city passing by as we drive through it. When we get back to the house, though, I do notice when the driver turns to pull in front of the house, instead of to the garages around the side and back.

I’m about to open my mouth to ask about the change when the car comes to a stop, Kent’s guy next to me opening the door and getting out.

And then, as soon as he moves so that I can see the front of the house, I know why.

He's standing there, at the top of the steps in front of his front door, his arms crossed across his chest as they always are when he's pissed at. He glares at me as I guiltily climb out of the car, meeting his eye.

"Good luck," Kent's guy murmurs, closing the car door behind me and walking around to the other side. "You're going to need it."

And as I stare at Kent up there, at the top of the stairs?

I know he's right.

"Fay," Kent calls, from the top of the stairs. "Inside. Now."

Chapter 58 – Punishment

Chapter 58 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

Kent doesn't wait for me to climb the steps up to the house. Instead, he goes in ahead of me, leaving me to follow dutifully behind.

I feel my stomach turn over for the second time today, though this time for totally different reasons. I would feel better, frankly – understand it more – if Kent were freaking out at me. Yelling at me, losing his temper, giving me commands.

But this Kent? The quiet, controlled, considered Kent?

He's the one I'm afraid of.

I look down at my feet as I climb the steps, feeling every bit the naughty schoolgirl about to get yelled at for breaking the rules. The pleasant buzz that the tequila built in my mind gets wiped away by my anxiety, my adrenaline. It's as if my body knows that I have to be focused right now to face him.

When I walk into the house I see that his office door is open, a silent demand for me to enter. I take a deep breath, steeling myself, obeying that command and then walking into the office, stopping just as I cross the threshold.

"Close the door," Kent demands, his back to me as he leans his arm against the mantle of the fireplace, staring down into the fire. I don't do anything for a moment, staring at the fire myself. Why did he light it? It's warm out – a fire, so late in the season –

“Fay,” Kent snaps, turning to glare at me. “The door.”

“Oh!” I gasp, scurrying into action and pushing the door shut behind me. Then, not knowing what else to do, I lean back against it, staring at him, waiting for him to deliver his judgement.

Kent just stares at me for a long moment. Then, he begins. “What the hell,” he demands, “did you think you were doing today?”

I shrug one shoulder, not really knowing what to say. Honestly, I should have spent the time in the car planning my response to this very question. And because I don’t have a practiced answer, I just tell him the truth.

“I...acted on instinct,” I say, my voice a whisper. “Ivan was there, all of a sudden, his car across the road – and I got out because Jerome was going to shoot at him and get himself killed. So I went to tell Ivan not to come any further, and he said he wouldn’t if I went out with him for the day and...”

I run out of words, out of ideas, out of breath under the force of Kent’s furious glare. But it doesn’t matter. Kent knows how it ends.

“A date, Fay?” Kent asks condescendingly, putting his hands in his pockets and slowly walking over to my place by the door. “You thought that a great response to my enemy blocking your path to the stables was to go on a date with him?”

I blush as he comes to stand before me, his feet spread wide in a powerful stance.

“It wasn’t a date,” I murmur, looking down at my feet, feeling the redness on my cheeks deepen. “It was just...”

He laughs at me then, a low, disdainful thing.

“Drinking all day at a bar, laughing, kissing,” he chides, leaning forward towards me. “It sounds like a date to me, girl.”

I whip up my head at that, glaring at him. “We didn’t kiss,” I blurt out, defiant. Then, I blush harder when he laughs at me again.

“Does it matter if you kissed, Fay?” Kent asks, leaning back and shaking his head. “The damage is done. You were seen today, did you know that? That place he took you – it’s a gathering place. Neutral territory. So, it wasn’t just you and him there in that darkness – no. Men from all the families saw you there. Your father’s men saw you there. Alden was the one who called me, in fact, to tell me where you were.”

I go pale at this realization. Kent was right – I had assumed that Ivan took me to someplace personal and private, to a place where we precisely wouldn’t be seen. I hang my head, realizing that the damage is just as bad as Kent says it is.

“So, you understand now,” Kent continues. “What you’ve done. How you’ve embarrassed me. How you’ve embarrassed Daniel, of all people. About whom I actually thought you cared.”

Frowning, ashamed of myself, I meet Kent’s eyes, a little angry at that. “I do care about Daniel,” I spit out. “I – I’m sorry. I didn’t know that we’d be seen.”

