



Corrupted By the Capo

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: I faked an engagement to a ruthless mafia enforcer...

I was facing death when ruthless mafia enforcer claimed me as his to save me.

He dragged me into this life...and his bed.

He says that I'm safe from his enemies.

But now that I'm carrying his baby, who is going to protect my heart from him?

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ONE

Molly

“Giveme everything you have if you don’t want to get hurt.”

I barely stopped myself from rolling my eyes at the sound of the faux-aggressive voice.

This—this—was why I would always miss Hope working here.

If she were here, she would have told me what a terrible idea it was to volunteer to close the shelter up alone. And if I was being my usual self and stubbornly insisted it was fine, she would have stayed after with me and kept an eagle eye on our surroundings. Meaning this asshole wouldn’t have gotten the drop on me.

But Hope was long gone, retired from the life of a vet tech. Her entire world had changed. From her basement studio to happily married to the love of her life and in vet school.

Which left me alone in this alley, dealing with this prick who sounded like he practiced being a tough guy in the mirror.

As if to underscore how alone I was, a gust of warm wind blew through the alley. It carried the scent of exhaust fumes, fried food, and a faint whiff of garbage. The streetlight buzzed and flickered, sending down pulses of yellow-white light.

It was fucking comedy. So cliché I could have laughed if I wasn't so irritated.

I sighed, not concerned but thoroughly unimpressed as I turned to face the source of the voice.

A quick glance: nice shoes, expensive pants that were terribly tailored, off-white polo two sizes too small, probably to show off huge arms inflated by some less than legal substances.

Not your standard-looking mugger, especially with clearly manicured nails, an expensive haircut, and the gold chain and the crucifix hanging around his thick neck.

If I squinted the right way, he might have been handsome if he'd eased up on the human growth hormone.

I met his dark gaze. "I'm sorry, I don't have anything," I said.

I hoped I didn't sound as bored as I felt, and I added a little snuffle at the end to try to throw him off.

"I know you have something on you or in there," he said, gesturing toward the shelter, his voice cracking before he dropped it an octave and took the threat level from TV mugger to a middle schooler on Halloween.

I exhaled, but not with fear. No, it was pure annoyance at the utter stupidity of this entire encounter.

I worked at an animal shelter in an almost bad neighborhood. What could I possibly have? Diamonds?

I reached into the pocket of my cozy black denim overalls and pulled out the two

crumpled dollar bills I kept there for just this occasion.

“This is all I have,” I said.

The man took the money, and I was glad he didn’t accidentally brush my fingers as he did. Something about this man made my skin crawl, and I didn’t want to touch him.

“Two fucking bucks?”

I bit my tongue to keep my temper in check.

Failed.

“This is an alley outside of an animal shelter, dickhead, not a bank. And before you ask, no, we don’t have any drugs here, either,” I snapped.

The man narrowed his eyes, his nostrils flaring ever so slightly.

And with that, something shifted in the air. For the first time, I felt it. Something like actual danger. I was still flabbergasted.

I mean what kind of degenerate robbed an animal shelter?

“I’m sure you have something,” he said, looking me up and down.

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His leer lit something in my gut.

Not fear this time, either.

Fucking fury.

These men were so fucking predictable.

I hated using my taser. The thing took forever to recharge and the smell of burning metal was hell to get out of my clothes. So I tried to avoid using it, but I was about to make an exception for him.

He'd more than earned it.

I reached into my pocket again. "Look, motherfuck?—"

A deep voice cut me off. "Why are you out here, doll?"

The man currently accosting me was as surprised as I was at the new voice. We both turned toward the voice like we'd been pulled by the same string.

I knew him.

Enzo Moretti.

The first time I'd met him, he'd been barging into my apartment like he owned the place. He'd given some excuse about checking me out for his cousin Nico. I'd been

determined not to mention him to Hope. She'd had enough to deal with as it was.

Of course Enzo the asshole had grabbed the phone out of my hand to talk to Hope anyway.

I'd been so annoyed that it was only after I'd finally gotten Enzo out of my place that it had struck me how familiar he'd seemed. I'd blown the feeling off and put Enzo out of my mind.

Until Hope and Nico's wedding.

Luckily, he hadn't paid me a second of attention. Not that he'd had the time. From the heavy pats on his shoulders, to the flirtatious whispers from every woman in attendance, Enzo had been the bell of the ball. Hope had been grateful for him taking at least some of the spotlight.

I'd thought he was a douchebag—and way too handsome for his own good.

Or mine.

Again, I shrugged it off. Sure, Enzo seemed familiar, but if I'd met one conceited jerk-off, I'd met them all. I'd keep the peace for Hope, and leave it at that. Whatever pesky feelings Enzo stirred were my secrets.

Easy enough, except for times like now, when I was confronted by the man in the flesh—and the attraction he stirred with no effort at all.

I sighed, confronted with a reality I couldn't ignore. My would-be mugger annoyed me, but Enzo, the way I reacted to him, scared the fuck out of me.

“Enzo,” the robber said.

“Fabiano,” he responded.

Of course these two knew each other.

Hope had never said a word about what Nico did, but she didn’t need to.

Nico was connected. And so was Enzo.

That was clear to me and the closest I’d ever been to the mafia were those true-crime shows.

“You’re far from home,” Fabiano said. “Straying into Genovese territory.”

Territory.

Yeah, I was definitely out of my league.

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It was time to go.

I pressed my hands together in a tight clasp. “Well, sounds like you two have a lot of catching up to do, so if you don’t mind...”

I went to step around Enzo and was stopped by a strong arm around my waist.

I tried to think of a time when another person had so effortlessly halted me, and I came up short.

I’d been five-eight in the fifth grade and only got bigger and taller from there. But Enzo didn’t seem to have any trouble stopping me in my tracks when his arm wrapped around my waist, holding me in place effortlessly, like I weighed nothing.

One second I was moving, the next I was pinned to him, my side flush against his hard chest, the place where we touched electrified.

“Excuse me?” I said, glaring at him, my face no doubt twisted.

He chuckled, the sound rich, amused, and far too attractive.

“Don’t be coy, doll,” he said.

As he spoke, he pulled me even closer, sealing my side against his. The suit he wore probably cost more than the entire animal shelter. Tailored within an inch of its life, the fit so perfect, it could only have been made for him. The black fabric had a subtle sheen, and his white shirt looked extra crisp against his tan skin.

He looked, smelled, and felt like money.

He made me want to lean into him.

He felt...good. I hated how solid he felt. How much I wanted to touch him even though my brain screamed danger.

Instead I tried to pull away...and got absolutely nowhere.

“She belong to you?” Fabiano said.

I was so intent on asking Enzo what the fuck he was doing, I had practically forgotten Fabiano was there.

His words drew my attention and my ire.

“I don’t belong to?—”

Enzo cut me off. “Yep, she does,” he said, his voice easy before it shifted into menace. “Which means this place is off limits.”

