



ARRANGED CURRENCY

NYLA LILY

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Prologue - Ramona



The first time I ever set my eyes on Elias Mariani, I was attending my father's funeral ten years ago.

Families from all over the state had come in to pay their respect and get a better look at the person taking his spot as the head of the Franzolli family.

Antonio and I were forced to greet people and listen to their condolences. While my brother kept up a strong face, I cried my eyes out for the first few hours. Funerals were always the hardest.

My brother promised everything would be alright. He'd protect us no matter what. To him, family meant everything. He wouldn't let any of the surrounding families take advantage of our loss.

I believed every word. As protective as he was toward me growing up, I had no doubt that Antonio would keep me safe.

When three more men approached us, I was ready to scream. I didn't think I could hear another person tell Antonio how great our father was or how much he'd be missed.

"Enzo Mariani," the man in the middle introduced, giving a small bow. He was older, painted in age lines, and gifted with a broad frame. The cane he walked with had a crow's head as a handle. Fancy.

I'd seen him before in our home. He was the man who ran the south side of the city if I remembered right. With a listening ear, I could only know so much.

“If you were my son, I wouldn't be more proud as a father,” he started up, saying words I'd already heard be spoken three times in the last two hours. “I'm sure you'll take his chair without any complications.”

Sniffing, I wiped my eyes. How much longer would I need to sit in the stuffy room?

Enzo continued to praise my brother, speaking the words he assumed Antonio wanted to hear before introducing the men behind him.

One of them, Rilo, had his attention lingering in the direction of the casket. The other, Elias, was staring straight at me.

I hadn't even noticed him at first, not while I was too busy rubbing my eyes raw and rubbing the snot from my nose. Surely, there had to be something more interesting than watching a woman cry.

Unlike most of the men lingering about, the man watching my suffering stood out like a sore thumb. Pale skin, blond hair, and blue eyes.

Elias reminded me of a diamond, sparkling in a room of disgusting, disgruntled men. So handsome, a walking distraction I could really use at the moment. At the same time,

he was being a bit creepy by not blinking. Why was he staring at only me?

Antonio was the star of this show.

He looked like an absolute outsider. Someone who didn't belong. Yet, he looked to be the most comfortable person in the building.

What in the hell was wrong with him?

How could I continue to feel miserable with such a beautiful spectator? Even after I looked away, I could feel the cold chill of his eyes.

When I moved to stand, Antonio immediately grabbed my hand. Probably didn't want me to leave him to suffer all alone.

"Where are you going?" he asked, interrupting one of Enzo's stories about the past.

"Fresh air," I muttered, already needing more than a lungful.

"I don't want you going alone," Antonio pressed. Protective as always.

Enzo let out a laugh, making me jump. I didn't expect to hear one of those today. "Please, allow Rilo to walk with her. He'll keep her—"

"I'll go with her," the blue-eyed stranger interrupted.

I stiffened. Which was more startling, his voice or his volunteering to be alone with me?

With Antonio wanting to keep me at his side, having the idea that I couldn't be left alone, my feelings became too overwhelming and I snatched my wrist from Antonio's grip. "I'll be fine, thank you very much. I don't need to be supervised."

Twisting away, I stormed away before my brother could think about ordering me around. After today, I'd have to follow everything he said. Today, I just wanted to appreciate a few minutes outside before I made a scene that would bring shame to my family.

I made it outside without looking back. Hearing the doors shut and open after I left, I groaned.

"You can't leave me alone for five minutes, Anto—"

My brother's name fell from my lips once I realized he wasn't the one who followed after me.

Elias Mariani. The man who hadn't even spoken a word to me, yet still interrupted his boss and moved on his own. Even I knew how wrong that was. Was this guy crazy or something?

Twisting back around, I stared at my surroundings. A packed parking lot with more cars coming and going. My father must've really been respected.

Hearing footsteps approaching, I didn't move when Elias stood next to me. If he was staring, I couldn't tell. I didn't want to look. Trickling seconds of silence moved between us that only grew more uncomfortable.

“Why in the hell do you keep staring at me?” I asked, swirling around. “If you have something to say, then just say it!” I snapped.

“I’m struggling to believe you are real,” he admitted slowly, like he didn’t understand how to hold a conversation.

He couldn’t be serious. A guy who looked to be my brother’s age could not actually be trying to feed me such awful lines.

“Marry me,” he stated next, oblivious to my shocked expression.

Sputtering, I looked to make sure I was still standing outside of a funeral home.

“You are a lunatic.” The words left my lips automatically. “Like, absolutely nuts. No, I won’t marry you.”

He frowned but didn’t move. “I don’t understand.”

The guy seriously wanted me to spell it out to him.

“Well, let’s start with the obvious. My father died three days ago, I’m not in the mood to suddenly go ring shopping. Next, I’ve literally just met you. I didn’t even know of your existence until about five minutes ago.” Listing off each reason why on my fingers, I noticed him nodding.

Why was I even trying? The guy clearly wasn’t all the way there.

“Plus, last time I checked, I don’t think Enzo and my father had a super great relationship. Your boss wouldn’t want

you to marry someone like me. I don't bring you or your family anything to the table."

Elias' frown grew at the mention of Enzo's name. "So if I let you mourn your father's death, get to know you better, and take Enzo out of the equation, you'll agree to be my wife?"

I threw my hands in the air, letting out a cry of annoyance. I really shouldn't have come outside.

"You know what? Sure. Why not? You better become best friends with my brother while you're at it, because he'll also be in your way."

Elias' frown disappeared and a smile took over. He looked so pleased with himself as if he really thought he got his way. His smile then faltered.

"I don't even know your name."

I blew out a laugh, letting out a little bit of the stress I had gathered up the last few hours.

"Guess you have some work to put in, Elias. Good luck."

As if I'd actually marry a madman. Not in his wildest dreams.

Elias



I was ready to attack the world and watch it burn.

“You are going to reopen your stitches if you keep moving, boss.”

Scowling at the man stitching up my shoulder, I clenched my fists together.

Can't kill the doctor. Not unless I wanted to risk bleeding out again. I shouldn't be pointing my anger out on the random grunt anyway.

No, I planned on pointing my anger straight at Antonio Franzolli. I was going to destroy him, his dogs, and their stupid girlfriends. Fuck their happiness. I planned on raining down on them with pure ammunition.

I didn't have the patience to wait. I planned on gathering all my men, even those scattered throughout the city. Reckless or not, I planned on killing them all.

“Damn it!” I hissed, knocking my fist against the platter of bloody cotton swabs. Making the doctor jump, my scowl deepened.

I needed to squeeze something.

This was all Antonio's fault. I wanted to squeeze his throat. I *really* wanted to kill him.

There was a pounding at the door, the last sound I wanted to hear. Filled with urgency, my annoyance only grew.

“Unless you have that dog with you, that door better not open unless you want a bullet between your eyes!” Grabbing my gun, I pointed it at the door with the pure intention of shooting.

“S-Sir,” the man at my side urged.

“They’ve all failed me today, they need to learn what happens,” I grunted. Maybe causing a little pain could make me feel better. I needed a distraction.

The door didn’t open, not for a few seconds. I almost grew disappointed. Then it cracked open and a hand appeared.

“Please, don’t shoot.” A woman’s voice. One I hadn’t heard in a very long time. One I couldn’t possibly mistake.

I dropped my gun before launching myself from the seat. Rushing to the door, I yanked it open with a held breath.

“It’s you...” I murmured in disbelief.

Ramona Franzolli was standing in my home, pale and a little startled. Once I got a look at her, my eyes couldn’t budge.

Her appearance hasn’t changed in the slightest. Still the same dark-haired beauty that stole my breath away the first time I looked her way. This time around, those brown eyes of hers weren’t stained pink with sorrowful emotions.

“It’s me,” she feigned excitement, already taking a step back. “It’s been a while, Elias.”

Nine years, eleven months, and two days, but who in the hell was counting?

“Please, come in,” I took a step back to give her the space. My legs weren’t working correctly. Looking back at the doctor, I glared. “You, out. Now.”

He rushed out without hesitation. Good. I didn’t need anyone getting in my way.

Turning back to Ramona, a smile came to my lips when she stepped inside. “This is unexpected. Please, don’t mind the mess. I was shot. Welcome to my home, darling. If I’d known you were coming, I would have welcomed you at the front door.”

Her smile was pressed, forced. I wanted her to relax, she looked uncomfortable.

She looked down at the trail of blood staining the carpet, grimacing.

I’d replace the carpet tomorrow. No, tonight. I just needed to find someone to come out here on short notice. Surely, I had a favor or two I could cash in.

“Yeah, sorry. It was a last-minute decision kind of thing,” she admitted before lifting her gaze, “I’ve come to talk to you.”

“How did you even find me? Last time I checked, you’ve never been allowed to grace my home.”

Ramona lifted her gaze and hugged her frame. “It’s not hard to find your men, Elias. They stick out pretty easily. I just

asked the first one I ran into to take me to you.”

“So, then I take it, you’ve come to accept my proposal?” I asked, circling her. I lost count of how many times I thought about making the woman my wife. Today was going to be my lucky day.

“I’ve come to talk business.” Keeping her chin held high, she kept her eyes on mine. Not many had that ability, not without scurrying away soon after.

“Please, talk away,” I hummed as I returned to my seat. Rolling my shoulder, I tried to relax. “I am all ears.”

“You need to forgive and forget,” she started, “and apologize to the two you hurt.”

I stared at her, my smile falling. “You can’t be serious. That dog—”

“Elias, please,” Ramona pleaded, “his name is Bruno. He was hurt too.”

Fuck. I didn’t want to be the reason for her frown.