“Haven’t you learned enough, Fay?” Kent bites out, his voice sharp. “To know that you can’t trust your instincts in this world? That it’s always one step ahead of you?”

I sigh, hanging my head, realizing that he’s right. Damn it, I really thought Ivan had liked me...but now, realizing that he brought me there just so we’d be seen, so Kent would be embarrassed? I realize that I’ve again fallen for a ruse.

“Have I not been kind to you, Fay?” Kent scolds. “Have I not given you your horse, given you your sister back? You have everything you need to live a happy life, if you’d just stay within the lines I draw for you.”

His voice raises in the final words of his sentence, and I clench my teeth as I hear them. Perhaps it’s the frustration in me, the embarrassment, rising again, but his words – they rankle me. I can’t help myself as I raise my head to glare at him.

“Is that what I’m supposed to do?” I spit out. “Just...follow the rules? Live the life you lay out for me, Kent? Wear the clothes you pick out for me every morning, participate in the approved activities you plan, talk to the people you want me to, when you want me to?” I feel my mouth raise in a little sneer as I continue my tirade. “What’s next, Kent? Are you going to pick my food out for me, plan my meals? Cut my meat on my plate every morning?”

Kent comes forward then, all quiet control, and places a hand beside my head on the door, leaning close. “If that’s what it takes, Fay,” he murmurs, a cruel smile playing on his lips. “To get you in line? Then yes. I’ll feed you with a spoon, if you like.”

I glare up at him, my lips pressed into a thin line. “And if I disobey?” I ask, my voice angry. He opens his mouth to respond but I continue, to fast for him. “What are you going to do then, take me down into your little torture chamber in the cellar? Punish me?”

“No, Fay,” he says, bringing his face closer to mine as he smirks at me. “I got the feeling that you...liked that. A little too much. So, we’ll have to find some different methods to teach you how to act in this family.”

I gasp at this, shocked at the gall of him – but also, frankly, by the fact that...well, that he’s right. I just didn’t know he knew.

Embarrassed, I push myself away from the door, moving to my right, working to get past him, away from him. “Bully,” I growl, my teeth clenched. “I’m engaged to your son, you don’t have any right to control my life –“

He puts his other arm up, blocking me as I try to get past him, and then his hand is suddenly against my chest, pushing me with force back against the door. I feel the breath leave me as I look up into his face, which glares furiously down into mine.

“Do you think this has anything to do with Daniel anymore, Fay?” he snaps. “No, you ended that today, with your little date. You belong to me now, girl. I decide your fate from here on out.”

“Is that it, then?” I ask, cocking my head and staring daggers into his dark green eyes, which are lit now with that fire I know I kindle in him. “It has nothing to do with Daniel anymore? So what, Kent, are you just admitting that you’re jealous?”

“Jealous?” he whispers, considering, as if turning the word over in his mouth, tasting it on his tongue. He brings his whole body closer to mine, moving his hand away from my chest and instead back to the door on the other side of my head. He’s trapping me now with his whole self, not touching me but pinning me to the wood none the less.

“Do you honestly think I’m jealous of those little boys, Fay? Daniel, or even Ivan?” Kent continues, his face filling my vision now, a smile turning up the corners of his lips. “That I’m jealous of the little stolen kisses, and the way he takes your hand, and the shivers he sends up your spine that make the hair on the back of your neck stand on end?”

I say nothing, staring up at him, the traitorous hairs on neck indeed standing to attention at his words, at the feel of his breath against my face. My breath comes quicker now, raising my chest, brushing it against Kent’s. He observes me, laughing a little to see that me open my breath to get more air, that I fidget beneath the force of him.

His laugh turns in me like a knife.

“Yes,” I snap, lifting my chin in defiance. “I do think you’re jealous – I think you wish you were the one to –“

He snaps into action, then, quick as a fox, forcing a gasp from me as one arm wraps around my waist and another slides behind my neck, his hand holding my head in place as he pulls me flush against him, against every hard muscle of his body.

“Wish I were the one to do what, Fay,” he demands, cruel. “This?”

I cry out, but the noise is silenced by his mouth on mine.

Chapter 59 - Midnights

Chapter 59 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I pound my hands against Kent at first, desperate to get away, but he holds me steadily against him with that arm wrapped around my waist, with that steady hand wrapped in the hair at the base of my neck. I am locked in place as he moves his mouth against mine, his movements slow, controlled, taking his time as he explores the contours of my lips. Savoring the experience.