His voice was flat, final. Didn’t allow even a hint of debate.

Fabiano wasn’t fazed. “Are you trying to tell the Genovese what we can do in our own territory?”

“I don’t give a fuck about the Genovese or your fucking territory,” Enzo said, his voice dismissive and taunting.

I could tell it pissed Fabiano off, too, and seeing that irritation was enough to make me smile.

“This is my woman’s place, which means it—and her—are under the protection of the Morettis. Remember that,” Enzo said.

I started to interject. “I don’t?—”

“Let me handle this, doll,” Enzo said.

Doll.

He may as well have patted my head.

I looked at him, mouth gaping open.

He had shushed me.

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Well, not technically, but in practice, he had shushed me.

Nobodyshushed me.

“I haven’t heard anything about that,” Fabiano said.

I took enough of a break from my anger at this pigheaded Enzo person to notice that Fabiano had stepped closer. He also had his hand near his waist—and in an instant, the moment took a turn.

This silly little farce had become life or death.

I wasn’t afraid of guns, but I’d never really had a reason to be. Most of my interactions with petty street crime were just that: petty.

Sure, there was violence—and guns were as common as oxygen—but this...this was something different.

“You trying to start a war over two bucks?” Enzo said. His voice was calm, steel wrapped in silk, the promise of violence unmissable.

As he spoke, he pushed me behind him, and this time, I had no inclination to resist.

“You trying to start a war over some bitch?” Fabiano said.

“Watch your fucking mouth, Fabiano,” Enzo said.

On instinct, I glanced up at him, trying to process what I was hearing. Even though this situation had been tense, his voice had held a tone of playfulness.

It wasn't playful now.

In fact, when I had looked at Enzo the first time, after that feeling of familiarity, there had been something warm, almost comforting about him.

But in just that split second, I realized how simple—naive—I had been.

Because the person holding me now wasn't comforting.

He was dangerous.

And I stood behind him like I belonged there.

I wasn't sure how I missed it before, but I saw his danger now.

Saw it, believed it so much that I didn't try to pull away again.

"Don't speak to her that way," Enzo said.

Even Fabiano, clearly not a genius, was smart enough to look afraid. Interesting considering he was the one with a gun in his waistband.

"Sorry about the insult, Enzo," he said.

"Tell Molly," Enzo said.

The way Enzo said my name was something I'd never heard.

He spoke my name with reverence.

Spoke it like he was claiming me.

Fabiano glanced toward me but didn't really look at me as he mumbled, "Sorry. It won't happen again."

Enzo glared at the man as he retreated, either not interested or not willing to look back.

When he was gone, I looked at Enzo, sudden awareness hitting me.

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“Wait a second. How do you know where I work?”

TWO

Enzo

“That’s your question?” I said as I stared down at Molly.

She looked furious, and it took everything inside of me not to laugh.

Not because she was funny.

It was just...she was so fucking adorable.

I’d called her doll, and it fit.

She had the biggest, prettiest brown eyes I’d ever seen, and when she smiled, her eyes lit up.

That smile had lived rent-free in my head since the first time I’d seen her, and I hadn’t been able to shake it.

She’d drawn me in when I’d seen her at Carlo’s, and even when she’d been terrified as the bullets flew, and then confused when the drugs I’d slipped her started to take effect, I’d felt a connection I couldn’t explain.

That was why I’d shown up at her apartment that day.

By then I'd known everything about her, but the urge to see her had been too strong.

After that visit to her apartment, I'd managed to keep my distance, even avoiding her at Nico's wedding, which had been almost impossible.

She'd looked like a present, all full curves and soft brown skin wrapped in pink satin just for me to unwrap.

I'd resisted, but seeing her tonight felt like luck, like she had fallen directly into my arms.

I'd have to thank Nico for telling the men to keep an eye on the shelter. I'd gotten to watch her, and that asshole Fabiano had given me an excuse to finally talk to her.

After all, she was Hope's friend, which meant she was under Moretti protection whether she knew it or not. I'd fail my cousin and my name if I'd let Fabiano fuck with her. And if stepping in had the added benefit of being in her space, I sure as shit wouldn't complain.

Not that Molly would make it easy.

Every time I saw her, whether she was either annoyed, freaking out and then confused, or just plain scared, she always tried to move with this air of toughness.

She was trying now, too, but I could see through it.

I'd watched her interaction with Fabiano, simultaneously proud and pissed when she'd been so unafraid of him.

Had pinpointed the exact moment when she'd realized how deadly serious that interaction was.

Saw the flicker of understanding in her eyes, followed by a small step closer to me.

I'd never wanted anything more than to have Molly close to me. Thought maybe once would be enough but I now knew that was a lie.

She was still close to me but when she realized it, she pushed me away, her hands leaving a ghost of sensation on my chest.

I gave her some space—but just a little. I liked her being that close to me.

After all, I'd fucking dreamed about it enough.

I wouldn't let the opportunity go to waste.

She stared up at me with those beautiful eyes. "That's a pretty important question," she said.

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I touched my chest like I was wounded. “Molly, am I really so forgettable?”

She recognized me. I knew that, just as I knew she would deny it.

Her eyes went hard, and she stepped a little farther away.

I’d never expected Molly to be easy, and she seemed intent on proving my point.

She stuffed her hands into her pockets, focusing the bib of her overalls to pull tight against her absolutely delicious-looking tits.

I didn’t appreciate the distance but I loved the view.

“My eyes are up here, asshole,” she barked.

I kept my gaze down. “I wasn’t looking at your eyes, doll.”

She scoffed, and out of my periphery, I saw her shake her head. I glanced up then and saw she was really pissed. Once she knew she had my attention, she glared, her eyes full of anger.

I wanted to kiss her so fucking bad, I clenched my fists to keep my hands still. Molly was fire, and oh how I wanted to burn.

“How. The. Fuck. Do. You? Know?”

She punctuated every word with a little jab at my chest.

I couldn't stop myself. I grabbed her hand and slowly pulled it to my lips.

Her eyes widened with surprise, and when I brushed a soft kiss against her fingers, she rolled her eyes.

"Enzo Moretti. Hope's cousin," I said around my smile.

"Hope doesn't have any cousins," she said, scoffing.

"She married Nico, so she has at least fifty cousins now, including me."

"Fine. Answer my question, cousin Enzo?"

"Just Enzo to you, and I'm following orders."

She shook her head and then pressed her fingers against her closed eyes. "I was supposed to be home by now," she muttered. Then she opened her eyes and looked at me. "What does that mean?"

I shrugged. "Hope cares about this place. Nico cares about Hope. I care about what Nico cares about. So I'm here. Which is how I know where you work."

That was almost true.

I didn't want to seem like any more of a psycho than I already did, so I left out the insignificant detail that letting a day pass without seeing her left me on edge. That was my burden to bear, and from the softening of her expression, she bought my story, so I'd run with it.

