



STOLEN CURRENCY

NYLA LILY

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Stolen Currency

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Lily



Lilian Peterson. Only my friends and family called me Lily. The gorgeous man who entered my father's thrift shop was neither. I would not have mistaken a face like his. Yet, I was given the opportunity to hear it straight from that deep, booming voice.

“Are you her or not?” he asked, staring down at me all menacingly. Having more than a foot extra of height, his body almost did the job.

While I heard the question, my brain was not computing. Instead, my focus was entirely on the man's face and body. Big, tall, and brooding, *oh my*. If it weren't for the scar running across his cheekbone, he'd be flawless. The scar was a plus, it made him look dangerous.

Leaning against the counter, I almost made a fool of myself when my hand slipped. Sweaty palms would be the cause of my death around the man.

“Huh?” The word came out in confusion before I straightened my posture and cleared my throat. “Depends. Who's asking?”

A tiny raise to the stranger's lips was all it took for my heart to be his. He didn't reply at first, pulling out an envelope instead. Flattening it against the glass counter, he slid it in my direction.

“From Kelsie. She’s out of town for the time being. I’m here to deliver some money to get you through the week. Don’t let Frank touch it.” A short and sweet explanation that left me with only more questions.

The gorgeous man was already walking away, his task complete. Instead of sticking around to answer my hundreds of questions, he moved fast for such a big build.

“Wait!” I called out, almost choking on the word with how fast it came out. Obviously, I needed one question answered before he disappeared from my life forever. “What is your name?”

Sure, I should have pressed for more information about my sister’s sudden disappearance, but priorities, right? I needed to know the identity of the man who straight-up knocked my world off its axis.

The man stopped at the door, one hand already pressed against the glass. He wasn’t even the type to use the handle, marking up the surface I’d wiped off yesterday. How devious. Without even looking my way, he gave a slight shake of his head.

“Bruno.”

With that, he was gone. Like a gust in the wind, drifting away and leaving nothing behind but my crushed heart. I might have never been in love before, but that five-minute interaction was enough to put me through a lifetime of heartache.

Once I was alone, I took a glance at the envelope he'd dropped off. Hoping to get any other hints about the stranger, my eyes nearly popped out of my head at the sight of money. Holy crap! This was supposed to last a week? More like a month with my lifestyle!

When I tried to call Kelsie to ask what was going on, I got sent straight to voicemail. Weird. Why she didn't want our father to hold onto the money, I didn't quite understand. Rather than lingering on the confusion clogging up my mind, I tucked the money away in a secret spot before approaching the front door.

Peering outside, the parking lot remained empty with the exception of my car. Both my sister and father were gone, just the same as Bruno, the mysterious hunk.

Maybe I could try to hunt him down on social media later. For now, I'd remember the dark look in his eyes and the impressive beard that hid the hint of a smirk. Ugh, I missed him already. I didn't even catch his last name! What terrible luck.

If he didn't come back, I didn't know what I'd do. Probably go die somewhere of loneliness if I had to guess.

Between taking classes on campus and watching my father's shop due to his odd absence, the days flew by without noticing. Kelsie wasn't responding to any of the messages I tried to send which was a bit scary. From such a large sum of money given to me, I wondered what work she picked up. She needed to give me some tips.

Hunched over one of the tables for sale, I worked on an assignment. Not too many people ever came into the shop, not unless they were suspicious. We didn't exactly live in the best part of town. Bad people hid in every shadow, each with evil intentions.

I didn't mind the quiet atmosphere, I was able to get work done and earn some money on the side for keeping the shop open. Moving to rock back in my chair, I stared at my writing like the plague. Between being conscious of my work and worrying about what grade I'd get, I dreaded the thought of ever sending it to my professor.

Three pages typed and at a complete loss of motivation to continue, the door opened at the perfect time to give me the distraction I needed.

The door shot open and, to my surprise, my father rushed inside. He looked *rough*. Bags under his eyes, an unshaven face, the whole package of a man in danger.

Looking my way, he looked more startled. Didn't even stop by to say hello or give any sort of explanation on where he'd gone. Instead, he made a run for the stairs that led to our home on the second floor.

Yeah, that wasn't weird at all.

I looked back to my computer, frowning when seeing that I still needed to wrap up my document. Dang paper wouldn't write itself.

Bruno



Sitting in my car, I stared out at the thrift shop. Spotting the same car in the parking lot during my first visit, I knew *she* would be inside. Lily. The woman with round cheeks and eyes that matched the color of the ocean. One look into them for too long and I'd surely drown.

Two cars passed, neither slowing down to pay the thrift shop attention. Earlier, a different car pulled in. One that was oddly familiar. When I was reminded of who it belonged to once the driver's door opened, my fists curled around the steering wheel.

Frank Peterson. The man who held a debt so large, his daughter Kelsie took over to pay it back. The same man who cowered away for a week just in case any of our family changed our mind about the exchange.

He looked around too, checking his surroundings. He was a coward that didn't deserve the opportunity to live another day. I didn't budge when he glanced my way, only watching as he quickly rushed inside out of fear.

Pathetic waste of space.

Knowing I'd have to give over the envelope stuffed in my jacket, I remained in my car for an additional hour.

While there were other tasks I needed to be done, I worried Frank would be tarnishing my name in front of the young

woman. Telling her to stay away, warning her how dangerous I was.

Well, he wouldn't be speaking any lies. Didn't mean I wanted her to suddenly scurry off like her father the next time I crossed her path.

Lily, the special girl. The first time I entered the shop to complete my task, she'd caught me off guard with a smile.

Women didn't smile at me, not even those who wanted to show pity. Before last week, I didn't give a damn. Ever since I first laid my eyes on her, Lily's smile had been burned into my brain. Two dimples made just for me.

The woman plagued my thoughts, more than I cared to admit out loud. I couldn't get her out no matter how hard I tried.

After all the suffering I'd caused in my life, Lily Peterson was karma returning the favor. So close I could touch her, yet so far from my reach. Too innocent to let a filthy hand like mine near.

Antonio sending me to drop off the second payment was both a blessing and a curse. He was too busy putting his attention on Lily's sister to notice how much his order left me suffering.

Being someone who was thick-skulled, I didn't listen to my conscience often. Having made more than two visits to the thrift shop, I was only torturing myself by simply hoping to catch a glimpse of the woman.

From a distance, I slightly filled my hunger. I couldn't spend any time with her, not up close. I had no choice but to be satisfied by simply watching her from the streets during my free time.

After hiding away for long enough, I left my car. I had a job to do, I didn't have any more time to waste. In and out, just like the first time. Not long enough to get caught up with noticing the smaller details of her appearance.

Just had to drop off the envelope and leave.

I pulled the door open and stepped inside, unconsciously holding my breath. I didn't have to search for Lily.

A loud gasp escaped her lips before a hard thump followed soon after.

She'd been sitting at one of the tables with a price attached. Her chair balancing on the rear legs as she leaned backward had rocked even further once she noticed my arrival. On the surface of the table rested a laptop and a notebook. Must've been doing some kind of work. Either way, the woman was on the ground, having tipped over.

Fighting the urge to check on her, I watched as she got to her feet before I could even make it past the entrance.

"You actually came back?"

Her face was flushed, her eyes wide. Not a second passed before that haunting smile formed on her lips.

In and out. Other jobs to do. Better places to be.

Parting my lips, I tried to speak. My tongue felt thick, tied in a knot. Instead, I took a few steps toward her as I grabbed the envelope from my pocket. Hoping she'd understand why I'd returned, I held it in her direction.

Lily didn't take the hint, not even looking at the money in my hands. Instead, she stared at my face, craning her neck just to get a better view.

I wasn't much to look at. When I took a blade to the face during a pointless bar fight, I lost my chance at winning any beauty contests. Ugly and scarred, a jewel like her shouldn't be stretching to get a closer look.

"How's Kelsie?" she asked, keeping her hands at her sides.

She wanted a conversation. Out of the question. While I could reach out and take her hand to force the envelope, I stood like a statue. Touching her was also out of the question.

"Is she going to send you every week?" Pestering me with questions, all I could do was stare down at her.

Her cheeks were scattered with freckles. Even across that little nose of hers. There were brown flecks in her eyes. Real long eyelashes, too.

"Bruno?"

Hearing my name come out in that sweet voice of hers, I crinkled the envelope within my grip.

"Your sister is fine. She'll send someone once a week. Take the money," I ordered before holding it out again.

“If I take it, you won’t have a reason to stick around.”

That was the point. I wanted to escape her gaze even now. Frank Peterson wasn’t the only coward, clearly. If he wasn’t hiding in his home above the shop, then he’d be enjoying quite the show.

“I don’t have a reason to stay,” I told her firmly, trying to get my point across. Every second I stood near the woman, I knew I risked my sanity.

She’d lose her smile eventually, once she learned of my true identity. Not taking the hints I gave, my only option was to act like myself. Show my true colors. Make her realize she didn’t want to waste a second of her time on a monster like me.

“I was thinking about closing the store early. We could grab something to eat. Is that enough of a reason?” she asked before finally taking the envelope from my death grip. She stared into my eyes, blinking so innocently.

I was a loan shark, thriving in a world she couldn’t comprehend. A guard dog to a man who ran this section of the city. A loner who accepted long ago that love was not an option. Yet, I didn’t even have the strength to tell her no. Instead, my shoulders sank. “Raincheck. I’m busy today.”

She perked up despite getting rejected. Then she spun around and I almost thought I was free from her deathly grasp.

“Let me write down my number. Then you can text me and we can set up a date.” While she fumbled around, she ever so

gracefully dropped a pen she successfully found.

This had to be a trap. Frank was using his gorgeous daughter to expose a weakness. There was no other way she'd be putting so much attention my way. A woman who could pull any man she pleased, wanting me? What a cruel joke.

I was so blinded by a little attention, I suddenly forgot what lengths that scum would go to get himself out of trouble. I should have known better.