“I’ll apologize,” I agreed, “but forgiving?”

That would be one hell of a stretch. The rage I felt only grew. I lost money, my house was shot up and my shoulder ached every time I moved it.

“If you can stop the fighting and be willing to clear the air, then I’ll be happy to be your bride.”

I let out a long sigh, my smile only growing. “This is why I love you, Ramona. You’re the type to sacrifice everything for

the people you care about.”

She was frowning, not taking my compliment as I’d hoped.

“Fine, fine. If Antonio is going to be my in-law, then I should work hard to be the best brother possible. Now, with that out of the way, I’ll call someone to officiate our union.”

Before I could stand, she shot her hands out.

“W-Wait, I want to have a wedding!” she blurted. “I’ve always wanted to have a big one, and if I have to only get married once, I don’t want to miss out.”

I settled back in my chair, already growing impatient. “Weddings take time to prepare, darling. I want you as my bride now.”

She was frowning, her eyes cast downward. Only five minutes in my home and she knew how to play me like a damn fiddle.

“Fine, a few days then. Enough time to get you a dress and a ring,” I agreed. Getting back up, I approached her.

“A week,” she pushed, biting her lip. Looking up at me, her hands came together. While she might be able to meet my gaze, she still fidgeted nervously.

“Too long. Denied.”

Her lips parted and those cheeks of hers grew flushed. “I want you to be in prime condition for after the wedding.”

I stared at her, looking to see what she was up to. Clearly, she wanted more time for something. If she simply wanted to

be fucked, I didn't need to wait for a wedding.

I grabbed her chin and a gasp left her lips. Frowning, I stared into her chocolate-brown eyes to search for any form of deception.

“You don't have any idea what I could do to you, Ramona. After waiting so long, if you think I'll give you the chance to run—”

“I don't want to go back home,” she interrupted, “I want to stay here with you.”

My heart skipped. I wanted to hear those words for so long. I was struggling to determine if the woman of my dreams was simply trying to trick me or not.

Those who tried to trick me ended up dead. Ramona was a woman I couldn't possibly hurt.

I was conflicted. Between a rock and a hard place, I wasn't sure how to respond.

Ramona hadn't pulled away or flinched at me touching her. That was a plus.

“Why?” I finally asked, craving the truth.

She smiled, lifting her hand to brush my knuckles. “Wouldn't you like to know, Mariani?”

Oh god, I did. Realizing she wouldn't give me the answers I sought easily, I let out a long sigh.

“Fine, I'll give you a week,” I agreed, “but I still plan on treating you like my wife starting today.” That wasn't up for

discussion.

“Sounds great. One more thing, how fast can I get something out to my brother?”

My nose scrunched at the mention of Antonio. I released her, thinking about what she’d want to slip over to him.

“I want to give them an invitation, let them see I’m not dead, you know?” she explained.

Oh. She wanted to give me a way to rub it in her brother’s face that I always got what I wanted. The idea left me grinning.

“I’ll have it sent out immediately once you have something drawn up.”

She was smiling as well.

“Perfect.”

Ramona



Antonio was going to murder me. Maybe I shouldn't have run away without giving a warning.

At the same time, it was so nice to finally be able to breathe without having him hovering at my side.

I was almost thirty without any kids or a boyfriend. If I stayed with Antonio, I wouldn't meet the love of my life until I hit a retirement home. By then, most of my life would be over.

Elias Mariani was my ticket to freedom. Why would I waste time getting a boyfriend when I could get a husband? Especially one who hadn't stopped staring at me since I took my first bite of food. Tasted a bit salty.

Seeing how Elias reacted when one of his men offered to be the one to take my invitation to Antonio, I didn't want to think what would happen to the cooks if I complained.

Elias was all over the place with his emotions. While he stared at me like I was something special, he glared at his men. There was a warmth factor lacking in the home and it felt a bit unsettling. I wasn't around long enough to find out why Elias treated his men the way he did.

"Antonio is definitely going to try to come here," I explained to Elias as I picked at my food, "can you make sure nothing happens to him?"

He scoffed, frowning at my request. “If he tries to take you away, I can’t make any promises.”

“Something tells me you wouldn’t even let him take me out of a room,” I joked.

His lip twitched into a smile. “I wouldn’t allow him to touch you at all, darling.”

My stomach tightened as I felt a round of tingles. I should not get excited by the promise in his voice.

“I plan on making my intentions of staying very clear, so don’t worry. He won’t be able to convince me to stay. I just want to make sure you don’t try to shoot him again. If he gets hurt, then I don’t think I’ll be able to stick around.”

Elias sat back in his chair, clicking his tongue in distaste. “It was hardly a graze of a bullet,” he defended. “An act of self-defense. If Antonio had given me his blessing instead of punching my face, then he wouldn’t have gotten injured.”

“You’ve asked him to marry me before?” I asked, curious. Clearly, my brother hadn’t been very open with me when it came to Elias.

“Every chance I could possibly get,” he admitted proudly.

“Why?”

He met my curious gaze with a confused one. “I don’t understand.”

“After all these years, you’ve stayed determined to make me your wife, I just want to know why. Surely, you’ve had to

have women come in and out of your life, right?”

Elias was grimacing at my question. “Why should I settle for some boring woman when I had you as an option?”

I scoffed, laughing at his words. My smile drifted off when he reached over to squeeze my hand. He felt warm, much unlike his colder personality.

“You told me you’d be my bride once I met the conditions. After going to the lengths I had, I couldn’t possibly lose sight of my prize. Now you’re in my home, promised to be mine in a week. I’ve been rewarded for my patience.”

“I’m yours now,” I promised him softly.

As much as I loved the aspect of freedom, I was growing worried.

“Why are you upset?” he asked, his hold on my hand growing firmer, grounding me to avoid allowing me to slip deeper into my concerns.

“Elias, you are putting me on quite the pedestal.” I forced out a laugh. “What happens when you realize I’m not as awesome of a wife as you were hoping for all this time?”

His chair scraped as he shot back. Standing abruptly, he flattened a hand against the table. In an instant, our plates were pushed to the floor with a loud clatter. He looked at the men who were guarding the walls.

“Leave,” he ordered, “now.”

I looked down at the broken plates, sighing softly. I needed to work on getting used to Elias' behavior.

Hearing the thudded footsteps, I glanced up to see everyone was leaving the room. In an instant, Elias and I were left entirely alone.

Suddenly, I felt more aware of my situation.

I didn't know Elias well, not much outside of the rumors I'd heard over hushed conversations between my brother and his men. Back when we first met, Elias couldn't even hold a conversation. The man staring me down had changed so much.

He erased the space between us, reaching out to grab my arm. Pulling me up, I gasped when he lifted me with ease, sitting me down where my plate had just rested.

I choked back his name, sputtering when his hands flattened against my thighs. Splitting them apart, he gave himself the room to stand between my legs. Then he lifted his hand to unbutton his shirt.

Oh, god, what was he doing? If he wanted sex, well, then he needed to know I was a bit rusty. My last boyfriend was almost two years ago, and our relationship had been lacking and disappointing in all aspects.

"Ramona," he stated firmly, his voice growing serious. He grabbed my hand, bringing it to his chest. Flattening my palm against his skin, he kept my hand there. "Do you feel that?"

I felt how hard his chest was against my fingertips, how hot his skin felt against mine. Was that what he wanted to

show off?

Silence trickled between us and I lowered my gaze down to my hand.

There was a thumping against my fingers, a heartbeat. “Your heart is pounding,” I murmured.

“It has been ever since you first arrived,” he admitted. “Ramona, you’re all I’ve ever wanted. I will never want to let you go. You can grow to hate me, but my heart will never stop racing for you.”

He released my wrist, allowing me to touch him as I pleased. I didn’t pull away automatically, choosing to let my fingers graze the buttons of his shirt.

Elias Mariani was too good to be true. Only a crazy person could go to the lengths he had. For some reason, I hadn’t fallen for him the moment I saw him. Maybe, just maybe, I could fall in love with him now.

He leaned forward, flattening his hands on the table at my sides. “Tell me I don’t have to wait until the wedding to kiss you, darling.”

My breath got caught in my throat at his words. “Would you really be willing to wait?”

Despite the frown on his lips, he nodded. “While I could easily take what I wanted, I find it more sexier if you are craving the same thing. If you don’t want me to do something, all you need to do is say so. Otherwise, I plan on finally getting a taste of you.”

He leaned forward and his breath tickled my neck, causing the small hairs on the back to stand up.

If I was going to be his wife, it wasn't like I could go the rest of my life without kissing him at least once. At least I'd know now if he was a bad kisser or not before I said my vows.

"Sure, let's do it," I agreed softly.

His lips brushed my neck, hardly making any contact at all. Yet, goosebumps easily scattered across my skin. My heartbeat was already growing by the second. The sound of his low chuckle rumbling through the stilled air made my stomach do a small flip.

Maybe I felt more eager for the kiss than I realized. Elias was taking his sweet time, relishing in the moment. Well, I didn't have the patience for all that.

Grabbing his face, his stubble poked my fingertips. I got a closer look at him, noting how blue his eyes were. Not even the decades of wear and tear from the mafia had dimmed the shade in the slightest. What a lovely color.

Leaning forward, I pressed my lips to his. Just a light brush, hardly an experience to remember. Nearly disappointed that he wasn't giving me much of a response, I felt the rumble of his chest as a chuckle brushed against my lips.

Even now, Elias was amused and clearly not satisfied either.

Elias



When I mentioned kissing her, she misunderstood.

I didn't want something brisk. No, I wanted to devour her completely. I had to taste the sweetness of her tongue, needed to discover what sounds she could make if I pressed the right buttons.