"And are you to blame for your friend Fabiano harassing me?" she asked.

“Fabiano Genovese is no friend of mine. And no, I’m not. He was just fucking with you for the fun of it. Any money he got was just gravy,” I said.

She looked disgusted and annoyed as she glanced at the building. “It’s a fucking animal shelter,” she said, exasperated. “Maybe if we were one of those fancy places uptown where you could steal an expensive breed to sell, I could see it, but seriously, this place is full of mangy strays and people too soft-hearted or desperate for work to do something else. It’s not a good way to make money.”

“Which are you? Too soft-hearted I’d bet,” I said.

She chuckled. “None of your business, Enzo.”

I laughed and then sobered. “The shelter get robbed a lot?”

This place was supposed to be off-limits. I hadn’t seen anything in the time I’d been watching her, but that didn’t mean I knew everything.

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“More than we should, but things have been quiet for a while. I’d hoped we’d turned the corner,” she said.

“Maybe you have,” I said.

“Maybe,” she responded, looking off down the alley before facing me again. “Anyway, Enzo, can’t say it’s nice to meet you or that I hope to see you again, but have a nice evening.”

“Don’t worry, doll, you don’t have to say it.”

She huffed, but I didn’t miss her quick little laugh.

Knew I would replay that sound over and over in my head until I heard it again.

“You ready to go?” I asked a second later.

She looked at me like I was an especially challenging puzzle, her head tilted just so and the lights from the alley making her eyes look more bronze than deep brown. “Go where?”

I didn’t answer immediately and instead stared at her. Her bangs were different now. This week she had pink-colored tips. I actually liked the blue ones. Or maybe the purple was my favorite.

Whatever the color, I wanted to wrap her hair around my fist as I fed her my cock.

I brought myself far enough out of the haze of lust to remember that I wasn't a fucking hairdresser, so I had no idea how she changed the color so often and decided then the color didn't matter.

Everything looked good on her.

And nothing would look even better.

"Go where?"

Molly's question broke into my lewd thoughts.

"Home," I said.

She took her hands out of her pockets and crossed her arms underneath her breasts.

"What concern is it of yours?"

"I need to know where I'm going," I said, not mentioning the very small fact that I already knew where she lived, something I was surprised she didn't acknowledge.

She laughed. "You think I'm letting you walk me home?"

I laughed. "You think I was asking?"

"Look, I don't know who the fuck you?—"

I lifted a finger and pulled out my phone.

She stopped talking, her mouth flopping open and then closed. She was so indignant she couldn't speak. Not a reaction I'd seen from Molly much.

But instead of teasing her like I so badly wanted to, I punched a few buttons and waited for a response.

Hope answered on the second ring.

“Hey, Enzo. You looking for Nico?” she asked.

“No, cousin, you’re who I need,” I replied.

“Okay. Is everything okay? And when are you coming by for breakfast? Maybe I can ask Molly to come, too,” she said.

I wasn’t surprised. I hadn’t said a peep about Molly to anyone, but Hope was smart and observant. I was sure she hadn’t missed my reaction to the mention of Molly’s name. Or the way I clung to every morsel of information about her that Hope might offhandedly mention.

“I’ll come by soon, and as for Molly, I’m here with her now. Can you tell her it’s fine if I walk her home?”

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“Why are you with Molly?” she asked.

“Serendipity,” I said.

“Enzo...” Hope dragged out my name in a way that would make my Aunt Mona proud.

“Just happened to walk by and catch Fabiano Genovese giving Molly a hard time. Gentleman that I am, I had to intervene,” I said.

Hope laughed. “You, a gentleman? Wait, don’t answer that but put Molly on the phone.”

I handed Molly the phone. She looked like she wanted to pummel me with it, but instead she glared at me as she lifted the phone to her ear.

“Hey, Hope...” She blinked, her face twisted. I couldn’t quite make out what Hope said, but it was clear Molly didn’t like it. “But, Hope...I don’t want him to.”

She blew out a harsh breath and then frowned, her forehead wrinkled with annoyance.

Fuck, what was it about this girl? She was full-on pouting. That shit usually pissed me off, but with Molly, it attracted me that much more. I needed to leave this girl the fuck alone.

I made no attempt to move.

“I know, Hope. But...fine—but you owe me.”

Molly sighed as she hung up the phone, then pushed it toward me.

“Let’s go,” she said.

She started walking and didn’t look back. I matched her step for step but didn’t try to talk. Molly might have pushed me into traffic, and seeing her little pissed-off face was enough of a prize for the day.

Fifteen minutes later, we turned on her block. Molly stopped in front of her building and then finally looked at me.

“I’m home. Thanks, Enzo. Not nice to meet you and I hope I never see you again,” she said as she gave me a little finger wave and walked up the wide concrete steps.

I let her get up two before I called out. “You forgot something.”

She spun, then looked down at me dramatically. “Make it quick. I’ve had quite enough of you.”

“You’re going to get a lot more,” I responded.

There were nine specific inches I’d dreamed about giving her over and over and over, but that could wait for the moment.

“What does that mean, Enzo?” she asked.

“I told them you’re mine. Now I have to prove it.”

THREE

Molly

“What does that mean, Enzo?” I said.

I tapped my foot on my steps, annoyed that I was so close to my apartment and away from Enzo, but he’d found yet another way to slow me down.

I couldn’t help but think of my poor grandmother. How many times in my twenty-five years had I cornered her with one scheme or another? The woman had always said I’d send her to an early grave. A piece of shit drunk driver had beat me to it, but I’d given it a good shot.

Hopefully Enzo wouldn’t be as much trouble to me as I had been to her.

“It means exactly what I said,” he said in that stupid deep, gravelly voice of his.

I raised a hand, at my wit’s end.

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Between Fabiano and this crap with Enzo and the long day's work at the shelter, I'd had enough of everyone. "You cut me off before, so let me say this again loud and clear: I belong to no one. I don't ever want to see you again. Have the night you deserve," I said.

I spun on my heel and stomped up the steps, proud of myself that I didn't look back.

I stepped inside of my apartment and dead-bolted the door.

I was proud of myself when I ignored Enzo's persistent knocking and Hope's phone calls.

I was less proud of myself now, three days later. Because instead of putting out of my head and not giving him another thought, I was seated in the nicest dining room I'd even been in, wearing a dress I couldn't afford—and told myself I fucking hated—with Enzo's hand protectively wrapped around mine like I belonged to him.

"You gotta try the cutlet, Molly. It's fucking amazing," Enzo said.

As he spoke, his breath brushed against my ear, and he stroked his lips across my cheek.

It wasn't a kiss, exactly.

Just another one of those innocent touches he seemed so content to give.

Always "accidentally."

It hadn't escaped me that they'd increased in frequency, and I was sure they weren't accidental, not when his touches lingered.