While she hunched over the counter, scribbling what I assumed to be her number, I walked towards her. Knowing damn well I could get the truth out if I pushed the right buttons, I considered flattening her against the counter to make her speak the words I desperately needed to hear.

If I heard that sweet voice of hers prove my suspicions were correct, then I could finally get her out of my head. I didn't like being used or tricked.

Sweet girl or not, one hand around her throat would do the trick. A little squeeze to show her I was to be feared. I'd be the one to get her to experience something new. Something terrifying.

Before I could even try to touch her, she spun around. Completely clueless about why I approached so closely, she thrust the paper against my chest. Her cheeks were stained pink and for once, she wasn't meeting my gaze.

"I'm normally free on the weekends, so give me a call, okay? I like going to buffets, so you better pick a good one."

Her fingers were trembling, and even her voice shook. If Lily was playing a part given to her, she was one hell of a good actress.

Otherwise, she was honestly interested and I was an idiot. One who was getting his hopes up all over again.

My suffering would continue until next week then. Perfect. Now I needed to keep my patience and not let myself get worked up over keeping my distance away from her. Seven days was an incredibly long time.

Not a soul would know about the slip of paper in my grip or the satisfaction it filled me with.

Lily



Bruno never called. He did text me once, telling me that he'd only contact me if anything came up with his visits. But that was literally it.

After gaining the courage to ask him out in the first place, he should have taken me out by now. I already imagined our first kiss, playing it over and over in my head. It was the same cliché moment that happened in every romance movie ever. Walking me up to the door, pushing me up against the glass, kissing me like there was no tomorrow.

Okay, maybe not like a *sweet* romance movie.

There was a roughness about the guy that I kind of wanted to be pointed in my direction.

Well, he would never know how badly I was pining after him. After all, he ignored all of my texts! I wanted to scream.

My father could tell something was wrong, but he never actually asked. He was too busy working hard at the shop, working like he had before Kelsie disappeared. Sure, he still slipped away at night, but at least he came back home during the day.

It was nice getting a breather from only having the shop open during the few hours I was free.

He must've caught on to Bruno's scheduled visits. Especially when I insisted on watching the shop on the day the

giant was supposed to make his delivery. Happy to slip away into our home and hide away, I didn't think he'd be around to close the shop either.

My father had been acting weird for the last three weeks. Then again, I hadn't told him about the money I received the last two times. I think Bruno terrified him. While I might not have understood why, I didn't try to keep him in the shop. My father would only get in my way from getting what I wanted.

I waited in my usual spot, this time relaxing. My mind was too preoccupied to think about homework. Instead, I prepared my words to say to Bruno. After basically ghosting me, I had a lot to say.

When he arrived, he wasn't alone. My lovely sister was right behind him, alive and well. Turns out, she wasn't secretly kidnapped and the whole money deal wasn't a distraction.

I couldn't possibly yell at him when he brought Kelsie along. Happiness replaced my annoyance the moment we got the chance to sit down and catch up. While I mostly talked about school, I learned a little bit about her. She'd found a man she loved, the lucky woman.

I considered telling her about my feelings about Bruno, about her delivery man. Maybe she could give him a nudge in my direction? I hoped if he learned Kelsie was accepting, then he'd give me a little *something*. I didn't hold my breath.

She stayed only for an hour, denying my invitation to dinner. How ironic. Maybe no one wanted to share a meal with me. Then they left and silence returned to the shop. All alone,

I hardly had the time to suffer before the door opened and Bruno stepped back inside.

“Your allowance—” he started, already pulling an envelope from his jacket pocket.

Of course. He hadn’t even bothered saying hello. Thinking about it now, he’d never even sent a greeting my way before.

He offered the envelope and I took it without putting up a fight. He had places to go, a busy man.

“See you next week,” I murmured, staring down at the stained carpet that should’ve been replaced two months ago.

Bruno didn’t leave despite having empty hands. I worked on biting back a frown, trying not to show how upset I felt.

“Look at me.”

I lifted my eyes, staring at his chest instead. He wore dark colors so well. As much as I wanted to appreciate the way his shirt hugged his frame, I was too busy blinking away stupid upset tears.

I’d never been one to take rejection well. Even with a man I’d only gotten to see a couple of times, I knew he’d break my heart if I looked him in the eyes. Did Kelsie warn him how big of a crybaby I was? If any tears fell, they wouldn’t stop.

“Lily.” He stated my name firmly, making his own frustrations apparent. “I’ve upset you, tell me what I’ve done. You haven’t smiled at me once today.”

Then he did the unthinkable. Those large hands of his touched my warm cheeks, lifting my face to make me look at him. He sounded desperate. Much better than trying to leave as soon as possible.

“Do you find me repulsive?”

He scoffed, staring down at me. “What in the hell are you talking about?”

“You don’t want to go on a date with me,” I explained, frowning at him.

His jaw set and he looked displeased. “I can’t.”

“If you aren’t repulsed by me, then why not?” I asked, aching for a reason to get him out of my mind. Three weeks of having the one man stuck in my mind was terrible. I was ready to scream. “Be honest with me, I can take it.”

He sighed as one of his thumbs brushed my temple. “You really want the truth?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

He moved his hands. Rather than gently brushing my cheeks, he used one arm alone to crush me against his body. While one arm kept me pinned, he used his other hand to cradle my chin. I hardly got a gasp out before his breath brushed my cheeks

“If I take you anywhere, it won’t be at some restaurant. It’ll be a place where I can enjoy my meal in peace. Somewhere I can get you alone all to myself.”

Letting out a forced breath, my body trembled from all the chills running through my body. While my legs lost a little strength, my knees buckled. Bruno was far more intense than I realized.

His frown twitched, revealing the hint of a smirk. He moved the arm wrapped around my body. Another gasp left my lips when he suddenly gripped my hip. “I’ve got an all-you-can-eat buffet right here, Lily. Trust me, I’m fucking starving.”

My heart was pounding. I couldn’t even hear myself think. Not while everywhere he touched burned a thousand degrees hotter than before.

I simply wanted a kiss after a shared date. What he was suggesting was far more tempting. Unless he stopped me, I could let my imagination run wild.

“Okay,” I said with a nod.

“Okay?” he repeated, hardly hiding the confusion from his voice.

“Yeah, let’s do it.” I nodded more to myself. “Papa leaves at night. If you’re serious about this, then you better come tonight. Otherwise, I’ll feel like the most disgusting woman in this town.”

I didn’t want to admit how badly I wanted the man. How he created the throbbing between my thighs, amplifying the sensation because of his words. If he had a clue of how hard I fell the first time I looked at him, he’d be too scared to return.

When he nodded, I wanted to squeal. Feeling so happy that I could kiss the guy, I grinned.

The sound of a car honking vibrated the large glass windows that we both apparently forgot were there.

Looking out, I saw Kelsie honking the horn, a disgusted expression on her face. She didn't get it. Maybe if she got a powerful man of her own, then maybe she'd understand.

"I'm going to get an earful the entire drive back," he explained through a long sigh, "going to have to make her keep it a secret."

"You're not embarrassed by me, are you?"

Bruno released my body from his hold but his hands grazed my arms. "Let's just say if her boss finds out I've gotten a bit attached, he won't let me deliver the allowances anymore."

"I thought Kelsie was your boss?" I asked, confused. I was beginning to wonder if Bruno had fed me some lies at the beginning. Seeing that Kelsie seemed happy, I wasn't super bothered.

He pursed his lips together, shrugging. Yeah, I thought so.

Another honk. My sister was a cockblock, seriously.

"I'll return tonight," he promised before stepping away.

If he didn't, then it might actually be time to give up for real. I wouldn't be able to live another day without getting a taste of him.

Bruno



Convincing Kelsie to stay quiet was far harder than I expected. Yesterday, I terrified the woman. Today, I pissed her off. If she told Antonio, my time with Lily would be given to someone else.

“You threatened my family,” she reminded on the way back to the Franzolli estate.

“I threatened Frank,” I corrected, “you just showed up at the wrong time.”

“What if it had been Lily in my place?” she asked, her question hit me like a brick to the face. “She’d be the one sitting here, going home to Antonio.”

Despite trying to make a point, she sounded sour. What in the world did she think she had to worry about? My boss had eyes only for her.

I decided to focus on the road. What a terrible time to remember the way Lily’s body felt against mine. If only we hadn’t been interrupted. I might’ve kissed her. No, I would most definitely have.

“I don’t have any bad intentions,” I told her, “I can’t say the same for whoever Antonio will replace me with if you tell him.”

My hands gripped the steering wheel at the thought of someone else touching her. Family or not, I didn’t care. Lily

was mine.

“She’s going to get a place out of this awful city,” Kelsie explained softly, “when she wants to leave, will you be able to let her go?”

Living a dangerous life since I first turned eighteen, I’d seen a lifetime of death and pain. I wouldn’t force someone to enter that life unknowingly. Not even the woman who seeped into the cracks of my armor. She deserved her best shot of happiness.

“Yeah.”

It wasn’t a lie. I didn’t want Lily to get hurt. One day, I’d tell her who I really was. I’d give her the choice to stay at my side or to find someone better. She had the option to pick better fitting men, I’d give her that.

“If you hurt her, I’ll stab you in the eye,” she threatened.

I chuckled, the sound foreign. “Antonio has rubbed off on you. You’ll fit well in our family. And no, I’m not telling you that to get your blessing.”

Kelsie was smiling, nodding her head. She looked like she was in a better mood after seeing her sister. Not even the thought of dragging her back home was enough to ruin that smile. She and Lily were definitely sisters. Smiling for undeserving, dangerous men.

Now in the somewhat clear, I needed to put my focus on tonight. I lost control and let myself speak the truth. Now I

hoped if I gave Lily what she wanted, she would continue to want me as much as I did her.

When I excused myself after dinner, Antonio was the first to want to know where I was going. I couldn't lie, not unless I wanted the man to take my tongue. Luckily for me, I had room to breathe.

“Noticed Frank's been working during the day, but he's been slipping away at night. Want to make sure Elias Mariani is keeping his word.”