My sweet, Ramona. My darling, my wife.

When I moved my hands, a gasp left her lips after I slid her to the edge of the table.

Nearly falling off, her arm hooked around my neck, using me as support. Before she could speak, I connected our lips.

I was not known as a man with self-control. When I wanted something, I simply took it. I didn't just want Ramona, I *needed* her.

I wanted to memorize the taste of my wife, and now she was welcoming my tongue to join hers. Her mouth was perfect, sweet and willing. She opened up with such ease, her body responding naturally. She even let out a moan while I relished in her sweetness.

We were meant to be, our relationship had been written in stone. It was expected for her to accept my love with ease.

Ramona got a fist full of my unbuttoned shirt, pulling my body even closer.

Mere seconds felt like a lifetime. I got a front-row seat of watching the beauty melt on the table. Between her mean grip and the soft sighs leaving her mouth, I imagined a kiss wouldn't be enough to satisfy her.

If she made the demand, I'd be happy to drop to my knees and feast on her like my last meal. What a wonderful idea. If only.

When she was the one to break the kiss, the hum of satisfaction that left her lips went straight down to my cock. Each sound she made fed into my hunger.

“Good to know you aren't a bad kisser,” she murmured. Her tongue ran across her lips, testing my patience.

“You sound surprised.” Realizing I was grinning, I fought the urge to resume where we left off.

“Pleasantly surprised,” she corrected, a smile of her own forming.

“Well, I'm happy to report kissing isn't all I'm good at.” Flattening a hand against her leg, my thumb brushed her inner thigh. “Want me to give you an example?”

Ramona let out a shaky breath before releasing my shirt. “You are not a modest man when it comes to clarifying what you want, Elias.”

“I want you,” I stated firmly, “I have no problem repeating myself. I'll say it until you believe me.”

Her smile grew slightly as she continued looking at me. I loved every second she stared in my direction.

“I don’t think we’re in the right setting for all this,” she admitted as she looked down toward the dishes I destroyed not long ago.

“I haven’t shown you to our bedroom, have I?” I murmured to myself. With all the excitement going on at the time, I wouldn’t have stopped myself from being a little over the top. I would’ve taken her the moment I introduced her to my bed.

When I grabbed her off the table, she latched on with a gasp. Realizing where she was gripping, her hand flew away from my shoulder.

“Elias, I can walk,” she argued, “you’re injured.”

“Nonesense, I could be on my deathbed and I’d still use this as an excuse to touch you, darling.” Grinning, I walked over to a set of closed doors.

Giving one a swift kick, a frown momentarily overcame my smile.

“Open the fucking door!” I barked, my hands clearly full.

In an instant, a grunt with a name I hadn’t bothered to remember followed my order and opened the door.

Ramona watched with curious eyes, her brows coming together in concern as I continued walking.

“Shouldn’t you thank him?” she asked softly.

“Why would I do that?” I asked, scoffing at the thought. “They’re here to follow orders.”

She frowned, displeased. I said something wrong.

“They’re your *family*, Elias. Family should be kind to each other.” The way she simplified the explanation made my frown grow.

“They aren’t my family.”

Now we were both frowning, perfect. Ramona didn’t understand how my home was run. While things might be all perfect at the Franzolli home, mine wasn’t the same.

Here, it was eat or be eaten. If I didn’t stay on the top and make my position clear, then someone else would try to take what belonged to me. I couldn’t lose my power, not when I finally got Ramona at my side.

Known as an outsider for my appearance alone, I’d never look at the people inside my home as *family*. Disgusting. I only needed one person and she was in my arms.

Reaching the door to my room, she wiggled enough to get released. Before I could complain, she opened the door and stepped inside.

“Well, it’s nice to see one room without any bullet holes,” she murmured as she looked around. “You know, I kind of expected you to have a giant portrait of me hanging in here.”

“If the option was available, then I would,” I admitted, “but you hardly ever left that home. Getting a picture unnoticed would be impossible.”

“Antonio never let me leave, you know. Said the world is one dangerous place.” She ran her hand along my desk, her

eyes cast low. “Every time I’ve left that house, it’s because I ran away. Be it by myself, or with a member of my family. You’d be surprised how many men were willing to cross Antonio just to please me.”

I rested my back against the door, crossing my arms across my chest. “Are you trying to make me jealous? If so, it’s working.”

Her lips twitched upward. “I’m simply explaining why you haven’t seen me around.”

“Well, my home is not a prison, Ramona. You can leave as you please as long as you always return. Though, if a man is stupid enough to put his hands on you, I don’t believe I can be rational.”

“I won’t need another man, Elias. You have nothing to worry about.” Her smile grew as she twisted around to take a look at my bed. “Giant bed for just one guy.”

I abandoned the door, stalking toward her.

“Perfect size for the two of us if I say so myself.”

She twisted around, catching me off guard. Her cheeks were stained pink, similar to how she’d looked after our kiss ended. Falling back, she plopped down on the bed.

“Not tonight.”

“No?” My body screamed at the rejection. I wondered what I had done to extinguish the heat in her gaze only minutes ago.

Her smile remained as she nodded. “We’re on limited time, Elias. If I’m supposed to write out some heartfelt vows, I think I need to learn more about my future husband. Plus, I’m not *that* easy.”

I liked that. I’d never get used to Ramona calling me her husband. What a lovely distraction.

I sat next to her, kicking off my shoes to get comfortable. I had a feeling we’d be here for a while.

“Where should I even start?”

“How did you get tied up with the Mariani family?” she asked. As I expected, she also must have believed me to be an outsider.

“My mother had married Enzo’s brother. I’m not sure if you remember Enzo. Growing up, you should already know you can’t ignore the dangerous life, even if no one speaks about it. Once I reached the right age, I was offered a position as a grunt. Slowly, I worked my way up.”

She sat up a bit straighter, her brows shooting up. “Wait, you killed your uncle to take his spot?”

I lifted a brow, “who in the hell said I killed Enzo?”

“Antonio—”

“—is an idiot,” I finished with an eye roll. “Enzo died due to natural causes. A heart attack. Not by my hand, thank you. I took his spot because I was his nephew, the closest to a son he had.”

Her smile softened as she continued watching me. “I’m sorry for assuming you were brought in some other way. I’ve just never seen a man like you before.”

“A man like me?” I sighed, already knowing what she was referring to.

“This might sound weird, but you are nice to look at, Elias. You stick out, but in a good way,” she tried to explain before her cheeks grew more flushed. “I like looking at you.”

She was going to make a simple conversation far more complicated if she continued speaking so freely. I’d need to cut my hands off to avoid going against her wishes.

“Next question,” I rasped, already dreading the long length of the night.

Ramona



Antonio did not take long to make his expected visit. Three days were all it took before he made his appearance.

Elias was smiling smugly while my brother looked like he'd foam at the mouth like a rabid dog.

"Please tell your men to put their guns away," I asked Elias, sighing at the ten pistols pointed in my brother's direction. Had lessons not been learned? No firing guns in the house!

Elias sighed in disappointment, swatting his hand to make them back off. Getting comfortable next to me, his smile didn't last long.

"I want to be alone with my brother," I told him, much to his dismay.

"How do I know he won't try to take you away?"

"Because I won't let him," I promised as I looked between the two of them. "I'd made it clear that I have no intention of leaving in that invitation I sent."

Antonio was looking at me now, his hands balled up in fists. Yeah, he was definitely going to give me an earful. Couldn't wait for that.

Elias grabbed my hand, bringing it to his lips. "I trust you."

“Fucking hell,” Antonio huffed out, glaring at his rival. “Hurry up and take your men with you. Once you aren’t breathing down her neck, she might be able to actually hear what I’m saying.”

Elias let go of my hand, automatically reaching for his gun with a deep scowl.

“Elias.” I sighed, already tired of the bickering. “Remember what we talked about? How I wanted to help clear the air?”

My future husband’s expression remained for seconds before he let out a long exaggerated sigh. Clapping his hands together, he looked at his men.

“Everyone out.” He looked at Antonio and a smile grew on his lips. “Enjoy your time with my wife, *brother*.”

One step forward and two steps back. Elias wanted to egg on my brother and it was clearly working. I could hear Antonio’s teeth grinding. Perfect.

Elias left with the other men in tan suits, looking pleased with himself. Before he slipped out entirely, he caught my gaze.

“I’ll be right outside of the door, darling. Just say the word and I’ll be there,” he called before closing the door behind him.

I didn’t get even five seconds of peaceful silence.

“What in the hell are you doing, Ramona?” Antonio asked, already taking a few steps in my direction. “*Elias Mariani*,

seriously? I don't know what you heard—”

“Enough people were already hurt, Antonio. I don't want anyone else to fight.”

“Ramona, he kidnapped Bruno's girlfriend and threatened to kill her if I didn't give you to him,” Antonio stated.

I frowned as my hands curled around the chair's arms. If I hadn't listened in on the conversation happening inside Antonio's office, I'd still be so ignorant and people I cared about would've gotten killed.

“You didn't let me in on the conversation with Bruno because you knew what Elias wanted. You took away my option to choose, Antonio. Now that I went out and decided for myself, you're here to scold me. Tell me I'm wrong.”

My brother looked surprised for a moment before his frown matched mine. “He doesn't actually love you, Ramona. He's doing all this to spite me.”

“And?” I shrugged my shoulders. “He plans on marrying me despite knowing full well that I don't love him either, not right now. That's the funny thing about love, brother. It kind of just manifests on its own. You should know that best.”

Kelsie, his own lover, had been brought to our home due to a stupid gambling debt. She didn't even like him, not at first. Over time, she learned to love my annoying, stubborn brother.