Not when I knew that he knew how I reacted.

I smiled brightly, noticing that he smiled back. His eyes—the most enchanting shade of golden brown—sparkled with amusement.

I kept a smile on my face as I leaned over, pushing my lips to his ear.

“I hope you fucking choke on it,” I said softly, ending with a light laugh.

Enzo turned his head, brushing his lips against my ear.

“I have something for you to choke on instead,” he said.

I smiled tightly, trying to ignore the way my stomach flipped with desire at his words.

When I pulled away, I met the gaze of a woman I'd been introduced to earlier. Enzo had told me she was his aunt, but I couldn't for the life of me remember her name.

She was maybe seventy with thick, dark hair threaded through with gray. Her eyes reminded me of Enzo, but they exuded a warmth that felt like home.

She was also apparently Enzo and I's biggest fan.

“Oh, to be young and in love again,” she said.

“Mona, you'll always be young,” Enzo said.

Mona.

That was her name.

I'd have to remember that, though I hoped this would be the last time we met. No offense to her; she'd actually been great. But after I put in this appearance, I would make sure Enzo was nothing but a distant memory.

I shifted in my seat, trying to ignore the way my heart clenched at that thought or at the fact that I knew Enzo wouldn't disappear so easily.

He'd been ever-present for the last three days. Waiting outside my door the morning after all that crap with Fabiano.

At the shelter.

Walking me home at night.

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Some part of me had gotten used to him, annoying as he was.

“Always so charming, Enzo. Tell me, how did you meet the beautiful Molly?”

Enzo chuckled, and I couldn't help looking at him. He looked...happy. And if I wasn't seeing things, his elderly aunt made him blush.

“You know how it is, Mona. I was out and about. Saw her. Had to have her.” As he spoke, he stroked his fingertips along my shoulder, the shoulder that was bare at his instance. His fingertips burned my skin with silent, insistent promise.

He'd insisted I come to this dinner and he had the dress and shoes delivered.

I'd said nothing, but it wasn't lost on me that everything fit perfectly and the deep green silk perfectly complemented my skin's dark hues and the cut of the dress made my curves look amazing.

Of course the jerk had great taste. The dress was perfect, and when he'd seen me in it, a slow, satisfied smile had lit his face.

I smiled, suddenly feeling mischievous.

“Oh, that's not how I remember it at all.”

I batted my eyelashes and could have fist-pumped when Enzo gulped.

Mona laughed, then reached across the table to pat my hand. “We can never listen to

men on these things. You tell me the tale, bella.”

Fuck.

I glanced at Enzo and saw he was smiling now—no doubt at my own discomfort.

My plan had backfired. But seeing that flicker of panic on his face had been worth it.

I looked at Mona. “I was in trouble, and Enzo helped me,” I said simply.

It wasn’t exactly a lie.

She nodded. “That sounds like my Enzo. A little rough around the edges, but such a sweet boy. Now that he’s settled down, he’ll be even better.”

I watched her eyes as they lingered on Enzo. The idea of him being “settled” was almost laughable.

Nothing about the man was settled.

He looked dangerous, and not just in the obvious way—the “I could fuck you up and not break a sweat” kind of way.

That was a given.

No. He was dangerous in ways I couldn’t really fathom.

He scared me.

Embarrassing to admit but true nonetheless.

I talked a big game. Hope had told me he was someone I could trust. But when Enzo waited outside my door and then later, when he'd showed up at the shelter and told me I'd find "appropriate attire" inside the package he'd left—I hadn't even considered defying him.

It had been far too easy for me to go with the flow, and that wasn't me.

But somehow, bending to Enzo's will didn't feel like surrender.

It felt like relief.

Felt like exhaling for the first time in years.

Felt like something I wanted more of.

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And that?

That was more terrifying than the Genovese, the Morettis, or anything else.

I blinked when Mona patted my hand. “Molly, you are beautiful, and you make my Enzo happy. If he gives you trouble, call me. I’ll straighten him out,” she said.

“I will,” I said.

Mona nodded, looking satisfied. And I somehow managed to make it through the rest of the meal.

“See? You had fun,” he said after dinner as we waited at the valet.

“I didn’t say all that. But what I did say was that I would take the train home. You don’t need to take me.”

Enzo grazed his lips along my temple. “You did well. Mona looks soft but she’s a savage. And she has an impeccable bullshit detector.”

“What does that have to do with the train, Enzo?” I said.

“Molly, you know you’re not taking the fucking train. Anyway, you felt safe with them. You feel safe with me,” he said.

I huffed, but didn’t deny what he’d said.

Because it was true.

Enzo locked his eyes with mine, grazed his lips along my temple as he pulled me closer, his hand centered possessively at the small of my back.

“But we really need to sell this,” he said.

I noticed when his eyes shifted and I followed his gaze to where it landed.

It was Fabiano.

His eyes were on mine, but everything about his posture told me I was secondary.

He was watching Enzo.

Waiting.

Enzo huffed, then flipped Fabiano off.

Then he turned to look at me and leaned in.

His kiss started like a whisper.

A breath.

Turned into a wave.

The rest of the world fell away, and my brain couldn't hold anything but the feeling of him.

There was no Fabiano.

No restaurant.

No Aunt Mona.

Only Enzo.

His lips, warm against mine.

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Then his tongue as he claimed my mouth.

His scent as it filled my nostrils.

The perfection of his body against mine.

And all I could do was receive it.

He claimed my lips thoroughly, kissing me like I was his to devour.

It wasn't the first time I'd been kissed, but it may as well have been.

His mouth was the perfect balance of rough and reverent.

It short-circuited my brain.

I needed him closer. I wouldn't dare say it out loud—but my body spoke for me.

I kissed him back.

Because I wanted to.

Because I was ready.

He broke the kiss and stared down at me with eyes so intense I shivered.

“You still want to ride the train home?” he whispered.

Instead of answering, I got in the car.

As I watched him walk around the car, trying to process the moment I realized something with undeniable clarity.

I was in over my head, way, way over my head.

And I didn't care.

FOUR

Molly

It was after midnight when Enzo finally parked.

"You need a parking space," he said.

"Enzo, I don't have a car. So no, I don't need a parking space," I said.

"But I do," he responded.

He flashed me a quick smile and then got out and walked around the car and offered me his arm.

My pride told me not to take it.

I did anyway.

It felt good, too good, walking down the block on Enzo's arm. It felt natural too, when it should have been anything but.

I practically floated up my stairs, my keys clutched in one hand while Enzo held the other.

It took me a moment to realize how quiet the hallway was. But it was quiet, too quiet... The kind of quiet that made the hairs on my neck lift like antennae.

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I glanced at Enzo and noticed that he was on alert.

Then I looked toward my apartment.

The door was ajar.

I stopped.

Blinked.

Then started to reach for the knob.

Enzo pulled me back.

“Wait here.”