Antonio scowled at my answer. His hatred for both men was the perfect distraction. “He try anything with Kelsie?”

“He's hidden himself every time I've visited. You don't have to worry about him trying to take her back,” I assured him, “but I don't want to risk letting the same thing happen to the other daughter.”

Antonio nodded in agreement. “Not a word to Kelsie. Stake out the place, and report anything suspicious. I'll have Marco tail him.”

I nodded along, letting him make the orders. The only place I'd have my eyes on would be Lily's bedroom.

Once I left his side, I set off, not wasting another minute.

Somehow, I made Lily feel underappreciated. While I stayed strong the last two weeks, I couldn't take it anymore. Not another day would pass without Lily understanding how I felt.

If I had to keep my word to Kelsie and let her go someday, I wanted to make sure I used every moment possible to make Lily feel wanted. Tonight, she'd know how badly I needed her.

When I reached the thrift store, the lot was empty with the exception of her car. I didn't care to wonder about Frank's location, that was Marco's job tonight.

I didn't even get out of my car before the door to the shop opened. Even through the darkness, I could see how excited Lily looked. How much time would pass until I adjusted to her happiness?

"I thought you weren't going to show up," she admitted. While she led me through the dark shop, she continued talking. "I made food, but I'm guessing you already ate. If it smells burnt, just know I followed the recipe."

Lily was nervous. Her voice held a slight quiver as she spoke. While she led, I couldn't see her face. Not even after she flipped on a light that revealed stairs.

"Kelsie says I can't boil an egg, but I'm telling you, it's worth trying."

As soon as we made it into her home, I didn't waste time by looking around. There was only one thing I cared about looking at tonight.

"Where's your room?"

Her steps slowed and she looked back at me. "You aren't hungry?"

"Not for food, no." I shook my head.

We continued walking. Once she opened the door, we stepped inside. I grimaced the moment the light was turned on.

Pink walls. Pink furniture. Pink sheets.

“This should be illegal,” I muttered.

Oblivious to my horror, she rubbed one of her arms. “This is me.”

For her, I could get used to the color.

Noticing her hesitance, I didn’t move past the door frame. Leaning against it, I watched her.

“If you changed your mind, we don’t have to do this,” I told her.

Lily straightened up at my words, her brows coming together. “No, I want to!” she blurted out before looking away. “I’ve just never had a guy in my room before. It’s embarrassing and I’m a little nervous.”

Moving, it took only a few steps to erase the space between us. “It’s just a room,” I told her before moving to cup her face. “I’ve come to see you, not the wallpaper.”

A smile overcame the nervous look on her expression and she nodded, understanding. Good.

Having waited far too long to finally get a taste of the sweet girl, I leaned down and kissed her before another second could pass.

She seemed to relax right away, melting against my body. When I probed her lips with my tongue, she immediately

opened up. Perfect and sweet tasting, just like I imagined.

Without missing a beat, I picked her up. She made a noise, clinging her arms around my neck. We had a short walk to her bed before I dropped her down.

Bouncing against the mattress, she looked up at me with wide eyes. As I moved to unbutton my shirt, her eyes followed. Then her mouth parted and she looked taken aback as I shrugged the shirt off my back.

“Oh my,” she murmured, staring at the ink that stained my skin.

My cock was already stirring and we had yet to begin. There was something about being stared at like a five-course meal by a goddess that was a serious turn-on.

“Are you going to stare the whole time?” I asked, already brushing my hands against my belt as I kicked off my shoes.

“Is that not an option?” she half-joked before plucking off her own shirt.

Miles and miles of flushed, freckled skin. Flawless and perfect. I dropped my belt with her shirt. Staring at her, I reminded myself she was real and not just a figment of my imagination.

“It might be an option,” I told her, fighting against the urge to do the same.

Then her hands grazed the band of her leggings, a pair that left so little to the imagination. She wasn't wearing them before. Had she put them on for tonight just to tease me?

I didn't deserve such happiness. Yet, I still got to watch her peel the fabric away. A slow type of torture I needed to remember to not stand around like a statue.

Her undergarments were all that was left. Sinking a knee against the mattress, it creaked.

"I've thought about this all day," she admitted as her eyes followed my hand running up her leg. "Thought about you, Bruno."

"You don't have to think anymore. I'm right here." Flattening her against the mattress, I kissed her next words away. When my hand slipped between her thighs, a gasp left her lips.

Soaked and responsive. Could this simply be another one of my torturous dreams? I felt like the moment I got the chance to bury myself deep, I'd wake up in my bed all alone.

My name left her lips as I pushed the wet strip to the side. Her hand gripped my arm, giving it a squeeze.

I'd gone weeks wondering how she felt, I wouldn't go another minute without knowing. Burying one finger deep, I immediately realized why I felt her nails dig into my skin.

"You're a virgin?"

I never moved away so fast.

Lily



Bruno looked horrified while my body was left on fire.

“Is that surprising?” I asked, forcing myself to ignore the thought of being rejected.

“You...” he started slowly before shaking his head, “I do not deserve such a gift. Sweet girl, you have to save yourself for someone better.”

He decided to say that now while I was ready to cry out in frustration? Perfect timing.

“I’m not saving myself for anyone,” I argued, “you’re just the first guy I’ve-”

My words got caught in my throat. Loved? I’ve known him for only three weeks. That was hardly long enough. Yet, my heart said otherwise.

He didn’t move, and for once, his face wasn’t warped as a permanent scowl. His expression spoke a thousand words.

“You really want me to go find some other guy?” I asked him, sitting up. “You don’t want to keep me for yourself?”

“I would break a man’s hand for touching you,” he confessed all too quickly, his voice growing thicker.

My toes curled and tingles rolled from my stomach. Bruno was a large man, he could do far worse than a simple break injury.

“If I made you mine, Lily, I’d never let you leave my side. If you tried to run, I’d drag you back.” His words were the truth, not just an attempt to scare me away. “I’d put a ring on that finger without hesitation.”

I wasn’t scared, not right now. My erratic breathing was due to a shameful excitement.

Every time Bruno stepped into the shop, he radiated danger. There was something taunting about him. I think that was why I felt such an intense pull. Whatever secrets he was hiding, I didn’t care.

“I won’t run,” I promised him, “not unless I want to be chased.”

“You don’t even know what you’d be getting yourself into, sweetness.” He moved, reaching out to touch me once more. Thank goodness.

“Maybe it’s about time I start learning then. Show me who you really are. I’m ready.”

The moment the words left my lips, I was crushed against the mattress. I couldn’t even let out a gasp before Bruno’s mouth was on mine. It didn’t matter that I hardly had any experience with kissing. He took immediate control.

I forgot how to breathe. When he slipped one hand into my bra, he squeezed one of my breasts. Calloused fingers gripped my sensitive skin as he buried his other hand between my legs once more. Rather than continuing where he left off, he grabbed my underwear.

Hearing the tear, my sex clenched at the cool air brushing my heated skin.

Breaking away from our kiss, he allowed me to take a breath. My head was spinning. His lips brushed my cheek as he moved over to my ear.

“I won’t bury my cock into you for the first time tonight,” he whispered, “not in this shithole. I’ll have you against my bed when it happens. In a home more deserving of your presence. We’ll have our fun then, sweetness.”

My heart pounded at the thought of stopping now. Not when his roughness left my body crying for more. Before I could complain, he continued.

“Until then, I still have a hunger that needs to be filled. I told you already, I’m *starving*. I’m going to devour you whole. Taste you until you beg me to stop. I don’t care how long it takes. I’ve got all night.”

Gasping when he pinched one of my nipples, I stirred beneath his weight. When I felt his fingers graze against my sex, my toes curled.

I nodded, not knowing what else to do. My body was already not working with my brain.

He pulled away, getting a look at me. Scoffing, he shook his head. “Even now, you’re smiling.”

Was I? Must’ve come naturally.

“Get rid of the bra unless you want it to end up like the underwear,” he warned.

It was my favorite bra. No way was I going to let him tear it, even if it would be a turn-on. I unclasped the hooks and tossed my bra away before he could follow with his threat. I didn't have the time to get self-conscious, not when Bruno was getting comfortable on his back.

“Get on,” he ordered, slapping a hand against his chest.

I sputtered at his order, not understanding what he wanted.

“You are going to come and take a seat and let me feast.” He reached over, already tugging toward him.

“I'm going to crush you,” I warned, choking on my words as I swung a leg over his chest.

“Don't threaten me with the perfect death.” He clearly didn't care. Not enough to be concerned.

I leaned forward, clutching my headboard as he moved my body where he needed me. Not even his hot breath against my thighs was enough to stop me from worrying.

When his arms snaked around my thighs, I couldn't stop him from tugging me down.

“You're going to suffoc-” the word fell off my tongue, replaced by a moan. While I couldn't see what he was doing, I felt *everything*. His tongue, his nose, even his teeth. When I tried to lift up, his hold on my thighs kept me in place.

Gripping the headboard, the wood creaked. His tongue felt as thick as his finger.

“*Oh.*” Closing my eyes, I tried to remember how to breathe. Releasing the wood with one hand, I buried my fingers in his hair. Giving him a tug, I pulled him closer. My body shifted, and my hips jerked. Little noises escaped my lips as I moved against his chin.

He groaned down below, his fingers digging deeper into my skin. Even if I bruised, I’d get a reminder of the pleasure only he could provide.

“A little longer,” I pleaded with him, jerking as he wrapped his lips around my clit. Already so sensitive, I worried a little less about his health and more about the tension collecting in my gut. I was ready to snap at any second.

Straightening up, I threw my head back before spilling his name from my lips. All at once, everything shook as a rush shot from my sex.

Bruno didn’t release me, not yet. Not until he got his fill. I was the first to pull away, collapsing. My legs felt weak and my nerves were shot. Before I could get too comfortable, he rolled me onto my back.

Bruno not only didn’t suffocate, but he appeared to want more. Not even his soaked chin was enough to satisfy him.

Ah yes, he did threaten to keep me up all night. We had hours on our hands.

How exciting.