If my brother could get his happy ending, why couldn't I at least get a chance to find one of my own?

His frown slipped away as he ran his fingers through his hair. “I can’t protect you when you’re here,” he finally admitted, shaking his head. “If that crazy bastard hurts you, I can’t do anything about it.”

“Elias won’t hurt me,” I promised him. Elias was definitely crazy, crazy about *me*. If I bumped into a wall, he’d demolish it simply out of spite. The guy was absolutely insane, enough to give me a few flutters in my stomach. “If I wanted to go back home, he’d let me. I just really don’t want to.”

“That’s hard to believe,” Antonio muttered under his breath.

“Elias!” I called out. I did not want to have this argument come up again in the future.

The door opened immediately and Elias was frowning at my brother.

“Elias, I want you to please tell my brother that if I wanted to visit the Franzolli household, you wouldn’t get in my way.”

The blond looked hesitant, as I figured. “Could I go with you?”

“No,” I answered immediately.

Elias sighed before glaring at Antonio. “If she wants to go, then I won’t stop her. But if you try to keep her against her will, I will slaughter your girlfriend.”

I groaned, already feeling a headache manifesting.

“We’re going to be one big family in four days. No killing each other please,” I pleaded.

Maybe I wasn’t up for the whole mafia lifestyle. All they did was hurt each other.

“He’s not family,” Antonio argued with balled fists. If his gun hadn’t been taken from him earlier, I knew he would’ve already fired at Elias for the mention of Kelsie.

“Okay, we’re taking ourselves back to square one. Listen, Antonio. I want you all to join us for the wedding. If you don’t feel comfortable enough with my decision, then you don’t have to come.” The words had grown thicker as they poured out. “I just want everyone to be able to breathe the same air without fighting.”

“Ramona...” Antonio’s shoulders sank before he looked back to Elias. “If you are trying to spite me by going after my sister, then I swear I will be up your ass until you keel over and die, Mariani.”

Elias straightened up, scowling at the idea. “You are the last person to be responsible for wanting Ramona. Your sister promised to marry me nearly ten years ago, I simply planned on keeping that promise alive.”

I don’t think I actually promised him that. Pretty sure I just said what he wanted to hear to make him leave me alone, but whatever.

When Antonio looked at me seeking answers, I could only shrug. I didn’t know what to say.

“So, you’ll be attending the wedding, right? I want to see Kelsie. Oh, and I want to finally introduce myself to her sister. Bruno gave me a whole earful about Lily. I have to meet her.”

Antonio looked exhausted. He shook his head, muttering something about me being just as crazy as my future husband.

“Even if I don’t agree with your decision, I wouldn’t miss such an important event. We’ll be there.” A promise that I knew he’d keep.

“Thank you.” Smiling big, my jaw ached. At the moment, the air was still a bit cloudy. I hoped by the time the wedding came around, peace could be made.

Elias



“Any siblings I need to know about?”

“Unless my parents were keeping secrets, I don’t believe so.”

Ramona was currently hunched over a platter of different rings. Taking her ring shopping was supposed to be romantic, yet her questions continued to fly out one at a time.

While I knew we missed out on plenty of time getting to know each other in the past, Ramona was persistent in getting to know everything about me. She didn’t even bother talking about herself which is something I would’ve preferred.

She believed any stories she had in her pocket weren’t very exciting, I was happy to disagree.

“A single child? How lonely,” she murmured before plucking out one of the rings. Twisting it onto her finger she stuck her hand up in the air to get a better look. Pursing her lips together, she plucked it off and went back to looking.

She’d already tried on plenty of rings. They were all high quality, glittering with diamonds that were fitting of her beauty. The choice should have been an easy pick.

I stepped closer, trying to look at the rings through her eyes. What in the world was she thinking?

“Should I have them bring more out?” I asked, already looking for the man who gave us our selection.

Ramona bit at her lip, hesitant. “Listen, Elias—”

“Tell me you haven’t changed your mind.” Horrified at the idea, I took a step back. We had two days left. I hadn’t fucked anything up, not that I knew of.

Her hands immediately flew out in front of her as she shook her head. “No, it’s not that! These are just so fancy, and they’re not exactly me.”

I looked at the rings and then over at her hesitant expression. Fuck, I hope I didn’t give her the wrong impression. Maybe I shouldn’t have picked out the rings beforehand. Instead, I should have let her pick out her ring instead. So accustomed to having control of each situation that crossed my path, I accidentally did the same to Ramona.

“You don’t have to pick one of these, you can look around,” I explained to her in a rush.

“They’re nice, Elias, really. I’m sure we can find something here in no time.” Once a smile drifted back to her lips, I felt a little better.

Nodding at her words, I took a few steps back to let her roam around the small jewelry store. Keeping my hands in my pockets, I held back the urge to give her my opinion. If she asked, only then would I say something.

Ramona took her time, speaking to the workers to try on different rings. The mix of expressions on her face told a story. The last ring she put on brought a smile to her face. Twisting around, she looked excited.

“What do you think?” she asked after rushing over. Holding out her hand, a band was wrapped around her ring finger. A very simple one at that with a few small diamonds embedded in the band.

It looked like a ring I would wear.

“You really like this?” I asked, trying not to reveal my disappointment. I assumed she’d want a fat diamond, not something so basic as this.

“I love it,” she corrected with a grin.

Lifting my gaze from the ring to her excited expression, her happiness grew a bit contagious. “Then it’s absolutely perfect. Let’s get it sized and get out of here. We still need to go dress shopping.”

“Aren’t we pushing it with these deadlines?” she asked as she returned the ring to the worker on the other side of the counter.

“Money makes up for the inconvenience, darling. Throw a few stacks here and there, and you’d be surprised how quickly people move to satisfy you,” I explained. While Ramona got her finger measured, I looked over all the rings.

I still needed to pick one out for myself. Moving away from her momentarily, I found another worker to help assist. Wanting something to pop out to show my marital status to whoever looked at my hand, I spotted darker-colored bands. Perfect.

“I like that,” Ramona murmured at my side after I picked out one in particular to try on.

Flicking my thumb against the band, I rotated it around my finger. “Doesn’t quite match yours.”

“Doesn’t need to,” she reminded, leaning closer for a better look. Brushing my side, her hair tickled my arms. “If you like it, you should get it.”

I did like it. I also loved the way she eyed the ring in my hand. How could I deny a reason to have her stare at me?

“Let me wrap everything up and then we’ll continue our shopping trip,” I urged as I plucked the ring off, “feel free to look around while you wait, but don’t trail away too far.”

Nodding, she left my side to look at the necklaces.

I rushed to get the paperwork filled out and the payment accepted. Two days would be more than enough time to have everything ready. I made sure to make it clear that I needed the rings to be perfect.

I couldn’t possibly marry the woman if I didn’t have rings. Now I needed to get the next essential part of a wedding; our apparel.

“Let’s go,” I urged, pressing a hand against the lower part of her back. Simply wanting an excuse to touch her, I guided her out of the jewelry store and led her to the back of one of our white cars.

“I’m so excited!” she cheered in the back seat. “I’m ready to try on so many dresses. You might have to tell me if I take

too long. I don't want to waste too much of your time."

"Darling, I will sit in the shop for hours if it means you find the perfect dress," I promised as we were on our way.

My bride would be perfect for her wedding day. I didn't care what I had to do to make it happen.

Ramona



The last wedding I'd gone to was not too long ago. Something small within our family. There was drinking and so much celebration.

I remembered how jealous I felt of the bride. Standing in front of so many people while looking absolutely radiant, I wished I could've been in her shoes. Now that I could be, I realized there was more pressure than I expected.

Despite asking for a big wedding as a little distraction to prolong reality, I didn't expect Elias to go out of his way to make my wishes true. The last few days were a blur.

The mansion was getting fixed up. Bullet holes were filled and bloodied carpets had been replaced. Despite planning on hosting the wedding outside, Elias made sure to give absolutely no reason for someone to judge his home.

Elias Mariani had image issues. Between wanting to look powerful and undefeatable to his men, he also tried so hard to please me.

I just wanted him to be able to show me his real side.

"Are you alright in there, darling?" Elias asked through the dressing room door, his voice muffled.

"Think you can grab one of the workers?" I asked, fighting with the zipper on the back. I didn't want to risk tearing the dress. "I need a little help—"

The door opened before I could take in my next breath.

“Elias!” I gasped, twisting around. “You aren’t supposed to see me! What if this is the dress I want to go with?”

The door shut behind him, he didn’t leave despite my words. One look over my shoulder was enough to realize Elias was staring at me.

My heart fluttered at his surprised expression. There was something about being looked at by such a powerful man that did something to me.

“What’s the issue?” he asked after a few seconds of passing, clearing his throat.

“The zipper,” I started to explain as I reached back, “it’s caught and I can’t get it to go up.”

I should’ve ordered him to grab one of the women running the dress shop. If they helped, then my face wouldn’t be feeling so hot at the moment.

Elias stepped toward me with a blank expression. Those were the worst. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking, I felt vulnerable.

“Hold still,” he murmured as his fingers brushed the bare of my back. My entire body tingled at the accidental touch.

With the exception of a few experimental kisses, Elias had kept his hands to himself for the most part. While the hunger in his eyes spoke volumes, he never tried to do anything without me asking first. Even now, he had the opportunity to

see the bareness of my back, and his attention was pointed at the pesky zipper.

“You really picked the wrong dress,” he joked lightly, “damn thing does not want to zip.”

Chewing on my lip, I hugged the front of the dress closer to my chest. Closing my eyes, I focused on each time his knuckles brushed against my skin.