He put himself in front of me and walked toward the door.

His body was like a shield, a force that would stand between me and anything that might try to hurt me. He was almost overbearing in his presence, and for the first time, I didn't resent it.

I appreciated it.

I couldn't tear my gaze away from him, my mind whirling as I tried to comprehend what had happened.

The door was splintered.

It had been kicked in.

My pulse spiked, and I fumbled in the cute little handbag that was only big enough for my phone and a tube of lipstick I hadn't even bothered to put on.

I pulled out the phone but realized I didn't have anyone to call.

"What are you doing?" I said when Enzo took the phone out of my hand.

"Stay back, Molly," he said.

I watched, still dumbfounded as he unlocked my phone and dialed a number.

"How do you know my unlock code?" I asked.

He chuckled, but a split second later was all business again.

"Meet me at Molly's in fifteen. Bring muscle and a new door," he said.

He hung up the phone without waiting for a response and then focused on the door.

I tried not to pay attention to the hand at his waistband, or think about what he might be capable of.

Instead I watched him as he moved—graceful, precise, terrifying.

He took one look at the door and pushed it open fully, scanning the interior with a narrowed gaze. I stayed frozen, heart in my throat, while he stepped inside like he owned the place.

“Stay there,” he said over his shoulder.

His voice was flat.

Controlled.

The exact opposite of how I felt.

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He disappeared inside, and seconds that felt like years ticked by.

When he emerged, his expression was dark, menacing.

It promised retribution.

Before I could think, I took a step back. Enzo's eyes flickered and his jaw ticked, but he didn't say anything.

"It's empty but the door's busted and the lock is useless," he said.

"Someone was inside my house," I said stupidly.

Enzo's expression softened. "Let's go," he said.

"No. I won't be forced out of my home," I said with bravado I didn't feel. Sure, I may have sounded strong, but I sure as fuck didn't feel strong.

To think that the excitement I'd felt just minutes ago had come to this. Maybe I should thank whoever had broken in. At least they'd kept me from doing something stupid like sleeping with Enzo.

I glanced at the door again and knew that was wrong. I couldn't help but think about that time in fourth grade when someone had broken into me and Gram's apartment. She'd been spitting mad. It took me years to realize she'd been afraid, too, but that she'd put up a brave face for me.

The least I could do was live up to her example.

“Come on, doll,” Enzo said.

“I’m not leaving my home, Enzo.”

To emphasize my point, I walked inside, trying not to balk at the splintered door.

“Fine, hard ass. The guys will be over in a few minutes to fix the door,” he said.

“Tell them not to bother. It’s after midnight, and I don’t have money to replace the door. I’ll figure something out,” I said tightly.

“Molly,” Enzo said, his voice so soft, I couldn’t help but look at him. When I met his eyes, he smiled. “That wasn’t a question.”

“Enzo...” I started, but when I saw the set of his expression, I shook my head and muttered, “Fine.”

By the time Enzo’s men had replaced the door, it was almost two in the morning. The apartment smelled like metal shavings and Enzo’s cologne—dark, citrusy, unnerving.

The essence of danger.

I dropped onto the couch, exhausted. He stood near the window, arms crossed, watching the street like a hawk.

“You don’t have to stay,” I said.

“I know.”

“Enzo...”

He didn't even look at me. “I'm staying.”

I huffed. “Don't you have made-man stuff to do? Or women to chase?”

His lips twitched, but he didn't take the bait. “I already caught the only woman I was chasing.”

I rolled my eyes but didn't argue.

Too tired.

Too affected by his words.

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He moved across the room and crouched by the door, examining the new lock. His shirt rode up, exposing the hard lines of his back. Scars slashed across his ribs like pale lightning.

My breath caught.

He didn't see me watching, so he couldn't see the way his body—coiled, powerful, lethal—was doing things to mine.

He turned.

Caught me staring.

Neither of us looked away.

He stood slowly.

“Lock's solid now.”

“Thanks,” I whispered.

He was too close.

I was too weak.

Desire hung between us heavy and thick.

I was the first to look away.

“You hungry?” I asked, because my mouth had to do something.

He blinked, and the spell broke. “Always.”

I walked to the kitchen and busied myself with a bag of frozen dumplings and the air fryer Hope had bought me last Christmas.

My hands shook, but I tried to ignore it.

He leaned in the doorway. “You cook?”

“Barely.”

“But you’re cooking for me,” he said.

“I would hardly call this cooking,” I countered.

He smiled. “You trying to impress me, Molly?”

“If I were, you’d know it.”

His grin was slow.

Dangerous.

Promised things that scared me.

Things I wanted with all my heart.

We ate on the couch, legs stretched out, knees almost brushing. He didn't talk much, but his eyes never left me.

Eventually, I stood.

"I'm going to bed," I announced.

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“I’ll take the chair,” he said.

I tried not to feel disappointed. Enzo was being a gentleman, something that, weirdly, didn’t surprise me.

Enzo gave me another soft smile. “Don’t worry, doll, I’ve slept on worse.”

I returned his smile and then walked away.

I paused in the doorway of my bedroom, hand on the frame.

“Enzo,” I called.

“Yeah?” He looked at me.

“Thank you.”

His eyes softened just enough to make my chest tighten.

“Anytime, doll.”

I believed him, more than I had any right to. More than I wanted to.

I didn’t sleep.

Not really.

At some point, I got up for water and found him curled in the chair, one arm over his chest, head tilted back.

The light from outside caught the side of his face, casting shadows over the sharp lines of his jaw. His expression was peaceful.

He didn't look like the scary capo with the big gun.

He looked younger.

Tired.

Human.

I padded over to him. Close enough to hear the slow, even rhythm of his breathing.

He shifted slightly, lips parting like he was about to speak. I flinched.

But he didn't wake.

Just muttered something low. A name, maybe. Or a prayer.

I didn't know why I stayed and stared at him like a creep.

Maybe because it was the first time I'd seen him vulnerable.

Maybe it was the fact that he'd stayed.

Either way, I watched him until I could breathe again.

Then I went back to bed.

Realized that I'd felt safe enough not to check the door.

Realized that I hadn't even thought of it.

FIVE

Molly

Morning sunlight spilled across the hardwood floor when I stepped out of my room.

After last night, I wasn't sure what I expected.

But one thing I definitely didn't expect was the smell of fresh coffee and the sound of a screwdriver against metal.

And Enzo crouched in front of the door—shirtless.

I stopped breathing.

His muscles flexed under golden skin as he adjusted the screws, pure sin in motion. He'd carelessly tossed his shirt and jacket over the recliner, and his pants clung to his waist, teasing what was underneath and making me want to throw my dignity right out of the door and fall at his feet.

I was so busy ogling him that I didn't notice he'd turned to look at me.

Busted.

He smirked when he caught my eye. "Good morning."

"That's debatable."

His smile wavered and he looked concerned. “You get any sleep at all?”