Bruno



“Those stakeouts must’ve been super eventful,” Ramona murmured to me at the table, “isn’t it the third one this week? So much time without anything happening and you’re still staying up all night to protect that little thrift shop.”

She was Antonio’s sister, I couldn’t be rude.

“You’re letting your imagination get the best of you.” I shoved a bite of noodles into my mouth.

“All I’m saying is that I’m worried about your sleep schedule. I don’t want you to suffer anymore.” She sucked on her spoon, putting her attention further down the table. “Look at them being all lovey-dovey, makes you want to throw up, huh?”

Antonio and Kelsie were eating, sharing their own whispered conversation. Kelsie was grinning, and Antonio looked pleased with himself.

“Don’t you have someone better to poke fun at?” I asked, biting back a frown.

Ramona was bored and she sucked at hiding it.

“Go get a boyfriend of your own. Then you won’t have to worry about their relationship or my life.”

Her nose scrunched. “Antonio scares them all away. He threw the last one in the desert, remember?”

Yeah, of course, I remembered. I was the one that had to drag his ass through the hot temperatures.

“Tough luck, I guess.”

I got three seconds of silence before she continued.

“Have you told them yet?”

Ramona knew nothing, yet tried to reach and pull the truth with her mind games.

She didn't know how I'd been secretly seeing Lily on the side for almost three months now. At the rate we were moving, I was ready to buy a house just to get her out of that damn thrift shop.

Antonio's decision of bringing Lily into the family would be uncertain. Kelsie got a free pass, I didn't think I had the same luck. I was too nervous to take the risk.

“You have a fat hickey on your neck, Bruno. It's obvious what's going on. He's definitely noticed.”

I touched my throat without thinking, cursing when Ramona grinned.

“Don't worry, there's nothing there,” she assured before sighing. “So even you got a girlfriend.”

“Fiancee,” I corrected smugly.

“Three months,” Ramona reminded, “and I can't get proposed to until my brother falls over.”

I did feel bad for her. Being stuck at the house all the time, she didn't even have the time to meet a normal man.

“Marco is nice,” I offered, “Antonio likes him.”

“Marco is married to the mafia. He wouldn’t recognize a cute woman if she hit him in the face.”

She was right. He was clueless.

“Humor me, tell me about her. Kelsie’s sister. I’ll keep your secret. You look like you’ve been holding in your feelings for the last few weeks.”

I cleared my plate, moving to stand. “I’m not saying shit in here. Let’s take a walk outside and I’ll tell you the whole story.”

Ramona shot up, a grin on her lips. She knew me more than I thought. I was ready to explode.

* * *

The opening of our newest club forced me to take a break from Frank’s shop. One week and already, problems were arising. Archer street was packed even in the early afternoon hours. Music thumped, reaching as far as a block away.

I made my way inside from the back, avoiding the line of people waiting to gain entrance.

I should’ve brought some painkillers, my head vibrated from the heavy bass that came with each song.

Knowing Antonio wanted a report of every little detail of the building, I searched for the right people to talk to.

Having people quickly scam from my path, immediately avoiding eye contact, I realized how spoiled I’d become. Lily

showed me a side of life that was a bit more enjoyable.

I wanted to see her even now. Unfortunately, orders always came first. Couldn't see the woman if Antonio decided to get a replacement.

I spoke to Diego first, our head bartender for today. He came from our club on Fourth, training most of the people working behind the bar. One of our strongest workers who didn't bitch about the long hours' thanks to his paychecks.

"Jimmy Lawrence," he called out against the music, "that name ring a bell?"

"I've dealt with a hundred Jimmys," I shrugged, "what about him?"

Diego handed out a drink he was currently tossing together before taking a few steps away. He returned with a box in hand. Opening it up, he pulled out a bundle of hundreds. He slapped it down in front of me.

"He's pulling the same shit. Antonio scared him away from Fourth, but now he's gotten us twice."

I didn't need to take a close look to know they were counterfeit. The feel of the paper was off. Amateur, clearly.

"Blew through our best stuff last night. Him and his buddies." Diego was annoyed, throwing the bundle back into the box. "The girls didn't know any better when they accepted his payment. I take responsibility-"

"You are fine, Diego. We'll take care of him. Just keep the bar running smoothly, that's all we want." I tried not to point

my frown in his direction.

Marco could chase down the bastard. He had the time to run around. I already missed out on enough of my hours of free time.

Diego smiled, less at me and more about the passing of responsibility. I couldn't blame him. No one wanted to pay thousands of dollars to make up for someone else's actions.

With the bar taken care of, I checked security. All the cameras were working wonderfully. All thirty of them. There wasn't a single speck of dust that could go by uncaptured.

"Jimmy Lawrence, find him. Send the reports to Antonio," I ordered to the team watching the live feed. "Get it done before you leave."

Hearing the rush of their fingers against their keyboards, I moved out. What else needed to be done? I was so worked up, I couldn't even think about proper procedures. I had to concentrate.

I needed to find whoever was managing today. Talk to them about whatever needed attention. Fuck, I didn't even remember their name.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, barely noticeable. There was only one person who ever called me and right now, I didn't have the time. Lily only needed to wait another hour at most, then I'd be in her arms in no time.

Ignoring her call, I went to shove the phone back into my pocket before it buzzed again. This time shorter, a text.

Deciding it wouldn't hurt to just look, I clicked the notification. Suddenly, everything went quiet.

The air was taken straight from my lungs at the two words that appeared on my screen. Suddenly, I couldn't feel the thumping of the music or even my pulse. I couldn't breathe.

Help me.

Lily



I should have known something was wrong when such a nice, slick white car pulled into the parking lot. Through the shop's windows, I watched two men get out. Wearing tan suits, they stood out like sore thumbs compared to their surroundings.

For once, I wished my father was here instead. After leaving after the shop closed yesterday, he had yet to return. He even left his phone behind which was more suspicious. Maybe I should've gone to the police station instead of trying to run the shop.

My father's odd behavior had become so regular, I didn't even think to get any authorities involved.

Was it too late to lock the door and call the shop closed? With the way the men were taking their time looking around, I probably could rush over and twist the lock in place.

I got all but four steps in before they started walking toward the entrance. Perfect.

My gut was telling me to leave. I didn't want to judge someone's character by their scary face, but I realized I was stepping closer to the stairway that led up to my home.

Always have a backup plan. Seeing I wouldn't make it through the front, this would be my best exit.

"Afternoon," I spoke out after the door opened.

The two of them strolled in. One didn't acknowledge my existence while the other sent a brisk nod in my direction. Surprisingly enough, they separated, actually looking at what we had for sale.

If they were simply some rich dudes who wanted to check out some tacky thrift shop, then heck yeah. Otherwise, I didn't understand what they were doing.

What if they weren't searching for something, but rather someone?

"Frank isn't here," I told them, deciding to go with my gut.

I didn't know what my father had been up to for the last few months, I should have asked. But over the last few weeks, more and more people asked me about my father. Usually, they were men in dark suits.

There was something about the light-colored scheme they had going on that felt unsettling.

They didn't respond, not at first. The silence was deafening.

"We didn't come for Frank," one of them said, breaking the layer of silence.

The other looked my way, already taking a step in my direction.

"Looking for Lily, you know her?"

Strangers didn't use my name, not unless they knew more than they should. I had no plans of hanging about to find out

what they wanted.

Twisting around, I made a run for it. Tripping up the stairs, I tried not to hear the thumping of their footsteps over the pounding of my heart. Thankfully keeping the door unlocked, I rushed inside and locked it behind me.

Knowing a door wouldn't stand a chance against two brutes, I kept moving. Rushing to my room, I locked that door too before I launched my body into my closet. Pressing my back against the furthest wall, I heard the first kick through the paper-thin walls.

I pulled my phone out to call the first person to come to mind. Probably should've called the cops, at least they would've picked up. When I called Bruno, he sent me straight to voicemail.

Hearing another kick to the front door, my body jerked. With shaky fingers, I texted him.

The front door was open. I could hear their heavy footsteps inside.

Why in the world were they looking for me? I hadn't done anything wrong.

Was I going to die?

My phone vibrated in my hand, a call from Bruno. Sliding down to sit on the floor, I curled my knees to my chest.

"There are two men inside my home," I told him through a hushed whisper, skipping any form of greetings this time around.

Hearing music on the other end of the phone, I had no idea where Bruno could've been. He must've been out having a good time. I hoped I didn't interrupt anything important.

"They've come looking for me." My throat felt tight as I whispered. Staring at the closet door, I waited for the inevitable to come.

"*Give me details,*" he ordered on the other side of the phone. There was a gruffness to his voice, strained with what sounded to be anger.

Hearing my door knob jiggle, I gasped, immediately covering my mouth.

"*Lily,*" he demanded, "*details.*"

What a terrible time to have a blank mind. I hadn't looked at their faces long enough to notice any small details. I said the only thing that came to mind; colors.

"White car. I-I don't know what kind." Flinching when a loud thump came from my door, my breathing grew unsteady. "They dress like you, but in lighter colors. Tan suits."

I didn't remember anything else. I couldn't. Not when I heard my door fly open.

"*They aren't going to hurt you, Lily. Just do everything you're told,*" he ordered over the thumping background. The music was growing quieter, he was moving. "*I'll find you, I promise.*"

My closet door opened and I dropped my phone as light flooded inside. A scream left my lips as I was yanked out of

my hiding spot. Bruno's name was the last sound to leave my lips before I was taken out of my room.

Lily



Squished between two huge men in a small car was not how I planned on spending my day.

At least they weren't asking questions, I wouldn't have been able to speak. Not without crying and revealing how scared I was. Seeing as how I was shaking between them, my fear was no secret.

Bruno made a promise I hoped he planned on keeping. Otherwise, I didn't know if I could prepare myself for what was next. Death, possibly? I hoped not. With only a year left in school, I wanted to at least get my degree. Especially after putting in so much effort already.

"We're here," the one on my left said, "think about running and I will snap your leg like a twig."