I must’ve been touch-hungry because I wanted him to give up on the stupid dress and touch me everywhere else.

“I can just try something else,” I muttered softly, “there’s still a few others.”

Elias was a man of determination. He didn’t give up, not just yet.

When I opened my eyes and looked at him through the reflection of the mirror, my next breath was caught in my throat. He was staring at me. No wonder he couldn’t get the zipper up, he wasn’t even looking.

Bold eyes were staring at my reflection, filled with apparent heat. Just like when I spent time alone with him, the man looked like he wanted to devour me completely. By the time I realized how he took in my appearance, he’d met my eyes. His gaze was mad with lust, hiding his feelings through a glass wall. His hands stilled, pausing their attempt.

We were in a dressing room. Other people were inside the shop, making purchases.

Yet, that wasn't enough to stop me from turning around and yanking the man down to let out a little bit of steam out of my system.

I wanted to feel his calloused hands against my bare skin. Would a kiss be enough to satisfy me this time around? There was only one way to find out.

Elias stepped forward, bumping my body against the mirror. Flattening me against the cool surface, his tongue lapped at my own while his hands moved to my sides. Gripping my hips, he crushed my body with his own. He knew just what to do to take away my next breath.

A moan manifested in the back of my throat. Trying to keep quiet to avoid gathering any unwanted attention, I tightened my hold on his shirt. I couldn't possibly think about needing air, not when his mouth was intoxicating. Elias was happy to swallow down every whimper and sigh he created.

It had been far too long since the last time I was with a man. I felt like I wanted to explode.

Originally planning on saving the sex for after we got married, I wasn't entirely sure I could wait that long. I didn't know how Elias remained so patient after each long day spent together.

A knock came on the dressing room door and we clearly hadn't been as quiet as I hoped to be.

Elias pulled away and I already saw the rage manifesting in his eyes.

“It’s okay,” I whispered to him before clearing my throat. Straightening up, I moved on trembling legs to go open the door. “He was just trying to help me zip up my dress. We were struggling.”

The woman on the other side looked between my flushed cheeks and Elias’ annoyed expression.

“Well, let’s have him take a seat out there and I will be happy to assist.”

I should’ve definitely been thankful for the woman who interrupted us. If she hadn’t, I wasn’t entirely sure if I would’ve been the one to have the strength to stop us from doing more than sharing a kiss.

Elias



Everything was almost running smoothly. While all of the preparations I made were nearly complete, I felt on edge. Restless, even. Tomorrow was the big day, yet, I felt unsettled about the event. I didn't imagine hosting a big wedding when I planned on marrying the woman.

Ramona was all smiles as she helped set up chairs. When I urged her not to help the men set up, she *scolded* me. Told me I should be trying to assist the other men who worked hard as well.

I didn't understand.

By the time she'd worked up quite the sweat, she looked like she'd lost a little patience with me.

"Listen, Elias," she started as she looked at everyone. "I really do not know how you have so many men to be a part of your family. With the way you treat them, I can only believe they're too afraid to leave."

"That is the case," I admitted shamelessly. "You wouldn't believe what you can get done through fear."

She frowned and placed her hands on her hips. "Okay, I have a theoretical question for you. When tomorrow comes around and Bruno decides to shoot you for hurting his girlfriend, do you think any of your men would be willing to sacrifice themselves to save you?"

“They would if I told them to.”

“What if you can’t talk?”

I frowned. “Are they planning an attack tomorrow?”

Ramona threw her hands up in the air, letting out an exaggerated sigh. “Theoretical, Elias. My point is, what’s the point of having a family if you can’t even treat these people like one? These men aren’t objects here to just do jobs.”

I laughed, looking over at the few pairs of eyes that had drifted in our direction. Of course, they looked away quickly.

“Elias, I want to have one big family, just like before. Please, just put your anger to the side and be nice to them.”

She was actually being serious. If I tried to be friendly, then what would stop them from seeing me as some weak fool?

“Fine,” I agreed with a frown returning.

“Then we can share a big dinner after all the work is done.”

I looked back at her, my brows shooting up. “I don’t eat with them.”

She smiled, “I know. You’ve got that giant table, it’s about time we put it to use.”

I walked alongside her, already dreading holding a conversation with the other men hard at work. “You know, no one has tried to boss me around before. Normally I’d kill them without batting an eye. Put a bullet right between their eyes.”

She didn't look bothered by my threat, not even in the slightest. "You probably shouldn't do that either. Talk first, then violence."

"I hate talking."

"You were a bit shy when we first met too," she murmured, "I'm sure we can overcome that hurdle."

I was not shy. Back then, I simply couldn't talk around her. At least I proposed, that was a leap back then.

When we reached two men working on unpacking chairs, they glanced our way and immediately stiffened up.

I really did scare them.

"We're here to help," I explained before sighing. "How many more chairs do you plan on putting out?"

Nameless grunt one looked at his buddy before rubbing the back of his neck. "We've gotten enough chairs for both families, but there's word that members of the Amante, Bertone, and Guarini families are coming to give their support so we got an extra hundred chairs."

When I scowled at the information I didn't know beforehand, Ramona elbowed my side. I could already hear her now.

"If they liked you, they would've told you the moment the information came in."

"Thank you," I gritted out, the words sounding foreign. Seeing their shocked expressions and Ramona's smile was not

worth it. I already felt weak.

“Now, let’s help you get more of those chairs set,” Ramona enthused.

I worked alongside them, fighting the urge to throw one of the damn chairs. Knowing that members running the entire state planned on popping in on our special day pissed me off. My shoulder aching wasn’t doing me any favors either. I was angry about everything.

Those fuckers knew well enough what would happen once Ramona became my wife. The south and east side of the state would be combined into one larger chunk. We’d become a threat to their smaller sections.

If we wanted, we could take over the entire state.

Shame I didn’t give a shit about any of that.

“Boss?”

Snapping out of my thoughts, I scowled. “What is it?”

“Are you wanting to send an alert out to all of the Mariani family?” The guy stirred under my gaze.

I sighed, my frown lessening. “Do you have the chair space for them?” Receiving a nod, I glanced over at Ramona who was hard at work. “Have a message passed around. The wedding is an option. No punishment will occur if they don’t want to come.”

Once again, I got a surprised reaction. Might as well get used to it.

“Tell them there will be a feast after. They can bring their families.”

Wives, children, siblings. The whole mess. Ramona was going to get her big wedding. I hope it was exactly what she hoped for.

The grunt I spoke to smiled, and nodded. “Thank you, sir.”

My frown slipped away as I watched him walk away to spread the word.

“Already tired of helping?” Ramona asked when she dropped a chair down next to mine.

“Yeah,” I murmured, “something like that.”

I couldn't remember the last time one of the men in my home sent a smile in my direction, let alone thanked me.

Ramona



“Look at you,” a male voice said from behind.

Twisting around, I did not expect to see Bruno with a beautiful woman at his side. Kelsie was with them as well, a grin on her lips.

I gasped, immediately rushing over to hug my brother’s girlfriend. I then grinned at Bruno, eyeing the woman I’d only seen in a blur of my escape.

“Lily, I presume?” I asked, already gathering her hands in my own. “Bruno has told me all about you!”

The woman laughed, her cheeks tinted in a layer of pink. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Bruno really snagged a cute one, that’s for sure. Funny to know we’d had a conversation about our love lives not too long ago.

“Where are Antonio and Marco?” I asked, noting the lack of the two other men.

Bruno sighed, his brows coming together. “Marco went AWOL and Antonio rushed straight to talking with the other families. You know how he is, all business, no pleasure.”

I wanted to ask more about Marco, but Kelsie stepped forward and grabbed my hands.

“Lily and I figured we could help get you ready. With a lack of women in this place, I assumed you didn’t have anyone to help.”

Heat crawled up my neck as I laughed. “Actually, that would be pretty nice. I don’t think Elias cares enough, but I’d like to look pretty for him.”

Bruno groaned, scrunching his nose. “Never thought I’d hear those words. I suppose that is my cue to leave.”

Hoping everyone would be able to act right without fighting, I led the women deeper into the room. Elias let me get ready in our room and I hadn’t left in the last two hours. I was not really the type of person to fancy herself up. These women were exactly what I needed.

After sitting me down in the bathroom, they floored me with questions. From them, I didn’t expect anything less. Luckily for me, I came prepared with answers.

No, Elias hadn’t hurt me or even sent a serious threat in my direction. No, we hadn’t slept with each other. Yes, I definitely wanted to. Yes, I definitely wanted to marry him.

The sisters believed me far easier than my own brother. At least I didn’t have to try to convince them that what I spoke was the truth.

While they curled and pinned my hair, I waited eagerly to see Elias. While I already knew he’d love what he saw, I couldn’t wait to see the shift in his eyes. The same way heat filled his gaze in that dressing room.

After we were done celebrating and having a great time, I couldn't wait for him to whisk me inside and take off the wedding dress I'd picked out. The same one we struggled to zip up the first time. There was no way I could've picked out a different one. Not after getting the reaction I had.

"You are flawless, Ramona," Kelsie murmured as she pinned my bangs back, "Elias sure is one lucky guy."

Honestly, I felt like the lucky one. If Elias hadn't remained faithful to a conversation I hadn't even thought about, I'd still be single and stuck in that house with Antonio. Elias was more than a ticket for escaping my prison. He *wanted* me. Despite having nothing to offer him in return, he had his sight set on me.

"I couldn't possibly ask for a better man to marry," I admitted softly, staring at my reflection. Only in my dreams, could I have imagined myself looking so pretty in a wedding dress.