I shrugged and found myself being honest. “Barely.”

“You should have joined me. The chair’s not as bad as it looks.”

The softness in his eyes made me feel exposed. I looked away and stared at the door. “What are you doing to my door?”

“I didn’t like the look of those hinges, so I’m fixing them,” he said. “Figured I’d finish the job. I don’t like half-done things.”

He turned back to his work. My eyes followed the slope of his shoulders, the line of his back. I hated how much I wanted to touch him, study every inch of him, commit him to memories that I would carry forever.

“You want coffee? Even though I wouldn’t call that instant crap coffee,” he said.

I blinked. “What?”

He nodded to the kitchen. “Coffee. I made enough for two.”

I smiled. “You drink coffee like a normal person, huh?”

“Define normal,” he said.

I snorted and went to the kitchen to pour a cup. When I came back, he was standing, shirtless, wiping sweat off his chest with a paper towel.

My body went hot and cold all at once.

“You keep doing that on purpose,” I muttered.

He raised a brow. “Doing what?”

“That,” I said, my eyes on his chest.

He stepped closer. I didn’t move.

“Is it working?”

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“Don’t play with me, Enzo,” I said.

“Why not?” he said. His voice was low, teasing—but underneath, I heard the truth of it.

He was just as on edge as I was.

“You know exactly what you’re doing, Enzo,” I said.

He grazed my cheek with soft fingers. “Do I?” he asked, trying to sound detached.

I hated him.

I wanted him.

I set my coffee down, hard.

“Enzo.”

He didn’t flinch. Just stood there, waiting.

“Why are you really here?”

The playfulness in his eyes was gone in an instant.

What was left was sternness, the faintest hint of concern.

“Because someone tried to break into your home, and because I don’t trust anyone else to keep you safe.”

I swallowed.

“That’s it?”

He shook his head slowly.

“No. That’s not it.”

He stepped closer again, until I smelled the cologne on his skin.

“You want the whole truth, doll? I’m here because when I’m not, I think about you too much. Because I’d rather be in your tiny apartment fixing your door than anywhere else in the world.”

He leaned in but stopped just short of my mouth.

“And because every time I look at you, I want to kiss you.”

My lips parted.

He didn’t move.

The tension stretched, wire-tight.

I reached up and touched his cheek.

Just once.

That was enough.

And then I walked away.

Because I needed a minute.

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Because I didn't know if I wanted him to follow.

And because part of me already knew he would.

SIX

Molly

I was right.

Enzo was barely a step behind me before I turned to look at him.

"What do you think this is, Enzo?" I said.

"I think this is what you and I have both wanted since the first time we laid eyes on each other. I think this is inevitable," he responded.

I couldn't deny what he said. "It is, but it's nothing more."

"You letting me down easy, doll?" he said.

"Just making sure we understand each other," I said.

That was more for my benefit than his. Enzo threw me off completely, making me feel things I'd never felt before. I needed to keep my head on my shoulders. If I didn't, I might lose myself to him.

That was something I wouldn't risk.

"We understand each other, doll," he said.

He moved closer, pressing his lips against my neck. Then he moved his lips up the curve of my neck.

Slowly.

Possessively.

I jumped.

He pulled back and braced my head with his eyes. His dark eyes were locked on my face as he studied me.

"You like it when I touch you," he said. "You breathe differently. Your pupils dilate."

I chuckled, the sound low, husky, proving his words true. "Jesus, are you studying me or something?"

"Obsessing, actually," he said.

That made me falter.

I put my hand on his chest, intending to push him back.

I pulled him closer, and he leaned in.

I narrowed my eyes, trying to keep at least some distance, no matter how fake it might be.

He kissed me anyway.

It wasn't gentle.

His mouth came down on mine with an edge of frustration—like he was tired of pretending.

Tired of waiting.

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I didn't stop him.

I kissed him back.

Hard.

Hungry.

His hands slipped under my thighs, lifting me onto like I weighed nothing. My knees bracketed his hips.

I felt the softness of my bed under me, trapping me under Enzo's hard body.

It seemed impossible, but it made me want him even more.

"Tell me to stop," he whispered against my lips.

I didn't.

Because I didn't want him to.

So I told the truth.

"Enzo, please don't stop," I said.

He dragged his mouth down my neck, biting at the place where my pulse pounded. I felt every scrape of his teeth like fire on my skin.

My fingers gripped his shoulders. His name escaped me like a whisper, like a dare.

“Say it again,” he growled.

“Enzo.”

That broke something in him.

Our clothes disappeared.

Our mouths collided.

Our bodies pressed and tangled together like they knew each other.

He kissed me like I was his.

Like he was tired of pretending I wasn't.

His hands were rough as he touched me, claiming every inch of skin he touched.

His hands fisted my hips so tight I was sure I would bruise.

He loosened his hold to grip my hair and used the others to smooth down my body to settle between my thighs.

I was soaking for him, and sighed out and laid his forehead against mine.

He found my lips with his, and we locked eyes.

I held his gaze as he thrust into me, the strength of his movement forcing the air out of my lungs.

I arched beneath him, nails digging into his back. He groaned against my mouth like he'd been starving and just got fed.

The way he took me was brutal.

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Aching.

Desperate.

And I wanted all of it.

He pinned my wrists above my head with one hand, the other holding my hip steady as he drove into me, deeper with each stroke.

I broke apart under him, shattered around him.

He didn't stop.

He chased his own climax like a man on fire, panting my name like a curse.

When he came, it was with a sound that wasn't quite human.

He collapsed beside me, pulling me with him, our limbs a mess of tangled heat and wrecked nerves.

I didn't speak.

Neither did he.

Eventually, I stood, gathering my robe from the hook, and went to the bathroom.

I stared at myself in the mirror.

My gaze lingering on the marks on my throat.

The fingerprints on my hips.

Something in my eyes I didn't want to name.

I washed my face slowly.

Brushed my teeth.

Dried my hands like I had all the time in the world, but my heart was still racing.

I wasn't sure what scared me more: how much I'd wanted him—or how much I didn't regret giving in.

When I came back, he was still in bed, one arm flung across his eyes.

I crawled under the blanket beside him. Close enough to feel his heat, far enough not to touch.

“That was a mistake,” I whispered.

He didn't answer right away.

Then, he said, “Yeah.”

The word landed between us like glass cracking under weight.

I turned to face the wall.

Knowing neither of us believed it.

The next morning was...interesting.

I woke up before Enzo, and after a quick shower, threw on a hoodie and leggings, making coffee like it was any other day. Like my body didn't still ache in all the places he'd touched me. Claimed me.

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He padded into the kitchen later, still shirtless, like nothing had changed.

He poured himself a cup of coffee without asking.

Sat across from me with his usual, unreadable calm.

“You work today?” he asked.

I nodded. “Morning shift. Inventory and new animal intake.”