I stiffened at his threat. All he had to do was look at me and I wouldn't have escaped. His words only made my eyes water. Totally unnecessary.

The car rolled to a stop and they both got out. Stumbling to follow one of them, I got on my feet before a hand wrapped securely around my arm.

They expected me to attempt an escape with such a rough hold? I could hardly keep up with their long strides, I didn't have the time to think of booking it.

They dragged me in the direction of a home. *A mansion.* Holy crap. I got one look around to see we weren't even in the city anymore.

Two men wearing similar colors guarded the front door. They hardly glanced my way as I was pulled inside.

If I had come inside willingly, I could've appreciated the large chandelier hanging inside the entrance. Whoever owned the home was one fancy person.

"Walk faster." Another order was sent in my direction as I tripped over my feet.

"I'm trying," I grunted, catching myself before I fell.

Being dragged through halls and different rooms, I didn't know which way was left and right. I couldn't even remember where the entrance was.

When we finally came to a stop and the grip on my arm disappeared, I realized we'd entered a room full of men who looked like my kidnappers. There was only one that stood out from the rest and he was staring my way from the moment I stepped inside.

Getting a bit closer, I got a better look at the man's appearance. Blond hair and pale blue eyes. The opposite of the others. Unlike his men, he wore a dark suit. If he wanted to stand out, well, he did a pretty good job. He was sitting in a large chair, unlike the men who stood near him.

He clapped his hands twice before a wicked smile grew on his lips. Teeth and all. What a creepy appearance. At least he

didn't look as threatening as the men surrounding us.

“You actually found her,” he enthused happily, “great job.”

For getting compliments, the men at my sides wore similar unsettling expressions.

The man then swatted his hand, ordering them to leave my side without using a single word. Once I was alone and exposed, he settled his eyes back in my direction.

“Lily Peterson, correct?” he asked, raising a brow.

Was I supposed to speak? The longer the man stared at me, the more I felt my skin crawl. I nodded, hardly having the strength to say yes.

“Perfect. Well then, welcome to my home.” He swept his arm around the room as if to show off its beauty. All I saw was a big room full of disgruntled men. “You might as well get comfortable, you'll be staying here until conditions are met.”

Conditions? What in the hell was he talking about?

Seeing that I wasn't budging, the man's smile lessened when he looked back toward the two men I got to spend too much time with.

“Tell me you at least told her why you brought her here.” He clicked his tongue when only silence filled the room.

It was like they were all holding their breath. How could twenty-plus men be scared of *one guy*?

He swept his hand forward to touch his chest. “Let's get introductions out of the way, then. My name is Elias Mariani,

it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

I stared at him, my brows coming together. “Who?”

He didn’t move, his eyes unblinking. “Elias Mariani. Head of the Mariani family.”

A frown appeared on his lips when I squinted.

“Never heard of you, sorry.” Maybe in his world, the guy could be feared, but in mine, he seemed like a try-hard.

“Franzolli ring a bell?” he asked after a few passing seconds.

“Not really, no.”

His smile returned and he sat a bit straighter. “You’re just ignorant then. Good. I was starting to get worked up over nothing.”

“So, Elias Mariani, wanna tell me why I’ve been kidnapped?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest.

There was a look of confusion on his face that passed for only a second. “Kidnapped? Oh no, you misunderstand.”

No, I don’t think I did. Pretty sure I knew what being kidnapped was.

“I was simply taking what was mine,” he answered. I didn’t have time to ask, as he continued with a laugh. “Sorry, getting ahead of myself. I do that sometimes.”

Oh my god, I was dealing with a lunatic.

His face straightened. “Your father and I made a deal. He had something I needed and I had plenty of what he wanted.”

“Wait, hold on.” Sputtering, I tried to register what he was saying.

“Thanks to the money he received just this morning, he’s left town, dear. Now I own you.” He explained it with such simplicity.

“You can’t just go out and buy someone-”

“I can do whatever the fuck I want,” he corrected with a laugh.

Okay, maybe he wasn’t a try-hard. He came off a bit scary.

“So, as I said, you better get comfortable. You’re going to be here for a while,” he advised before glancing at the ground by his chair. “Saved a spot for you right here. Take a seat.”

I did not want to sit down by his feet.

“I’m just some broke college student, dude. I have nothing you want,” I argued.

His men were staring at me more than him now.

Elias’ lips pressed together in a tight smile while his nose scrunched. While silence returned, his fingers curled and uncurled into fists. It took him a second to speak.

“I don’t want you, I *need* you, dear. There’s a difference.” He shook his head, clicking his tongue. “It’s the only thing stopping me from turning my trade into more of a gracious donation. I’ve got enough money to burn to take a loss or two.”

Not liking what he was implying, I shuddered when his voice lowered.

“I’m advising you to sit down and don’t say another word before I get up from this chair and snap your pretty little neck, dear. I am not a man of patience.”

I covered my mouth, hit with a wave of nausea. Clearly, I’d underestimated the man who looked so pleased with the thought of murdering me.

Bruno ordered me to do what I was told to survive. I just needed to give him enough time to find me.

I nodded, swallowing down the urge to throw up. I walked toward him, slowly. My legs felt like jello. Sitting on the carpet, I tried to put a few feet away from his chair.

“Perfect, good job.” He let out a relieved sigh before snapping his fingers toward one of the men nearest to me. “We need to get a message out to Antonio Franzolli. I’m demanding a trade.”

Antonio Franzolli? Wait, I definitely recognized that name. Taking a second to remember who he was, it finally clicked.

“You’re the freaking *mafia*?” I blurted.

He looked down at me, a laugh coming from his lips. “I’ll give you that one, for the amusement you’ve made me feel. Glad you’re caught up.”

Why in the world did someone from the mafia need me for?

“Antonio needs to be aware of who I have in my possession. Unless he wants his little girlfriend’s sister to suddenly disappear, then he needs to give me what is mine.” He snapped his fingers again, scowling at them. “Don’t stare at me, write it down somewhere. You know how the bastard feels about contracts.”

I wanted to ask what the hell was going on, but I didn’t want to risk speaking again. Not without dealing with the consequences. I didn’t like him insinuating that Kelsie was dating some mafia boss. He clearly was mistaken somewhere.

My sweet sister was working hard at a job outside of the city, making enough money to take care of herself and support her family. She didn’t have the time to date some dangerous man.

I paused, thinking it through again.

Oh my god, she’s dating a mafia boss.

“Let’s put a time limit on it as well. I don’t want Antonio to try to weasel his way out of this. I’ll give him three hours,” Elias stated, holding up his fingers. “Lily Peterson for Ramona Franzolli. Sister for sister. Tell me you’re getting this, right? I don’t want a word missing.”

The man he was speaking to nodded quickly, having already something in his hand to scribble on. A napkin? Seriously? Geez.

“Make sure to add at the bottom that if the time passes without him bringing my future bride, then I’ll be the one to

drop off the remains of this innocent girl.”

I stiffened at the promise in his voice.

Whoever he was trying to trade me for, I felt bad for her. Half of me hoped he didn't succeed. The other half prayed I lived past the promised three hours.

Bruno



Antonio wasn't answering his phone. Honestly, it wouldn't matter. By the time it would take to get any of our men over to the Mariani compound, it would be too late.

I floored the gas pedal, running two red lights as I tried to go faster. Briskly avoiding a potential accident, I made my way out of the city.

Why in the fuck did Elias Mariani want the one person I cared for? I didn't understand no matter how I tried to put the pieces together.

Frank must've had his hand in the event. Marco clearly hadn't kept too well of an eye on him. I was going to kill both of them if anything happened to Lily.

I'd kill any man who put his hands on my sweet girl, even if the man was Elias himself.

I turned a thirty-minute drive into a twenty-minute one, far too long for my liking. By the time I reached the compound, I was shaking. Between shot nerves and built-up rage, I was ready to get my hands around something that wasn't a steering wheel.

Hitting the gated fence without a second thought, I drove up to his home. Skidding to a stop at the entrance, I yanked the door open. Leaving the car running, I got out.

Two men stood guard at the door, staring my way with wide eyes.

“Where the fuck is she?” I barked, already making my way over toward them. I didn’t reach for my gun, not like I needed it. My knuckles were itching to be put in action. Needed a distraction.

Not getting an answer fast enough, I swung on one before they remembered they had weapons of their own.

By the time the left one hit the ground, the right one tried to reach behind him.

I grabbed him by his shirt, giving him a rough shaking before wrapping a hand around his throat.

“Don’t make me ask again.” Gritting my teeth so hard, my jaw ached.

“With the boss-” he said meekly before grunting when I punched him in the gut, tossing him away with ease.

I couldn’t kill them, not as much as I really wanted to. Not unless absolutely necessary. Not unless Lily was going to die.

If I took a life on Mariani grounds, as a member of the Franzolli family, I’d be declaring war. If I could just take my sweet girl back, I didn’t need to drag my family into the mess.

Continuing inside, I already knew his home like the back of my hand. Elias liked to gloat, showing us all his shiny new objects to Antonio. Unfortunately, Marco and I had to tag along. It came with the job. I’d already been in most of the

rooms in his home. I knew where that crazy bastard liked to relax.

I didn't get very far before running into another member of the family. He tried to put up a fight, even taking a swing of his own. Connecting his fist with my face, I felt the rush of hot liquid down my lips.

Fucking perfect. Pretty sure he broke my nose.

I hit him harder, cursing when my knuckles throbbed in response. Swiping the blood from my nose, I frowned when more came.

I continued forward, taking out my anger on whoever stood in my way. Three more men to be exact.

I expected a challenge, Elias was slacking. Where in the fuck was everyone? When I reached the door to my destination and pulled it open, I got my answer.

Not a second passed before guns were drawn. Twenty to thirty men stood in the room, all aiming their weapons in my direction. Great.

“Wow!” Elias exclaimed, clapping his hands together, “talk about impressive response time!”

I didn't look at the bastard, my eyes were trained on the poor woman sitting on the ground with her knees pressed against her chest. She looked terrified. When she looked at me, that fear didn't disappear.