"Oh, you can't get emotional now!" Lily pressed, rushing to ball up some toilet paper. "If you're going to cry, it has to be while you're confessing your love to Elias!"

I laughed, dabbing my eyes with her offering.

"I've just dreamed of this day, it's a bit much." Letting out a laugh, Kelsie soothed her palm against my back.

"There are already so many people here, I can only imagine how much fun later will be," Kelsie enthused as she

followed my gaze into the mirror. “We should go see how the timing is going. Don’t want you to get stuck in here all day.”

I nodded, thanking them both. Watching them leave the bathroom, I folded my hands against my dress. Surprisingly enough, I felt nervous and excited.

Once I got tired of staring at my reflection, I moved to sit on the bed. Waiting for any sign of life outside of the room, a knock eventually came.

Antonio was my next visitor.

“Damn, Ramona,” he mumbled, shaking his head at my appearance. “If listening to Elias talk my ear off about you wasn’t enough to make today real, that dress sure does the trick.”

“I love it, personally,” I told him, smiling down at my clothing. “Beats wearing my usual dark outfits.”

He shut the door behind him and walked over. Claiming a seat next to me, he let out a long sigh.

“He keeps calling me his brother, you know?” Antonio groaned as he shook his head, “tried really hard to be friendly. It’s too easy to piss him off. Yet, he is still trying.”

“I didn’t want us fighting anymore,” I explained, “I’ve asked him to mend the broken bridge.”

The bed creaked as my brother leaned back. “All this time, I thought he was simply trying to use you to hurt me. Turns out, that crazy bastard really does love you. His feelings are real.”

Heat tickled my ears. “I know.”

“Our father always wanted a big family,” he mumbled, looking my way, “we’re going to be the biggest family in the state. Some people are going to feel threatened by that. Dangers will come and go. Are you sure you are ready to be a wife to a head of a family?”

“Elias wouldn’t let anything happen to me,” I promised him, “I feel safer here than anywhere else. You did a great job at protecting my growing up Antonio, but it’s about time you leave me behind and start focusing on your own future wife.”

Antonio smiled at the mention of Kelsie. “I plan on marrying her quickly, too. I’ll let you have your moment before I consider taking her ring shopping.”

He then sighed, letting us ferment in the sound of silence before moving to his feet.

“I am the one who was supposed to fetch you. Took a little longer than they probably planned. Elias is surely fretting that you’ve made a run for it. Let’s get you down there before he starts a scene.” He offered his hand, one I happily accepted.

“He’d definitely make a scene,” I agreed with a laugh. Curling my arm around his, we carefully made our way through the halls of the Mariani home. *My home*. “Thank you for coming. I know I implied that I didn’t care—”

“I was angry then. Hell, I was angry when I first came here too until Elias talked my ear off. I wouldn’t have invited me

here either.” He let out a sigh. “There was no way I’d miss out on passing you onto him.”

“You’re going to walk me down?” I asked, a grin already forming.

“Obviously,” he scoffed, “I’ve already mentally prepared myself to hand you over. Kelsie will scold me if I start a fight, so I promised to be nice.”

We reached a large set of doors that led outside. I sucked in a breath as one of the men guarding the door slipped out to tell them I was ready.

I *was* ready. Over the last week, I grew more and more impatient. The time had finally come.

Elias Mariani would be mine.

Elias



From the moment Ramona requested a big wedding, I regretted throwing such an event. Seeing all the different families watching me from afar left me growing uneasy.

Then my bride appeared and every single one of my thoughts disappeared.

Ramona was *gorgeous*. The dress she picked, the one I already wished to strip away in the past, made her look so elegant. Too good for a man like myself. I was greedy, planning on keeping her at my side despite deserving a better man.

Today was going to be a long, torturous one. Knowing I needed to wait only made me want my bride even more.

For the first time in my lifetime, Antonio was not scowling at me. He had a look of business when he wasn't staring at his sister's beauty.

Everyone stared at Ramona, and it was so deserved that I couldn't even feel a lick of jealousy. Today was her day.

When she reached her destination, Antonio left her side. A smile formed on her lips as she gave me a look down. Seemingly pleased, her eyes lifted up to mine.

"You look great," she whispered, "everything does. Thank you, Elias. This is exactly what I wanted."

My own smile grew at her compliment. The headache of today was worth seeing the light in her eyes.

“Perfect, darling. We still have an entire day ahead of us. Wait until we get to the feast. I’m sure you’ll be impressed.”

She nodded, her cheeks growing flushed. “I can’t wait.”

Reaching out to hold her hands, I gave them a squeeze. Looking out at the man who waited patiently, I cleared my throat. “Let’s begin.”

I leaned on every word she spoke. While I could go on for hours and hours about my love for the woman, we decided it would be best to follow a script. At the moment, Ramona couldn’t confess her love, and that was alright.

She’d get there. After waiting nearly ten years to simply get her at my side, I knew I could wait a little longer for her to share my feelings.

Seeing as she didn’t speak like a robot, I was already one step closer to my goal. By the end of the night, I’d have a piece of her heart, if not the whole thing.

When I was set to push the ring she picked out onto her finger, I realized it didn’t look as bad as I originally thought. Simple, yet elegant. Fitting for her.

“You’re shaking,” she whispered as she watched as well.

I suppose I was. “Just a little eager, darling,” I lied.

Everything felt too good to be true. I was so close to getting my happy ending, I tried to prepare myself for the

moment when someone ruined it.

Occasion after occasion, I always failed when it came to getting Ramona. I expected today to be no exception.

She grabbed my hand, squeezing my trembling fingers. With ease, she slid on my ring. Originally coming off nervous, she was the strength I needed to calm down.

While the officiant spoke, his words came muffled as I stared down at the woman I loved. Reaching out, I cradled her cheek.

How ironic of me. While working so hard to come off as a hardened, fearless, and terrifying leader, I stood there looking like a weakened sap. In front of my men, other families, and even her.

Ramona leaned against my palm, her eyes closing momentarily. Her lips parted and a sigh left her lips. I wanted to kiss her now, not when ordered to.

Ramona was my weakness. She made it hard to act the part I'd been playing for the last decade. She wanted me to change, to be more humane toward others. Toward the people I should've called my family.

Could I still be strong with her at my side? Even as a man with the appearance of an outsider? If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have worked so hard to become the man I was today.

"I love you," I whispered with a gentleness I didn't realize I was capable of owning.

Her eyes snapped open and she looked at me like it was the first time I spoke the words.

If I wanted Ramona to fall in love with me, then I needed to be a man deserving of said love. As long as my will remained strong, I could put down my walls. I'd look a little weaker.

Making the promise to myself, I cradled her face and leaned down to kiss her.

While the officiant chuckled, he quickly wrapped up our ceremony, declaring our titles to the world.

Husband and wife.

When we parted, Ramona didn't look away with that startled look. Instead, she grabbed one of my hands and flattened it against her chest.

"You feel that?" she asked, curling her fingers around my wrist.

A racing heart, perfect for the occasion. One step closer. If my confession affected her, I wouldn't stop with just words. I'd show her through actions.

Grinning, I grabbed her hand and brought her knuckles to my lips. "Come, darling. Let's go celebrate."

Gasping when I tugged her away from our clapping audience, I dragged her into our home. Starving for her and food, I planned on fueling us both for the next few hours.

I couldn't tire her out too much. Not with what I planned for tonight.

Ramona



A bubbling giggle escaped my lips when Bruno swung me around. For a guy who'd been bloodied only a week ago, he moved wonderfully. Lily would have quite the workout by the time the night ended.

Elias had a room large enough for one grand party. Antonio had mentioned before how Elias liked showing off his home to make others jealous. I wished I could've been one of the spectators during his gatherings.

I would've fallen for him so much quicker if I had.

My head spun as my body did the same. When Bruno released his hold on my hands, I twirled around until I crashed into my husband. Elias immediately caught me, his arms wrapping securely around my frame.

"You sure are having a great time," he murmured, lacking the lick of jealousy in his voice.

Elias had no reason to get jealous. I had a ring around my finger now, I was all his.

Every time I reminded myself, my heart soared.

"Look at how happy everyone is," I enthused, watching women giggle and men grin as they danced. "Warmth is radiating everywhere!"

Elias grinned, looking absolutely pleased with himself. He then looked at Bruno and noticed his scowl. "I've actually

come to speak with you. I apologize, but I only know you as a dog. I don't remember your name."

"Bruno," I explained, noticing Elias was being genuine rather than trying to pick a fight.

"Right, *Bruno*," he corrected as he tightened his hold around my waist. "I'd like to speak to both you and the woman. Lily."

Bruno was frowning, unmoved.

"*Please*," Elias pressed, his smile remaining but growing tight.

Elias learning patience wasn't going to be a one day lesson. At least he was trying.

"One conversation," I promised Bruno, hoping to ease the agitation coming from my friend.

"Fine," Bruno agreed, his eyes softening when he looked down at me. "But if he even thinks about touching Lily—"

Elias scoffed. "My hands are clearly busy if you can't see for yourself."

I shouldn't smile, yet I laughed without thinking.

"Come on," I urged, "let's find her and go somewhere quiet."

I already knew what Elias was up to. It was one of the few things I demanded when I first came to his home a week ago.

Lily looked uncomfortable and Bruno happily kept her at his side.

Elias looked at her, sending a smile in her direction. “I apologize for purchasing you, dear. If I knew I’d get my wife in the end, I wouldn’t have threatened to snap your neck.”

Lily grimaced, her face matching mine. I didn’t know of the small details, just the bigger picture.

He then looked at Bruno, ignoring the glare pointed in his direction. “I also apologize for my men shooting you. I hope your recovery is going well. While I know you won’t apologize, I forgive you for trying to kill me in the process of taking your girlfriend back. My shoulder is healing nicely.”