“I’ll drive you,” he said.

“I can take the train.”

He stared at me. Took a sip.

“I’ll drive you,” he said again.

I didn’t argue.

Didn’t trust my voice.

When I stood, I felt the ghost of his hands on my skin. The memory of his weight pressing me into the mattress. The sound of his voice when he said my name like it meant something.

I packed my things in silence.

We didn't touch.

Didn't speak.

But when we walked out of my new door together, his hand hovered at the small of my back.

Not quite touching.

But close enough that I felt that touch linger for hours.

Couldn't stop myself from smiling every time I did.

SEVEN

Molly

Two Weeks Later

"Have the goons retired?" I asked Hope.

"Molly," she said, glaring daggers at me.

Well, I couldn't really call them daggers.

I mean, this was Hope I was talking about, so "daggers" were a stretch. More like toothpicks, but those sharp plastic ones shaped like swords.

I smiled at my own silly thought, knowing who was to blame, and looked at my best friend in the world.

Her neat braids were pulled up in her usual sloppy bun, and she looked like herself except for the fact that her jeans and T-shirt were designer, and her wedding ring was big enough to blind me. But even still, sitting in the beautifully appointed home she shared with Nico, one where clearly no expense was spared, she was still Hope.

The girl was the nicest girl I'd ever met. The real kind of nice. The kind that didn't flinch when shit got tough.

The very first time I met Hope, I had known we were going to be fast friends.

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Not that she'd made it easy. Back then, I hadn't known about everything that made Hope who she was, but even still, there had been something about her. Something that made me want to look after her, and something that made me admire her.

She at once confessed that she feared being invisible so that she could survive was the only thing she was good at. She'd been so wrong, and I was glad she'd found Nico.

Some might look at her and Nico and think it didn't make sense. But I saw it. Even a tough guy like Nico was putty in Hope's hands. And even though he was intimidating, I saw how much he loved and cherished her and gave her the life she deserved.

I couldn't be happier for her.

"Goons, Molly?" she said, her head tilted.

"What?" I blinked at her as innocently as I could.

She laughed, then shook her head.

"You're incorrigible. I can't tell if you're the bad influence or Enzo is," she said.

"What would give you the idea that Enzo has any influence on me at all?" I asked.

I tried to keep a straight face, something that was almost impossible in the face of the truth. I'd spent practically every waking moment and a lot of sleeping moments with

Enzo over the last two weeks.

He'd also ruined me for every man before him and any that would come after on every available surface of my apartment—and some that still surprised me.

“Save it, Molly,” she said.

“Has Enzo been gossiping?” I asked.

“Of course he has. They all do,” she said.

I laughed, and she joined in.

“Plus, I heard you met Mona,” she said.

“She’s so lovely...Wait, are you trying to trick me out of information?” I eyed her suspiciously.

“Just a little confirmation. Nico won’t give me details, and Enzo just blows me off,” she said. She narrowed her eyes. “To say nothing of the fact that my very best friend didn’t bother to tell me anything. So I’m forced to use all of the tools at my disposal.”

“You have better things to do than gossip about me. And I came to talk about the shelter,” I said.

Hope nodded, and then started to tick off a list on her fingers. “The shelter is fully self-funded, and I have a lead on an expert who’s willing to help out with potentially dangerous breeds. Enzo is overseeing the facility updates, and you’ve secured next year’s food donations. Okay, we’ve talked about the shelter—now tell me about this dinner at the Morettis,” she said.

“Well, after that jerk harassed me at the shelter, Enzo insisted that we had to pretend to be dating, at least for a little while, until some of the attention went away,” I said.

I rolled my eyes and then took a sip of my diet soda.

“Ridiculous, right?” I said.

I laughed, but then stopped when I noticed she hadn’t joined me.

She gave methatlook. The I’m-concerned-and-you’re-not-taking-this-seriously-Molly look. Hope had never had a chance to meet my grandmother, but she may as well have been channeling her now. And like Gram, Hope was as patient as a sniper. I wouldn’t weasel out of this one.

“What, Hope?” I said, still honor-bound to put up a fight.

“It’s just—I need you to be safe. And if Enzo says this is what you need to do, you should,” she said.

“Well, I am. Which is why I was at the Morettis. But...”

“But what?” Hope responded.

“But...Enzo.”

“Yes, Enzo,” she said.

“Hope,” I said, my voice taking on an edge.

She smiled. “What’s the problem, Molly?”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re sounding way too reasonable, and it’s suspicious as fuck.”

Hope countered, “And you’re almost pouting, which tells me I’m on to something. So why don’t you save us both the headache and tell me what’s going on?”

“I saw Enzo at your wedding, but we didn’t talk,” I said.

“That doesn’t seem to be a problem now,” she said.

“No, but...” I trailed off, trying to put into words what I felt.

Enzo had been great. Better than great. I’d tried to keep perspective, telling myself I’d enjoy whatever time we had and when it was over, maybe we’d leave as friends. Simple enough, but I learned nothing was simple with Enzo.

“He feels so familiar. I feel...safe with him,” I finally said.

“That’s not a bad thing,” Hope said.

“No, but it’s weird. And I don’t like it,” I said.

“You don’t like Enzo?” she said.

“No, I don’t like Enzo because I like the way he makes me feel way too much for it to be healthy,” I said. Then I giggled. “But ignore me. You know how I can get.”

“Nope, don’t try to shut me out, Molly. And if something’s wrong, you can tell me,” she said.

“Nothing’s wrong.” She looked at me skeptically. “Really. He just feels familiar, and I worry that it’s clouding my perspective. It’s probably best to be on my toes with him.”

Hope didn’t look completely convinced, but she didn’t push, either.

“But that’s enough of that. That idiot has been taking up far too much of my time. I can’t waste my visit with you talking about him.” I smiled.

“No, this I want to hear,” she said.

I laughed. “Fine. He’s the most ridiculous human being on planet Earth,” I said.

“I’m not disagreeing,” she responded.

“But...I don’t know,” I said.

“You don’t know?” Hope said.

“Fine. He’s...fun,” I said.

“Very much, but you say that like he shouldn’t be,” she said.

“I mean, he shouldn’t be. I haven’t asked any questions, but I’m not an idiot. And I don’t think that sweet Mona Moretti has armed guards at her house because her husband made his fortune in imported Italian marble,” I said.

Hope murmured noncommittally.

It was the best I would get from her.

I hadn’t even made any allusions to what Nico might do, because I knew it would be futile. A belief that was proven when Hope essentially shut me down before I even said a word.

“Point is, he’s not a college student, or a semi-professional football player, or a bouncer. You know, the usual,” I said. “He’s something...more. And I might be out of my depth,” I said.

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Admitting that, even to my best friend, was something.