“As much as I appreciate the rush, I don't remember asking for one of Franzolli's vicious dogs.”

I lifted my eyes, Elias was no longer smiling.

“Where is she?” he asked, his eyes narrowing. “Where is my bride?”

Fucking Ramona? He kidnapped my sweet girl for Antonio’s fucking sister?

I walked towards him, my fists balling up as I tried not to shake.

Elias lifted his hand to stop any of his men with eager trigger fingers.

I approached Lily, kneeling down to her level. I needed to make sure she was okay.

“Bruno,” she cried out before wrapping her arms around my throat, “you really came.”

While I enjoyed the warmth of her touch, Elias gagged much to my displeasure.

“Lovely, she isn’t with you then. You went rogue, just wonderful. That’s what I need.” He let out a long sigh. “You both can stay here and die together, I really don’t care.”

Holding Lily close, I frowned at him. “Antonio has denied your request every single time, you know he won’t agree.”

“I’m not asking, dog.” His lips curled into a frown. “He can either give me what I want, or he can have that girl’s blood on his hands and ruin the same happiness he refuses to give me. It’s a win-win. Though, if he continues to keep her away

from me, then I suppose I could take the other woman. Kelsie, wasn't it?"

Lily stiffened in my arms. Fuck. Well, there was no denying it now. If she didn't know I was lying to her from the beginning, she knew now.

I moved to stand, pulling her up with me. Keeping her close, I hugged her like it was the last time. Knowing what would soon happen, it might actually be.

"Lily, listen to me," I whispered, "he's not going to kill you. Not before Antonio responds. I need you to be strong. The man is more desperate than he's coming off to be."

She buried her face into my chest, shaking her head. She was scared, just like she was on the phone.

Elias glared down at us, frowning in disgust. The bastard was a loner, he didn't understand what I felt.

"If I'm going to die, I want to enjoy the time I have left," I barked.

"So even a vicious dog can be tamed," he murmured more to himself, "I thought Antonio was the only one who'd grown soft. I pity you both."

Funny coming from a guy who was trying his hardest to be with a woman who hardly even knew of his existence. He was the pathetic one.

"Listen to me sweet girl, I need you to run when I let you go," I continued to whisper, glaring at the man who put me in such a tight position. "Run and don't stop."

“I won’t leave you.” She shook her head.

“I’ll be fine,” I lied, “my car is still running outside. I need you to take it and drive as far away as you can. Leave town. Take that money you’ve been saving and get a place away from this god awful city. Tell me you’ll run, and you won’t look back.”

She didn’t respond, I only felt the heat of her breath against my chest. She then looked up and I was forced to look into those watery ocean eyes of hers.

“I love you, Bruno Franzolli,” she whispered, the pain in her voice clear as day. We both knew what would happen to me once I let go, and damn it, she was making it hard to say goodbye.

“I know, sweet girl.” I pressed a kiss against her forehead, savoring my next breath. I squeezed her closer for only a moment, long enough to memorize her warmth. Then my arms loosened.

At first, I didn’t think she’d release me from her own hold. Then her arms fell. Her face remained pained, her lips scrunched.

“Don’t look back, no matter what.”

Then I released her, hoping she’d do as I asked.

Lily



Once I started crying, I knew it would take a lot to make the tears stop. Knowing I'd be saying a final goodbye to the one man I loved, the tears would be falling for a very long time.

A scream filled the room, one belonging to Elias Mariani. A furious order with my name laced, demanding I be caught.

As soon as Bruno released me, I sprinted out of the room with all the strength I had. I didn't stop for the three men who tried to grab me, or for the sound of a single gunshot piercing through the air. Not at me, aimed somewhere else.

I didn't know where I was going, I didn't know the mansion. Seeing the unconscious bodies on the floor, I used them to guide me through the home.

Another gunshot, then two more. I was counting each bullet as I moved, reminding myself why I couldn't slow down.

Wiping my eyes, I reached two paths, both clear of bodies. I hesitated, I didn't know where to turn. There were thumping footsteps behind me, heavy. I couldn't stop now! Not when Bruno...

A scream left my lips when I was lifted off my feet, my body spun and thrown over one broad shoulder.

High up off the ground, I didn't even get the chance to wrap my mind around what was happening until we were still

moving, my path was chosen for me. We weren't going back the way I ran from.

“Oh my god, Bruno! You're alive?”

He was breathing heavily, not responding to my question. I couldn't see his face. I immediately noticed the red trail left behind. He was injured, and his shirt was soaking mine.

For a big guy, Bruno ran much faster than I could. He also stood a chance at getting away since he clearly knew where he was going.

“You better not bleed out,” I ordered, my voice growing tight, “you can't actually die now.”

There were yells in the distance and I gasped when a bullet shattered one of the fancy vases near us. So much for not trying to kill me.

We made it outside, but we still weren't safe, not yet.

I grunted when Bruno literally threw me in his car without warning. I hit my head on the way in. Cursing out, I rubbed the sore spot. The pain couldn't be compared to whatever Bruno was feeling. Not when I saw his soaked sleeve.

Bruno was moving automatically, his eyes unblinking, his jaw set. The car jerked as he put it in reverse.

Suddenly, the back window shattered, cracking the front windshield as a bullet traveled through the car.

“Head down,” he barked, as the car launched forward.

Doing as I was told, I heard two more loud bangs. They were shooting at us even more so. I didn't move, hunched over for what felt like a lifetime. Blinking away the next round of tears, we made too many turns to count.

"We're not being tailed," he finally spoke, the words coming out much softer. His breathing was growing more uneven.

"Are you going to bleed out?" I asked weakly.

"Maybe." He shrugged, his frown permanent. He glanced my way. "They do anything to you? You hurt?"

Even when he was injured, he still worried about me. I could only shake my head to avoid breaking down again.

We eventually came to a stop once Bruno felt safe enough. He went to the trunk, ordering me to stay in the car. I didn't listen.

I found him digging into bandages, using them to wrap both his arm and leg. Two wounds, both bleeding profusely. How he was still conscious, I didn't know. The sight of blood was a bit much. Even his nose and mouth had a dried patch that I wanted to wipe away.

"Does this happen to you a lot?" I asked, leaning against the car for support.

He glanced up, his hands still fumbling with the wound on his leg. "I'm the one who normally takes the hits, Lily. I'm built to take a few bullets, this is nothing. I've had worse."

My nose scrunched at his words. “You’re really part of the mafia? Why didn’t you tell me about Kelsie? Why didn’t *she* tell me?”

“I was ordered not to,” he explained before groaning as he stood. “As for your sister, you can ask her yourself. We’re headed there now.”

Going from one mafia boss’ home to another. Great. I got back in the car with him and stared at the damaged windshield. “Antonio isn’t crazy like that Elias guy, right?”

“No.” We were back on the road before he continued. “He doesn’t know about me and you, so I’m not exactly safe,” he admitted.

I looked at him, my jaw slack. “You’ve been keeping me a secret?”

“Until I could get you to a place where men like the Mariani family can’t touch you, yeah, I didn’t plan on telling a soul. Look what happened, you were still used.” He gripped the steering wheel hard.

I reached out to touch him. “Don’t be mad. I’m alive, thanks to you.”

He relaxed only slightly, focusing on the road. After a few minutes of silence, I realized how tired he looked. Without the adrenaline keeping him going, it surprised me he hadn’t already dozed off.

Bruno stayed awake through the long drive. While we traveled, he caught me up on Kelsie’s situation. How she

ended up mixed with the Franzolli's.

My father was a bad man. Kelsie might be willing to forgive him, but I was not. He sold me to start a new life. He let Kelsie take on a previous debt.

“If you ever see Pa—my father again, don't hesitate if you feel the need to take some revenge,” I told him quietly.

Bruno snorted, shaking his head. “Don't worry, I fully intend on giving that man what he's had coming. If someone runs from the Franzolli family, there are only two outcomes.”

I bit the inside of my cheeks, “which are?”

“They get caught, or end up dead.”

Bruno



When we made it to the compound, it went exactly as I expected.

Lily cried when she saw Kelsie and Antonio was pissed. At least he hadn't decided to put me out of my misery yet. Demanding we spoke alone, I knew I'd get an earful. While we headed to his office to talk away from the seeping women, we ran into the last woman I wanted to see.

"What in the hell happened to you, Bruno?" Ramona was at my side, squeezing at my arm.

"That hurts," I grunted and she immediately released my arm.

"He needs a doctor, Antonio," she urged.

"He needs to tell me what happened first." We reached his office and Antonio frowned at his sister. "You need to leave. Go check on Kelsie."

Ramona stood her ground, not budging.

"I'm fine, Ramona. You don't want to hear about all the gory details," I urged.

She didn't need to know what lengths Elias would go to get her. After shooting him before making my escape, there was no stopping that lunatic.

We were going to be at war and only one family would survive.

“Lily’s nice,” I promised her, “she’ll like you.”

Antonio narrowed his eyes at me, clearly displeased. Rather than giving me a tongue lashing in front of his sister, he urged me to go inside. While Ramona continued to look concerned, he shut the door in her face.

He’d always tried to keep her away from our lifestyle. We both knew it wouldn’t be so easy anymore.

After taking a seat on his couch, I groaned softly. In front of Lily, I acted strong. I couldn’t deny the pain, I was hurt. Knowing I’d survive, I pushed through.

Sitting there, I started with Frank Peterson.

“Why wasn’t Marco watching him?” Antonio ran a hand down his face. He sighed long and hard. “Jimmy Lawrence, right.”

The timeline didn’t entirely match up, but now was not the time to figure out those small details. Marco could explain his side whenever he finished his job.

Antonio walked up to one of the windows, staring outside. “So he took her. What the hell did he want?”

Sitting back, I sighed through my nose. “The same thing he always wants, Antonio. The only thing he wants.”

Silence trickled between us as he continued staring out. “She’s my sister. I can’t send her to that lunatic. He’ll chew

her up and spit her out once he's bored. Elias only wants Ramona because I won't let him touch her."