A breathless moment passes and then, damn it, but my body betrays me.

I stop beating at him with my fists, distracted, suddenly, but the incredible softness of his lips, the expert way they slide over mine, at the feel of his tongue moving exploratively over my bottom lip. I feel my own mouth fall open at this, obeying his demand for entry, allowing him to slide that tongue into my mouth and press it urgently against my own.

He tightens his arms at this and I hear a moan escape me as he pulls me away from the door, bending me backwards at the waist. His mouth is sealed against mine, kissing me with an demand that makes me want to submit, makes me want to follow his every command. Suddenly, my hands are in his hair, my eyes sealed tightly shut as he slides the hand around my waist, and then lower, down to grab the curve of my ass, to press me closer against the swelling mass of him that I can feel pressed against my abdomen.

Still holding me tight against him with that hand on my rear, Kent takes his mouth off of mine suddenly, laughing.

I blink, panting, looking up at him, returning to myself in a flash and feeling the sudden rush of embarrassment and panic and rage. I freeze for a moment and then I shout as I pull my hands from his hair and begin to shove against him with all my might. But he doesn't let me go – not an inch.

Instead, he continues laughing that low laugh, holding me tight against him.

“You see, Fay?” he murmurs, watching me, taking pleasure in my futile struggle. “Why would I be jealous when I can do this any time I want?”

I continue to shove against him, my shout turning into a little roar of fury, and he holds onto me for a second or two more – just to prove he can. Then, he releases me all at once and I skitter to the side like an angry cat, glaring at him and whipping at my mouth as I move away from the door, away from him.

“You’re a monster,” I snarl, pursing my lips together in an angry, embarrassed line.

“I never said I wasn’t,” Kent says seriously, putting his hands coolly in his pockets. “But don’t forget it, Fay. Monster or not?” He pauses, and leans towards me. “I own you. You are mine.”

I storm towards the door then, intent on leaving, not wanting to give him another word. But he just laughs and, damn him, leans forward to pull the door open before I can lay a hand on the knob. As if it’s his choice to release me.

“Good night, Fay,” he calls as I stomp up the stairs towards my room. “See you at breakfast.”

I don’t look back. Instead, I storm through my bedroom door and slam it shut behind me, hurling myself onto my bed. There, I hide my head in my pillow and burst into furious tears.

I stay alone in my room for hours after I finish crying. Vacillating between feeling absolutely horrible and then feeling absolutely nothing at all, I stare at my ceiling for hours.

I had thought I was in charge with Kent. That I could rile him, and use his...his attraction to me for my benefit. But today, everything had proved to me that I was again out of my depth. I had thought Ivan liked me, but he was just doing it for show. I thought I had been in control of things with Kent but –

God damn it, tonight he played me like a puppet. First raising me to anger, and then kissing me, making me kiss him back, lose control like some lovesick girl while he humiliated me.

God, I really am his puppet. Ivan’s puppet. Even Daniel’s sometimes. It is so mortifying, realizing how easily I play into all of their games.

I stare at the ceiling, watching the light of day fade into the shadows of night, trying to come up with a plan, with some way to get what I want out of this stupid game.

But at the end of it all?

The fact is that I don’t even know what I want. Or how to play. Everyone is playing chess and I’m not even playing checkers. I feel so...stupid. And alone. I pull my pillow over my head, groaning, missing my sister, my dad, my old life.

God, what I wouldn’t give to go back to it all.

The thing that finally breaks me out of my stupor is my stomach, which gives a mighty growl at some point in the evening when I’ve been laying in the dark for what must be a few hours. I sit up, looking down at my complaining stomach, and feel a headache pulse at the back of my head.

I groan, and put a hand there, wondering if it was Kent pressing me up against the door or Ivan feeding me tequila all day that’s responsible for this. Either way, I want water, and sustenance. Now.

When I peek out of my bedroom door, the house is quiet, which pleases me. I want to see no one – absolutely no one – this evening. Waiting a moment to check that the house is quiet, I then sneak out into the hall, pulling my door softly shut behind me. I glance at a clock down the hall, surprised to see that it’s much later than I thought – around one in the morning.

I am pleased when I encounter no one in the kitchen. I quickly pour myself a glass of milk and grab an entire box of cookies from the cabinet. Not healthy, I know, but tonight I need food for the soul as much as the body, and chocolate and sugar sound about right.