Bruno was never one to hold his temper well. His face said it all. He wanted to finish the job. Thankfully, before Bruno could act on his feelings, Lily wrapped her hands around his arm.

“We appreciate your apologies, Elias. Let bygones be bygones and hopefully we can move forward,” she enthused.

Bruno grunted, his anger extinguishing at her touch. “What she said.”

Elias clapped his hands together, pleased with himself. “Perfect, then let’s return to the party and enjoy ourselves,” he urged.

Bruno and Lily were never happier to leave us.

Before Elias could follow, I stopped him.

“Thank you,” I told him, “you doing that means a lot.”

He nodded, his eyes trained on where the other two disappeared. “Of course, darling. Though, I have to admit, I didn’t do it for you this time around. Funny enough, I’m starting to feel remorseful for my actions. Pesky little feeling.”

My brows shot up, my surprise impossible to hide. “Really?”

He chuckled softly. “Seeing them happy and knowing I could have ruined it because of my greediness, yes, really.”

My smile softened as I continued watching him. “You’re starting to thaw out, Elias. Better be careful, I might start to like this side of you more.”

Elias looked down, immediately snaking his arm around my frame. “My goal is to make you love me, Ramona. Good to know I’m already a foot set in the right direction.”

My heart flooded with happiness at his words and all I could do was nod.

He didn’t know that I was already falling for him.

Ramona



I lost my shoes while dancing with the people around me. Elias stuck nearby for most of the night, making sure I never got a break from all the movement.

I think he just wanted an excuse to twirl me around. Even he was wearing a smile through the long hours.

Staying in a good mood, I even got to watch some of the men who protected our home approach with their wives, introducing them to us. His smile seemed to only grow as others spoke to him.

Starting slowly, I was ecstatic by Elias' progress. Give it a week or two and he might even start remembering some of their names.

By the time the sun had lowered and people started drifting off, I was ready to ask Elias to carry me to bed. I was so tired. My jaw ached from smiling so much.

Members of my family made sure to wish my marriage the best of luck before leaving as well. Antonio, Bruno, and their girlfriends were one of the last ones to leave.

I had to promise Antonio I'd visit in a week to give him the courage to leave. Kelsie helped give him the push he needed to say goodbye. It wasn't a final one, not by a long shot. He'd eventually adjust.

Only when the large room was emptied did Elias make his move. He didn't even try to be sneaky either. Once he was close enough, he scooped me up into his arms.

"Your shoulder—," I gasped, heat crawling up my neck as we headed away from the leftover members of my new family.

"—is absolutely fine," he reminded me, "I'll take some painkillers later. Ramona Mariani, I've been *dying* to get you alone all night."

Ramona Mariani. I liked the sound of that.

"Well, you've got me," I enthused as we reached our room, "pretty sure no one will bother us either. Not unless the world is ending."

Setting me down, he opened the door before dragging me inside with him. The moment the door was shut, my back was pressed against it.

Lifting my eyes to meet his, my breath came out in soft pants. Elias looked hungry. After being patient for an entire week, I understood why.

Leaning forward, he brushed his lips against mine. Hardly feeding into my own hunger, he reached down to squeeze my hand. One tug left me stumbling forward to the middle of the room.

"Stay here," he ordered before shrugging off his jacket. Taking a few steps back, he tossed it to the side. Then he unbuttoned his vest, torturing me with slow movement.

Keeping his eyes on me, he then hooked a finger beneath the knot of his tie.

I stirred where I stood. After all that dancing in my wedding dress, I didn't think I could feel any hotter. Watching Elias undress was enough to prove me wrong.

His tie fell to the floor before a smirk came to his lips. Rather than stripping away his shirt, he decided to circle me instead. Stopping behind me, his fingers sent chills down my spine when he brushed my shoulder blades.

"Can I?" he asked, his breath tickling my skin. Just to tease me, his mouth brushed my neck. Light kisses were all it took to send goosebumps down my arms. Then he pulled away like he didn't have a serious effect on my body.

"Yes," I answered a little too quickly.

He chuckled but didn't tease. Instead, he cradled the zipper on the back of my dress before dragging it down the length of my back. His breathing stopped for a moment before growing heavier.

Sucking in a breath to help steady my racing pulse, my dress fell away, hitting my ankles.

I really hoped I was what Elias expected. Wearing nothing but my underwear now, I couldn't hide anything from him.

His hands moved to my body. Palming my sides, he slid down to my hips before caressing them. Stepping forward, his shirt brushed against my bare back.

“I’m going to have a hard time being gentle,” he admitted against my neck. One of his hands abandoned my hip to move to the front of my stomach. Not sure where he planned on moving, I sucked in a breath when his touch dragged downward

“Don’t go thinking I’ll break,” I mumbled softly, “gentle is boring.”

He slipped his hand into my underwear, parting my feet further apart with one of his own. I shuddered when he buried his fingers between my folds.

“It’s just been a while,” I admitted, my voice strained.

“You are telling me,” he chuckled, amused by my words. His warm breath tickled my ear as he kept his voice hushed. While one of his hands explored my rapidly growing arousal, he moved his other hand to touch my breast.

Right now, Elias was being experimental and my body was throbbing for more.

Lightly squeezing and caressing, his touch began kind. Seeing that I wasn’t reacting like he wanted, his touch grew rougher. One pinch of my nipple was all it took for my body to shift.

I couldn’t close my legs, not with his feet keeping mine apart. If I tried to step back, I’d feel his arousal digging deep into the curve of my back. All I could do was twitch and stir against his curious touches.

“Are you going to make me suffer all night long?” I asked, my hips jerking when he hooked his fingers inside.

“Possibly,” he mumbled. Shifting, he took a deep breath. “I want to take my sweet time memorizing everything. You’ve got a body that runs for miles, darling. It may take a while.”

A laugh broke past my lips. “You are ridiculous.”

“If it means I get to hear your happiness, I’ll continue to be,” he promised. Spreading the moisture gathering on his fingers, he slowly dragged his hand out of my underwear.

Despite wanting to move on to the best part, my clit cried out for his touch.

Elias pulled away entirely, circling back to the front of my body. He didn’t waste any time getting an eyeful. After a curse left his lips, he wetted his bottom lip.

“You would make Aphrodite jealous of your beauty, Ramona.”

I sputtered at his compliment. “You really know what to say to get my heart going.”

Stepping forward, I flattened my hands against his shirt. Fumbling with each of the buttons, I slowly exposed more and more of his bare chest. Making my way down, he eventually shrugged off his shirt.

His arousal was pressing hard against his dress pants. “You look uncomfortable,” I mumbled. Running my fingers down the outline, he cursed under his breath.

“Now you’re making me suffer, darling.” Reaching out to grab my hand, he flattened my palm against his cock. “Only you could cause such a reaction.”

I let out a shaky breath. “I’m sorry for making you wait so long.”

He chuckled, shaking his head when he released me. “If I knew I would be here with you like this, I would’ve been happy to wait another decade for you to come around.”

Meeting his eye, my next breath got caught in my throat. Elias surely knew how to be overwhelming at the worst of times.

Feeling my pulse thumping, I parted my lips.

“Elias, I have a confession to make.”

He looked confused, automatically reaching out for me. “What is it, darling? Surely, it isn’t worth panicking over.”

My heart was thumping so hard. I couldn’t decipher my rush of thoughts.

“I think I fell for you the first night I came here. Until today, I avoided saying it out loud.” I sucked in a much-needed breath. “My heart is yours, Elias Mariani.”

Elias



There was a ringing in my ears. I wanted to believe I misheard her words.

After all, I didn't expect her to actually love me. Not after everything terrible I'd done in my lifetime. I simply wanted to be hopeful and use a fantasy to fuel my good behavior. I could survive each day by having her simply at my side.

"Say it for me, darling," I begged with a desperation I wasn't expecting.

Her cheeks were red, her lips trembling with hesitance.

Love was a wonderful feeling, but it was also fucking terrifying.

"I love you, Elias. I think I've gone crazy."

"I've been called insane my entire life, Ramona. You are not crazy," I promised her.

She didn't look like she believed me. "What am I then?"

"Obviously mine," I answered immediately. Feeling in a pretty good mood, I closed the distance between us and picked her up much to her dismay. "Now I want to spend the rest of the night appreciating my wife who *loves* me dearly."

Sounded so good to say that out loud. Might have to say it a few more times before I called it a night.

Ramona grunted when I dropped her onto our bed. Grinning down at her, I knew nothing could possibly ruin my mood. I plucked her underwear off, fighting off the urge to shred it from her body.

“You’re too much,” she murmured as she watched me undo my belt. She had no reason to feel embarrassed. Soon, she would be too preoccupied to worry about anything other than my hands and the way I touched her.

Stripping away the last layer of clothing that got in my way, I enjoyed the way her eyes took me in. Drinking in my appearance, I let her soak up the view until she was satisfied.

“I remember the first time I saw you, I thought you were beautiful,” she admitted as her eyes shamelessly lowered. “I’m happy to admit that my feelings haven’t changed.”

I got on the bed, immediately crawling toward her. “First time I saw you, I thought you were a figment of my imagination.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “I also thought you were pretty crazy.”

“For you, I’m insane, darling.” Flattening her against the bed, I tucked my body between her thighs. “Absolutely mad.”

And she loved me despite my flaws. What a turn-on.

While Ramona wrapped her arms around my neck to pull me down to her lips, I worked on making my way inside her. While she nipped at my mouth and buried her fingers through my hair, I tried to keep myself grounded.