Family meant everything to Antonio, and Ramona was the closest family he had.

"You don't even want to give her the choice?" I offered, growing. I wouldn't send her either, but if she found out that she could've saved a possible fight, she'd be crushed.

"They'll attack the clubs first," he continued, ignoring my question. "Cut off our money. Same with the casino."

"Then they'll come here once everyone tries to run," I finished.

Antonio didn't start a war back when Elias shot him in the leg because he knew he couldn't win. Our family tried to do things the right way as best as we could.

Elias Mariani was the scum of our world. He didn't play fair. Played smart, and used people's weaknesses against them.

We were fucked.

"Get Marco here, we can deal with Jimmy later. I need all hands on deck." He paced to the other side of the room, moving to get into his personal vault. The same vault he used to help support Lily.

Instead of acknowledging the heavy weight in my gut, I tried to call Marco. Straight to voicemail.

"His phone is off," I told him, "Marco can't help us."

“Fantastic,” Antonio sarcastically cheered. He pulled out money, carrying it over to his desk. “You’re going to take Kelsie and her sister somewhere safe. You are going to say your goodbyes and then you’re going to come back here. We’ll go to the Mariani’s and kill that bastard ourselves.”

“I’m a deadweight boss, you know that won’t work.”

He threw his hands in the air, a curse leaving his lips. “We can’t just sit here! What else am I supposed to do?”

Three months ago, I knew Antonio Franzolli as a calm and collected individual. One who made smart decisions and knew which paths to take to get his way.

The man who was hovering over his desk today radiated desperation. He didn’t want to lose Kelsie as much as I didn’t want to leave Lily’s side.

“Talk to Ramona. Maybe if she tells him she’s not interested, he’ll give up. Then everything can hopefully be done and over with and the Mariani family won’t be an issue anymore.”

“You’re being highly optimistic.”

“Personally, I hope she shatters his heart.” Cracking a smile, I closed my eyes. “Antonio, I really do need a doctor.”

He sighed, nodding. “I know. You’re staining my carpet.”

From the sound of his voice, I was sure we were both done with today. We were really put in a tight spot this time around.

Lily



“I’ve lived one day of this life, and you’ve lived *three months* of it?” I blew out an imitation of an explosion.

“Technically, I’ve been lucky not to go through what you have,” Kelsie explained, “Antonio tries his hardest to keep me away from it all.

Now that my cheeks were dry and Kelsie was happy to fawn over her mafia boyfriend, I was trying to wrap my mind around everything.

“You’ve literally been living a life of luxury, Kelsie. Also, your boyfriend is terrifying. He yelled at Bruno, which is not cool.”

She cracked a smile. “Bruno is terrifying, and you’re just crazy. Antonio is amazing.”

I swatted my hand, noting our different tastes in men.

“Since you’ll be staying here from now on, you’ll see. You’ll warm up to him in no time,” she urged with excitement in her voice.

I looked around, taking in our environment of nothing but trees. There were no cafes or restaurants. No life outside of the home.

“Am I going to have to drop out of school?” I asked, my eyes connecting with Bruno’s car. It looked rough.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, her voice falling. “Maybe I can convince Antonio to get some WIFI. Then you could try online courses?”

“He doesn’t even have the internet? What in the world do you do to keep yourself entertained?” I saw her cheeks grow red and I gagged. “Don’t answer that. I don’t want to know.”

Hearing the front door open, I glanced behind Kelsie to see a woman. Good to know there wasn’t only a bunch of dudes lingering about. Before I could even try to say hello, she rushed past us.

“Ramona?” Kelsie called out, that same concern returning to her voice.

The woman stopped to look at both of us. She looked like Antonio, but definitely prettier. Ramona Franzolli.

The woman who was supposed to be traded for my safety.

“You didn’t see me,” she urged before twisting back around and making a straight shot for Bruno’s car.

Of course, Bruno left the keys inside. She started it up with ease. Before anyone would notice her departure, she was gone. From the way the car swerved, I could only imagine her driving.

“Where in the world is she going?”

I frowned, already having an idea.

“My guess is to stop a war,” I murmured as I brought my knees to my chest. The thought of a sibling being willing to

make a sacrifice to save her family sounded all too familiar. I still owed my own sister a thanks at minimum.

Kelsie stood, pulling me up with her much to my dismay. “Yeah, that doesn’t sound so good. We should definitely tell Antonio.”

I really didn’t want to hear more about Elias. I’d witnessed enough.

“How about you go talk to your boyfriend after you take me to mine?” I offered instead.

Kelsie didn’t argue, giving me what I wanted. She stopped at a door, claiming it to be Bruno’s. Told me to wait inside until she could find him. I slipped inside without missing a beat.

My sister didn’t need to look too hard. Bruno was already inside, laying on his bed. Wearing nothing but a pair of snug boxers, it was a terrible time to check out his body. At least I was relieved to see clean bandages.

“I figured you’d want to spend more time catching up with your sister.” He looked at me and my stomach tightened.

“Wanted to make sure you weren’t dead. I thought your boss was going to kill you if I’m going to be honest.” Walking closer, I reached his bed.

“Me too.” Despite agreeing, he held a hint of a smile.

“It’s not funny,” I urged, making him roll out a low chuckle.

“Not that,” he promised, “I was thinking about what you said to me.”

I tried to think back to what he was referring to. Personally, it was all a bit traumatic.

“You said you loved me. Never been told that before by such a pretty woman.”

I blew out a relieved sigh as I sat down on the edge of the bed. I grabbed his thick hand, giving it a squeeze. “I wanted you to know before you...you know.”

“Yeah.” He reached out, brushing some of my hair to the side. “It’s been in my head on repeat since.”

“They’ve got you on pain medicine, don’t they?” I asked, laughing. It felt so good to be able to smile.

He nodded, “the best kind.” He stared at me, looking so damn pleased with himself.

I abandoned his side long enough to kick off my shoes. Believing I deserved the chance to enjoy this time with him, I crawled across his bed, curling at his side. Being careful not to hurt him, I rested my cheek against his chest. I could hear the soft thump of his heart. He curled his arm around me, keeping me close.

“I’ve pictured you here a thousand times. Better than I could have imagined,” he mumbled, “much better than that pink disaster of a room.”

Just this once, I’d allow him to insult my lifestyle. I was too tired to put up a fight anyway.

Bruno



The sun was no longer up when a hard pounding came to my door. I woke up immediately while Lily fought to keep me in bed.

“Family meeting,” a muffled voice belonging to Antonio called from the other side of the door. He was pissed. Great. What now?

“If we don’t get up now, he’ll have us digging our own graves,” I groaned, wishing I could just keep her pressed against my chest for warmth.

“We can just dig one big hole tomorrow then,” she murmured, her eyes refusing to open. Good to know we were thinking alike.

“Come on sweet girl, it’s about time you get a taste of my life,” I urged as I forced myself to sit up.

She tumbled away, complaining the entire way. Made it hard not to smile.

I got up, putting on some clothes. By the time I pulled up some sweats, she was on her feet and staring at me with a certain look in her eye. One that took serious strength not to satisfy.

If only we weren’t needed. If only.

I led her to the dining area, having done these ‘family meetings’ plenty of times before.

Antonio looked like he wanted to murder someone, sitting in his chair while Kelsie was working on calming him down. Marco and Ramona's chairs were empty. So much for a family meeting. I sat Lily down next to me, keeping her close.

I noticed the crumpled sheet of paper resting in front of Antonio. He was glaring down at it.

"Declaration of war?" I guessed out loud, already expecting Elias to send something to agitate his foe.

"I would've preferred it," Antonio denied, sighing when Kelsie squeezed his shoulder. "It's an invitation."

I didn't speak, not when I noticed his jaw set.

"Ramona ran away," Kelsie explained with a sort of gentleness in her voice that we all needed to hear. "She's agreed to marry Elias to stop the fighting."

I stiffened, not expecting that to be the case. Not when I knew Antonio hadn't even brought up the idea to his sister due to his own feelings.

"Ramona sent the invitation and she wanted us to be there for her for the wedding. Now that she's in his grip, we both know he won't give her back. So we have two choices. Accept the invitation for peace, or risk losing everything by trying to get her back and hope no one gets caught in the crossfire."

Silence trickled into the room as we considered both options.

"Personally, I don't want to die," Lily suddenly spoke up. "I might not know much about the Elias guy, but he really

wants your sister. Like *really* wants her. I don't think he'd hurt her."

Antonio scowled and I immediately frowned at the thought of my boss talking down to her. He could threaten me any time of the day, but not her.

Staring down at the invitation, he tapped his fingers against the paper. "We have a week before the wedding. Thanks to Bruno, Elias isn't in the best condition to host a wedding. With the time given, I'll go over there and see where her head is at."

"Antonio—" Kelsie started, already ready to argue.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. He's got what he wants, he's got no reason to pick a fight. If Ramona gets upset, it makes him look like the bad guy." He ran a hand through his hair before letting out a sigh. "Guess we have a wedding to prepare for."

"I haven't been to a wedding in ages," Lily murmured next to me, soft enough only for my ear to hear.

I shouldn't encourage her. Honestly, I couldn't believe she'd be willing to return to see the man who had her snatched away. The thought of her dressing up, wearing a summer dress, I didn't shoot down the idea of her coming. I was still one greedy bastard.

"We should call it a night," Kelsie encouraged, much to my relief. She'd really molded herself into her role, acting as the compassion Antonio lacked. If it weren't for her, I had no doubt Antonio would've made some deadly decisions.

Antonio nodded, his body going slack into his chair. The man was truly exhausted and I couldn't blame him.

I moved to stand, collecting Lily to come with me. She wished them goodnight before I was leading her back toward my bedroom.

One week of relative peace. I didn't know if I wanted to be relieved or dread our situation.

"Are you feeling alright?" Lily asked as we slowly walked. My damn leg was making me move half as slow.

"Just a little sore, I'll be fine." She had nothing to worry about. Catching her chewing on her lip, I frowned. "What's wrong?"