I begin to relax as I head back up the stairs, confident I won't meet anyone, but just as my foot hits the landing I hear something and freeze.

It was just a soft noise, a groan, or a moan...

I stand at the top of the steps like a startled hare, not moving a muscle except my eyes, which dart around looking for the source of the noise.

Nothing in the hallway moves but...yes. There it is again!

Curious, I listen closely and find my eyes moving to Daniel's door. I continue to listen for a few moments more and then – yes. I'm certain. It's coming from inside.

I let my curiosity get the better of me, perhaps feeling a little reckless as a result of my great embarrassment earlier in the day. Either way, I tiptoe closer to Daniel's door, careful not to make a sound. Passingly, I wonder if he's okay and hope that nothing is wrong...

But deep down, I know what it is that I'll see when I lean down and peek through the little keyhole of his door.

And as I do just that, my suspicions are confirmed. It's convenient, frankly, that Kent never replaced the old-timey locks on the bedroom doors in this old house, because Daniel's gives me a perfect view inside to where he and another person – I can't see who – tangle on his bed.

I cock my head to the side as I look, curious. I know that it's wrong – that I should give Daniel his privacy, but...I realize, suddenly, that I've never seen anyone have sex before. I blush to realize it. I mean, of course I have seen it on TV and the internet. But not like this, never before so...real...

I'm mesmerized, frankly, by the sight of the bodies pressed together so fervently, tangled so that I can't tell the limbs apart in the dark blue light of the room. I continue watching as they pull apart for a moment sit up, changing positions. I recognize the profile of Daniel's sweet face, looking down at his lover.

I'm embarrassed, a little, by the tenderness that I see there, and know I should move away. In fact, I start to do so when the lover himself turns his torso towards the door. And I gasp aloud because...

Because I know that face, I know the shape of that body.

Jerome.

I stand up straight, aghast, my eyes wide and my jaw dropping open.

"Did you hear something?" I can barely hear Daniel's voice from inside the room, but I know that I've been caught. I scurry backwards, my eyes fixed on the door, when –

Oh my god.

I go stock still as I feel my back collide with something else. Someone else.

“Good evening, Fay,” I hear that familiar dark voice purr. “Why are you spying on my son?”

Chapter 60 – Spies

Chapter 60 - Fall For My Ex's Mafia Dad

I almost spill my milk everywhere as I spin to look up at Kent.

“Shut up!” I whisper angrily, glancing back at the door. “They’ll hear you –“

“They?” Kent asks, raising an eyebrow and looking at Daniel’s door.

“Come on!” I hiss, throwing my shoulder against his side, trying to herd him towards my room, to get him away from Daniel’s door before it opens and Daniel sees us both standing here.

Kent laughs a little at my wasted effort to get him to move – we both know I couldn’t budge him an inch if he didn’t want to go – but after a moment he allows himself to be shepherded out of the hall and through my open door, which I press my back against to close. I flinch as my lock clicks shut, desperately hoping that Daniel and Jerome didn’t hear us.

“Well, Fay,” Kent’s voice says, and I look up to see him standing in the darkness of my room, hands in his pockets, smirking at me. “I didn’t think you’d be so eager to get me alone in here –“

“Would you shut up,” I murmur, turning my head back to the door to listen, my milk and box of cookies still clutched in my hands. “I don’t want Daniel to know I was listening.”

“Listening, is it?” Kent says, not bothering to lower his voice. “Looked like you were peeking –“

I give him a dirty glare, promising murder and torture and every horrible thing he can imagine if he doesn’t shut his mouth right now. I can see the laughter cross his face but he puts his hands up, complying with my demand for silence.

I hear Daniel’s movements, then. Hear him open his door, take a few steps outside. Silence, for a moment, and then murmured voices. Then, someone passes by my door, and someone goes back into Daniel’s room, shutting the door behind him.

When the hall goes quiet again, I release my breath.

“Okay,” I murmur. “I think...I think we’re safe.”

“You know, Fay,” Kent says evenly. “I don’t like it when there are people in my home whom I’m unaware of. If Daniel is having midnight visitors...” He pauses here, looking at me curiously, allowing me to finish the sentence for myself.

I hold his gaze and slowly shake my head. “You’re getting nothing from me, Kent,” I say slowly. “So don’t even ask.”