This wasn't a dream or a fantasy. Ramona was here in the flesh with only my name on her tongue.

I didn't just want to fuck my wife, I planned on *worshiping* her. If I didn't have every inch of her memorized by the end of the night, then I didn't do her enough justice.

She let out a cute exhale when I slid deep. Still slick from my exploring fingers, I eased my way inside. While her thighs hugged my hips to keep me in place, I couldn't stop a chuckle from slipping out.

Ramona felt better than I could've ever imagined. While her walls wrapped perfectly around my cock, shaped like she was made for me, she kept my mouth busy. What a beautiful, haunting, woman.

When she pulled from my mouth, a grin formed. Watching me with glistening eyes, a moan fell from her lips after only a few strokes. She then reached forward, flattening her hand against my chest. I didn't expect her to suddenly push me.

Before I could ask what she was trying to do, I was pressed against my mattress. Ramona moved quickly, straddling my hips.

"Do you plan on taking over? This is not how I pictured our first time together." I asked, a smirk tugging onto my lips. Of course, all my amusement seeped away when she slid down my length.

Her hands pressed against my chest, using my body as support. Her smile remained as she looked down at my

twisting expression.

“You’ve really thrown yourself into making me happy,” she explained before shifting, “now I want to return the favor. Is this alright?”

Was having a front-row seat at watching Ramona use me for her own pleasure *alright?*

“It’s perfect.” The answer came out strained as she continued moving. A dream come true.

Hips rocking and nails pressing against my chest, Ramona went from watching my pleasure to getting lost in her own.

It took an effort to let her have control. I ached to lift my hips, fucking her from our current position. While I wanted to make her scream my name, her pacing movement brought me closer and closer to my own release.

We had barely even started. We also had an entire night to have fun. Yet, if she continued being so fucking mesmerizing with all her breathy moans and soft sighs, I wouldn’t survive half of it.

While she enjoyed going at her torturous pace, I decided to tuck one of my hands beneath her. Determined to make her come first, I found her sensitive nub with ease.

Jerking forward, one of her hands immediately wrapped around my wrist. Keeping me in place, her pace began growing.

My name left her lips in gutted pieces. All because of a little bit of touching. I clearly didn’t stand a chance.

Well, if I wasn't going to last longer than my sweet bride, I'd be happy with a tie.

"That's it, darling," I rasped as her breathing grew quicker. She was still watching me, soaking in both of our pleasures.

I gripped her hip with one hand, wishing she'd go fast and slow down all at the same time.

Snapping my eyes shut, a curse left my lips as my body jerked hard. Every muscle grew taut as I exploded.

Ramona's smile grew twice in size as her walls tightened around me. Still moving, she shot her head back to bask in the warmth I provided.

Then came her own twitches as waves of pleasure rippled through her body.

Seconds turned to minutes while we relished the aftermath of our release.

Once I got a chance to manifest a thought, I looked at my arm, appreciating the half-moon shapes dug into my skin. One glance down at my chest and I saw similar markings. It was a shame they'd be gone in less than an hour.

Ramona was the first to pull away, collapsing down next to me. She was still working on catching her breath.

"What a workout," she joked. She then ran her fingers across my chest, enjoying her freedom to touch me as she pleased. "Up for another round?"

I barked a laugh, my grin growing. “Good to know I can make you want more.”

Moving, I flipped her onto her stomach. Enjoying the way she gasped, I got a handful of her ass.

“I’ll need a minute, but I assure you, we are nowhere near finished.”

She giggled, stirring under my touch.

Honestly, I had no intention of letting her leave the bed until the sun greeted us.

Ramona



Three Months Later

“Be on your best behavior,” I urged Elias as we pulled up to the Franzolli estate.

Once a month, I dragged my husband over to see my family. I’d been eagerly waiting for this visit. I missed them all terribly.

“I am a treat,” Elias defended as he looked up at Antonio’s home. He wasn’t frowning, so that was good. He’d been getting better at not starting fights. Unless it was business related, which was a whole different story.

After the car came to a stop, we got out. Before I could sprint off and leave Elias behind, he hooked an arm around mine.

Hunching over the driver’s window, he looked at the two men who guided us to our destination.

“Stay or leave?” he asked, peering at the two of them.

Meaning; *Do you want to share a meal with us, or leave and come back later?*

They opted to join us. The more the merrier. Ernado and Abele were his ‘guard dogs.’ Though, Elias tended to use the word ‘friends’ more often than not.

When we entered, Kelsie was the first to rush over and throw her arms around me.

“You’ve got to be careful,” I scolded when her larger stomach crashed into mine.

She didn’t mind, her happiness overcoming my concern. She made it impossible to frown.

“I’m stealing her away,” Kelsie warned, eyeing Elias and his men.

Elias frowned but shrugged. “I’ve got matters with Antonio anyway. Have fun, darling.”

“Where are we going?” I asked as she dragged me toward our dining area.

While I might’ve been starving, I didn’t think the food was a good enough excuse to steal me away from my husband.

Before we entered the room, she tugged me to the side.

“Marco returned.”

“He’s alive?” I gasped, looking toward the closed door. Before I could bust my way into the room with questions, she quickly squeezed my hand.

“You barely missed him on your last visit. But listen, Ramona. He didn’t come alone. He came with a *woman*.”

My mouth fell open at her unbelievable words. Marco didn’t like women. He liked his job.

“Is she the reason he’s been gone for so long?”

Kelsie chuckled, giving a shrug. “She’s a bit shy, but I’m sure you can ask them all your questions. I just didn’t want you to see Marco with a girlfriend and make a big scene.”

I laughed, already moving to push the door open.

I was going to give him such a hard time. *Mr. I’m too good for love*. I absolutely lived for embarrassing the Franzolli men and my target was set.

Entering the room, I immediately spotted the couple. Before Bruno or Lily could say hello, I rushed past them.

Marco noticed me first, then the raven-haired beauty at his side. He grimaced, only fueling me by pulling her closer to his side.

“Ramona Mariani,” I introduced, giving her a look down.

“Antonio’s sister,” Marco explained in a soft whisper.

The woman looked hesitant but soon smiled. “Frankie Lawrence, a pleasure to meet you.”

I plopped down next to Marco, my eyes never leaving them. “You missed my wedding,” I informed him.

“I was preoccupied,” he explained shortly.

I glanced over at Frankie, noticing the way her pale complexion turned a lovely shade of red. “Clearly. I’m still *very* upset about your absence. Please, Marco, tell me what happened. What kept you so busy?”

Marco let out a long sigh much to my dismay. “If I tell you, will you go away?”

Someone learned how not to be so uptight.

“It’s my fault,” Frankie piped up unexpectedly, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Marco intervened, ignoring me. “Just bad timing.”

The woman bit back a smile as if there was some kind of inside joke I wasn’t catching on to. Frankie caught my confusion and let out a laugh.

“Don’t mind him, he’s being modest.” She let out a sigh before apologizing again.

Growing more and more curious, I looked between the two of them. They were holding secrets.

“Well then, what kept him from coming?”

Marco let out a long sigh.

Frankie was still smiling. “I kidnapped him.”

Registering what she said, I looked over to see Kelsie staring at us. Right. No big scene.

Though, I’d *love* to tease Marco. Because if a guy like him could let a woman like her get the upper hand, then I could only imagine the rest of their story.

“Well then, I suppose I can’t hold it against him for being unavailable.” Spotting the annoyance on Marco’s face, my smile grew. “We obviously have both had a busy last few months. What a perfect time to exchange stories. How about you go first? Then I can tell you all about Elias.”

Frankie looked at him, reaching over to squeeze his hand.

“Fine,” Marco agreed, “but I’ve already explained what happened two times. This is the last time so you better listen closely.”

“Trust me, Marco, I will be clinging to every single word.”

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Sneak Peek: Reversed Currency

Marco

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

I checked my GPS one more time to make sure I hadn’t made a mistake.

Jimmy Lawrence lived in the fucking woods. What kind of lumberman shit was that?

Deciding to follow the line of trees, I hunted for any kind of path to take deeper into the woods. The longer I drove, the more agitated I got.

Once I got my hands on the guy, I wasn’t going to ask for the money back. Not at first. Instead, I planned on getting a few punches in. I’d demand he lives in a regular house in the city instead of some cave or tree, or whatever the hell was going on.

Finding a mailbox, I was hit with a wave of relief. One step closer to finishing the job, I turned on the dirt trail.

Keeping an eye on my phone and on the path, I decided to pull to the side half a mile from my destination.

Jimmy wouldn’t know I was coming. I wasn’t going to risk letting him slip past my fingers and have to go through this process again.

Getting out of my car, I took a look around. Trees, bushes, and more trees. Reminded me of home a bit.

Feeling a pinch on my neck, I slapped my hand down. Damn mosquitoes.

Locking up, I set down the dirt path. I'd deter once I spotted the home. Get a good layout of my surroundings and then attack.

Eventually, I found a cabin in the middle of the woods. Keeping my distance from the home, I crept around the outskirts to search for any other exits. If Jimmy became aware of my arrival, I wanted to know where he could escape. Relieved there wasn't a back door, I noticed a collection of chickens. Roaming around in a caged fence, I lifted a brow as I watched them move about.

For a guy who liked to spend a lot of time in clubs throwing around counterfeit money, I could not imagine him having a taste for farm life.

Spotting a garden nearby as well, my confusion only grew.

From the looks of it, Jimmy seemed like he didn't actually have a reason to leave his home to begin with.

Hearing a snapping of a twig behind me, I jerked around. Before I could understand what in the hell was going on, the blur of a brown object thumped my head. I hardly got a glimpse of my attacker before the world began spinning.

Suddenly, everything went black.