She glanced my way, tugging her eyes away instantly, letting out a soft laugh. "It's nothing."

Yeah, I didn't believe that for one second. "Is it about our situation? If you're nervous—"

"It's not," she interrupted, "I promise, it's not important."

We reached my room and I let her inside, still not feeling satisfied with her brushing away the topic. Closing the door behind us, I pressed my back against it. "Lily."

She spun around, clasping her hands together. "Okay, so listen. I've been waiting three months to *finally* take the next step. But now that we're here, you're in pain and I'm being a terrible person by being freaking needy."

Spilling the truth, her face grew flushed. The courage she built to confess the truth fell away and she tried to find something far more interesting to stare at.

Lifting myself away from the door, I walked toward her. My lips twitched, curling upward. With a gasp from her end, I threw her over my shoulder with ease. She then giggled, enjoying herself far too much.

“I told you, sweet girl, I’m fine.” Holding her close, I walked her over to my bed and tossed her down. “You heard Antonio, we only have a week. I don’t plan on wasting a second of the time we have together.”

Staring up at me wide-eyed, her lips slowly grew to a smile. After taking a nap, we were both feeling a bit restless anyway.

Lily



It was *really* hard to worry about Bruno's condition while he had his hand buried between my thighs. A thought couldn't even manifest in my head. Not while my body writhed against his blankets.

Such thick fingers penetrated my body, preparing me for what was to come. Bruno insisted, already two fingers deep. Introducing a third left me a panting and sweating mess.

Before I filled his room with a moan, his mouth was on mine, swallowing the noise down. He didn't want to draw unwanted attention to his room. That, or he wanted to keep my pleasure all to himself. With Bruno, it was impossible to tell.

I'd grown too accustomed to his hand. I wanted more, craved him. Inexperienced or not, my body constantly screamed for more. Bruno had ruined me completely.

Breaking our kiss, I sucked in a much-needed breath. Head spinning, I groaned when he dragged his mouth down my neck and chest. Tickling my skin with his beard hair, a giggle escaped followed by a sigh.

He sat back, pulling his hand away. Keeping his eyes on mine, he brought his fingers to his mouth and sucked on each one like it was his last meal.

"You're too much," I panted out, sitting up on my elbows to get a better look. Growing hotter by the second, I licked my

lips. "Please don't ever change."

When Bruno smiled, I fell in love with him all over again. If I thought his brooding nature was sexy, seeing him happy was a whole new experience.

Letting my gaze travel down his chest, I chewed on my lip. No matter how many times I saw the man's bare chest, I swooned. When I looked even lower, my pulse quickened when I reached the hardened curve beneath his sweats.

"You're going to destroy me," I mumbled out loud.

"There you go smiling again." He shook his head, chuckling softly. "It's going to be a lot."

"I know." Watching him lower his sweat, dragging his underwear down with them, my mouth watered. It wasn't the first time I'd seen his cock, I wasn't caught off guard by his size.

Honestly, I was ready for him to make his promise come true. I was ready to have some real fun. I'd thought about it plenty. Basically, every single night if I wanted to be dramatic.

Not wanting anything to get in our way, he stripped what little clothing was left on his body. Built like a tank all the way down to his feet, he easily flattened me against the mattress. Giving me no wiggle room, he tortured me, crushing his hardness against my sex.

Bruno kissed me, distracting me with his tongue while he shoved his hand between our bodies. I didn't realize what he was doing until I felt the stretch of him pushing his way inside.

Pulling from his lips, I sucked in a breath. I didn't expect the intensity of being able to feel him *everywhere*. Even taking his time, aiming not to hurt me, I still struggled to play it off cool.

He paused and I slapped his arm. "Don't you dare stop," I ordered, hooking my legs around him. "I have been waiting for this moment, Bruno," I rasped, trying to dig my heels into his back to make him continue.

Bruno hunched over my body, fisting the blankets with both of his hands.

"You have no idea how long I've wanted this, sweet girl. My bed has never felt so empty since you came into my life. Trust me, we've both suffered plenty." Confessing his feelings, his breath tickled my neck.

He then pulled back for only a moment before thrusting forward, burying himself deep inside.

I cried out, instantly clawing his back. One swift moment was all it took to knock the breath straight from my lungs.

"Hard parts over," I tried to joke, my voice strained, "please start moving."

For the first few thrusts, he wasn't rough, not like I originally wanted. Thank goodness, I would not have survived the onslaught. I took the chance to enjoy the way he placed light kisses against my face and lips. He took his sweet time while I adjusted.

Funny to see such a hardened man grow soft for only me. Made me feel special.

The pleasure didn't come, not at first. There was something about the pull and push of him moving inside that soon brought a different kind of feeling. A sensation I hadn't felt with his fingers or mouth.

It wasn't until I gave him the green light to move faster that I was ready to let the entire house know how good I felt. It still wasn't enough. I wanted more.

"Making it hard to hold back," Bruno groaned, crushing my body into his mattress with each thrust.

Hugging his neck, I gave him a brisk kiss. Catching his eyes, my smile returned. "I can take it now," I encouraged.

Bruno chuckled, deep and low, just like the way I enjoyed it. He pulled back, leaving my body feeling empty. When he wrapped his hands around my ankles, he gave them a gentle squeeze. "I really do not deserve you. You were a blessing sent to the wrong man."

I gasped when he dragged my body toward him. Using his strength to move me like I was weightless, he moved his palms to the back of my knees and lifted my hips off the mattress, setting my lower half against the thickness of his legs. Different angle, alright.

"I'm going to ruin you, Lily. No other man will be able to satisfy you after I'm finished," he promised.

“As if I’d ever want another man.” Grinning, I watched him position himself. “You’re stuck with me. I’m not going anywhere.”

He buried himself deep, holding me in place when I tried to squirm. Leaning forward, he gripped my hips hard enough to bruise them. All in order to keep me in place as his cock began sliding in and out. Rough and hard, just like I’d dreamed.

My body was not prepared for Bruno’s attack. Sending me over the edge in a matter of seconds, he wasn’t done, not even close. He continued his onslaught, hitting my sweet spot over and over until I was crying out his name.

“You’re mine, Lily.” He growled out the obvious, his breathing growing heavier with each thrust. “Fucking mine, you hear?”

I nodded, clawing at the blanket in an attempt to ground myself. I needed something to prove this was all real. Everything was tingling and with the intensity going down below, I was going to be seeing stars before Bruno was finished. Thankfully, Bruno didn’t take long to get in a similar state.

Thrusts growing erratic, my back arched and my thighs shook when he buried himself, filling my body with an unfamiliar heat.

While he worked on steadying his uneven breathing, I focused on staying awake.

“I can’t move,” I groaned, “did you destroy the bones in my legs? They feel like freaking jello.”

He didn’t answer, choosing to grab my arms and pull me against his chest. We were both so sweaty, yet he didn’t seem to mind.

“I didn’t want to tell you back at Mariani’s estate,” he mumbled against my neck, “would’ve made it too hard to let you run. But you need to know you own my heart, sweet girl. You might be mine, but I am at your complete mercy.”

I pulled back to get a look at his face. Caressing his cheeks, I traced the scar down his face with my thumb. Even with his swollen nose, I could still say he was the most handsome man I’d ever met.

“You promise?” I asked softly.

He let out a hoarse laugh. “If you can’t take me at my word, then I swear I’ll take you ring shopping once this Mariani mess is over with.”

“Think you can wait a whole week before then?” I joked, enjoying the idea of tying the knot with the man to make sure he’d be stuck with me.

The curve of his lips made it obvious he liked the idea as well.

“I’ll try my damned hardest.”

One brisk kiss and a helpful shower later, I glanced toward the door while I got dressed into one of Bruno’s shirts to sleep in.

“You don’t think they heard us, do you?”

Bruno snorted much to my dismay. “Most definitely.”

Tomorrow was going to be a bit awkward.

Bruno



One Week Later

Antonio wanted me to be alert, to be prepared for the worst-case scenario. Normally, I had no issues following his orders.

There was something about seeing Lily spinning in a dress given to her by Kelsie that just left no room in my mind to worry about the enemy.

“She’s got a few inches on me, but still looks good, right?” she asked, her attention on the fabric swirling around her legs.

“Gorgeous.” The only word that came to mind but not fitting enough. Still made her smile though.

“Are you ready?” she asked, giving me a look down. Her eyes lingered and she bit her lip. A real tease, she was.

If only we had more time.

“Let’s go, I’m sure the other two are waiting.” Leading her out of my room, we went to the dining area to find it empty.

It was still strange to have Ramona’s warmth missing from the home. It would take more than a week to get used to her leaving. With Marco still MIA, the home felt even emptier. Unless we got more men to roam the house, Antonio might have to size down.

Speaking of the devil, he showed up only a few minutes after us with Kelsie wrapped around his arm.

If I had to guess, after witnessing her put her foot down to allow both she and Lily to join us, Kelsie wanted to make sure Antonio wasn't going to attempt to leave her behind.

He looked at us, sporting a frown despite the day of supposed celebration. Not even going to speak with his sister had saved his mood. Not when she announced that she still actually, seriously wanted to marry that lunatic.

“We better go. I'd hate to be late and stall the event,” he said with enough sarcasm to get a small pat on the chest from Kelsie.

I wrapped an arm around Lily, keeping her close. Looking down at her, my gaze softened. “You know what to do if the wedding is a ploy, right?”

“Run and don't look back,” she stated automatically with a smile.

Kelsie scoffed, shaking her head. She believed the event was actually supposed to be a peaceful event to join two families that despised each other. While she could be right, we could never be too careful.

There was only one way to find out Elias Mariani's intentions. Going in as prepared as we could, we left our home and made our way toward our enemies with held breaths.

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Sneak Peek of Arranged Currency

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 remember 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 already 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 this 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 wiping my eyes 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. I don’t think your boss would 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 it, Elias. Good luck."

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

If you want to read more of Ramona and Elias' story, check out book 3 of the Franzolli Empire series!