He purses his lips then, cocking his head to the side, clearly curious. “And you’re not mad about it?” he asks. “That Daniel is entertaining...someone? In his room? At night? While you...” he looks at the contents of my hands for a moment, “...eat cookies alone?”

“Well, I’m not alone, am I,” I toss back at him, speaking before I think about the implications of my words because I’m angry at him for his stupid pressing questions. “After all, you’re here, aren’t you?”

I push myself up from my spot against the door and walk to my bedside table, placing my snack down there and turning back towards Kent, my arms crossed.

“Am I your midnight visitor, Fay?” Kent asks, his voice taking on a sensual note I’m not sure I’ve heard before. “Is that what you want?”

Suddenly, I’m just...exhausted by it all.

I put my hand to my forehead, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath. Honestly, it’s past midnight, and I’m hiding in my room from my fiancé with his dad who I made out with earlier tonight – and he’s asking if I want him to be my midnight visitor – whatever that is - and Jerome is gay, when I thought he liked me -

It’s all just...too much.

“Sure, Kent,” I sigh. Then I look up at him blandly. “Visit all you want. Do you want a cookie?” I grab the box off the table and shove it towards him. “We can have a real sleepover, just like I did in Girl Scouts.”

Kent grabs the cookies from my hand and tosses them on the bed, taking a step closer to me. “Trust me, Fay,” he murmurs, his eyes on my mouth again. “This will be nothing like Girl Scouts.”

I groan then, tossing my head back, letting him see that none of this is sexy. It’s all just so draining.

“Whatever, Kent,” I murmur, looking up at the ceiling. “Can you just go away? I’m tired. I want to go to bed.”

He surprises me by backing off. I watch him as he moves away from me, heading towards the door.

“Seriously?” I ask, watching him as he twists the handle. “That’s it? No fight? No repartee? It’s that simple?”

Slowly, Kent turns to me. “You’re tired, Fay,” he says. “Go to bed. You need your rest.” He takes a moment to consider me, though. To run his eyes over my tired face, my rumpled hair, my lips still swollen from the force of his own pressed against them not so long ago.

“But simple? No, Fay. If you think this is over...” He just slowly shakes his head.

With that, he pulls my door open and steps out into the hall, closing it behind him.

I stand still for a moment, staring at the door. Then I slump down onto my bed, pulling the box of cookies into my lap.

Without a word, I eat the whole thing.

The next morning I push through the door to the kitchen rubbing my eyes, still bleary from lack of sleep. Unfortunately, no matter how late you go to bed, the Lippert house is buzzing with activity as soon as 6 am. A knock came to the door at 6:30 – a housekeeper delivering my fresh clothes for the day. There was no getting back to sleep after that. So here I am, at 7 in the morning, needing coffee. Badly.

I make a beeline for the espresso machine and am surprised to meet Daniel there.

“Hey Fay,” he says, handing me the cup of espresso he just made. I accept it gratefully. “How did you sleep?”

I shoot the shot of coffee down in one and hand the porcelain cup back to Daniel.

“Not great,” I say back to him, and then I lower my voice. “Daniel,” I say. “We have to talk.”

He frowns at me, curious and a little concerned. “Is everything all right?”

“For me?” I ask, pointing at my chest. “Sure. Weirdly fine at the moment. But for you?” I raise my eyebrows, switching the direction of my finger so that it points at him. “You are oddly in hot water today.”

“What?!” Daniel exclaims, looking around at the others in the kitchen, checking to make sure we aren’t overhead. Then, he puts a hand on my elbow, drawing me closer to him. “What’s going on?”

“Last night,” I say, leaning closer to him. “Whatever was going on in your room...your dad...” I bite my lip. Damn, I didn’t really plan how I wanted to say this.

Daniel's face goes pale though. He slowly looks around the room and then back at me with a level gaze, looking so much like his dad in this moment that chills run up my spine. "What?" he asks, glaring at me a little. "What does he know?"

I freeze, then, realizing something very suddenly that I hadn't thought of before.

That what I'm about to say to Daniel...it's leverage. That this is precisely the sort of information that these families trade on, that they hold over each other's heads, that they use to keep each other in check.

And if I wanted to, I could use it against Daniel to get something that I want. That I could enter this game of chess that they're all playing around me. Stop being a pawn, and become a real player.

But the real question is, do I enter the game at Daniel's expense?