After I'd lost my grandmother, I had devoted myself to living life to the fullest. It was something she had always told me—and something she herself had never gotten the chance to do. So I did it for her. Lived my life unapologetically and without question. And it was fucking fun. I didn't second-guess myself, didn't doubt myself, and if somebody had a problem with me, I paid them exactly the attention they deserved.

Which was none.

But that usual approach wasn't working with Enzo.

He had gotten under my skin. And I didn't like it one bit.

Being with him made me feel out of control. And if there was something I hated more than polyester, it was being out of control.

"I mean, I'm not going to say Enzo doesn't have his rough edges. But he's a good person. And Nico trusts him, which means I trust him. So you can, too. But protect your heart."

"Heart?" I said. My voice was almost a bark, and Hope started to giggle.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you by suggesting that your heart could become entangled with another person," she said.

I smiled. "Nobody's perfect, but don't make that kind of mistake again."

Hope snickered but then turned serious.

“But you seem to be having fun with Enzo. He’s a cool guy, and this will help keep you safe. I don’t see what the issue is,” she said.

“I didn’t say there was one,” I said.

“No, you didn’t. But I know that face, Molly. Something’s on your mind. Something more than what you’ve already said.”

I sighed. “It’s just…”

“Don’t think you can handle him?” she said, her voice lilting.

“Don’t start with me, Hope. I’m prepared to make very reckless decisions to keep my reputation intact. So don’t encourage me,” I said.

She smiled. “Silly. I don’t know what I was thinking. But, anyway, just go for it. Have fun.”

“Oh my God. My old Hope would be scandalized,” I said, smiling at her.

“Maybe you’ve worn off on me,” she said.

“No. That was all Nico. But I like it. You look happy, Hope,” I said, turning serious. I reached across the table and grabbed her hand. “And you deserve it,” I said.

“So do you, Molly,” Hope said.

“Yeah,” I said.

I looked at my watch.

“I told jerkface that I’d meet him. Apparently there’s a balloon animal exhibit he wants to go to,” I said.

Hope furrowed her brow. “You know what? It’s Enzo. I don’t ask questions.”

“Yeah. I guess I have to start taking your advice,” I said.

Hope gave me a hug, and I was on my way.

“If you ever tell anyone about this, I will hunt you down,” I said a few hours later.

“Your secrets are safe with me, doll,” Enzo said.

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“I mean, you’re obviously a maniac. That definitely goes without saying. But the balloon animal exhibit was kind of fire,” I said.

He smiled, but didn’t look smug.

“I’m not surprised that you doubted me, but maybe you won’t make that mistake again,” he said.

“Well,” I responded, getting close to him.

“You lovebirds get lost again?” Fabiano said.

I’d only heard him speak once, but his voice was far too familiar. As he spoke, I watched Enzo. It was like a disappearing act. One minute, Enzo—the goofy, intelligent, fun guy who could make something like a balloon animal exhibit fun—was there, and then, in a blink, he was gone.

Replaced with Enzo Moretti, who was absolutely nobody to play with.

I saw that. But looking at Fabiano and the smug little smile on his face, he didn’t.

“Fabiano, me and my fiancée are having a nice evening. Please fuck off,” he said.

“Enzo, if you think I’m going to take it easy on you just because you’re with your bitch?—”

Fabiano’s words were lost, drowned by the sickening thud of Enzo’s fist slamming

into his face.

His reaction was instant.

Brutal.

I had never seen him move that quickly. Wasn't sure I'd ever seen anyone move that quickly.

But he hit Fabiano with a speed and force that left me terrified.

“Stop!” I yelled.

He didn't seem to hear me, so I yelled again.

“Enzo! Stop!”

If I were braver—or stupider—I might have tried to physically interject. But Gram didn't raise a dummy, and I was not about to try to stop two grown men from fighting.

Or rather, stop Enzo from beating the fuck out of another grown man.

“Enzo!” I said, putting as much sternness into my voice as I could.

Maybe that got to him. Or maybe it was Fabiano's pathetic whimper.

Whatever it was, Enzo finally stopped.

“When they take the wire out of your jaw so you can talk again, think first, you?—”

Enzo glared at Fabiano and then grabbed my hand.

His fingers were warm, starting to swell.

“Are you all right?” I asked as we got away.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he said, his voice casual, light, but he wasn’t his usual self.

“Enzo,” I said.

“What, Molly?” he responded, his voice edged.

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I tried to pull my hand away, but he didn't let me.

Instead of tussling with him—a fight I knew I would lose—I glared at him.

“Don't get pissy with me because I stopped you from committing murder in the middle of the day,” I said. “I don't need your attitude, because I didn't do shit to you.”

“Didn't do shit to me?” he said, seeming unable to believe what I had just said.

“No, I didn't,” I responded, unwilling to back down.

Enzo tightened his grip on my hand and dragged me into the alley.

And I followed.

Not because I was scared—but because I wasn't.

And that was the problem.

He pushed me back against the wall—but before I could get disgusted, he pressed his body against mine, letting me feel the weight of his heavy hardness.

“You call this nothing?” His voice was low, guttural, just this side of a grunt.

“Enzo...” I said as he pushed me against the wall. I was supposed to sound firm, but I was putty in Enzo's hands,

And he knew it.

It didn't matter that we were in an alley.

It didn't matter that he'd almost beat someone to death.

All that mattered was that Enzo was here with me now.

All that mattered was that he wanted me just as much as I wanted him.

He kissed my neck as he kneaded my breasts, leaving my nipples hard little points that screamed for him. I wanted him inside me.

Now.

My pussy leaked and clenched with the need to be filled.

Enzo worked his pants open, his action sure, steady as he entered me.

"Enzo," I said on a tortured cry as he pumped into me, his long thrusts sending me inching up the wall.

I came hard, fast, unexpectedly, and Enzo was not even a second behind, his cum filling me until he pulled out and released two long spurts on my thighs.

When he was done, he kissed me—hard, rough, just like he'd fucked me.

"I hope that was better than the balloon animals," he said.

EIGHT

Enzo

She didn't say anything during the walk home, and I didn't either.

Had no fucking idea what to say anyway.

All of this was new to me.

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Not assholes like Fabiano. That little skirmish was nothing. Just me reacting to noise on pure muscle memory.

But Molly...

She may as well have been a fucking spaceship, and nothing in my toolbox was equipped to handle her.

Nico said I was fifty percent temper, fifty percent bullshit.

The perfect combination for a Moretti capo.

To be whatever the fuck I needed and wanted to be for Molly was beyond me.

That was why it had taken me so long to approach her. I'd been gone the first time I'd seen her at Carlo's. Dazed in an instant and hooked beyond reason. It pained me to admit it, but Molly affected me like no one else ever had.

Maybe no one else ever would.

And that was something I couldn't allow.

I needed to keep my distance. It was the only way I could try to maintain my equilibrium. If I wasn't careful, I'd do something stupid, something unforgivable, like fall in love with her.

I intended to start today. When we reached Molly's place, I prepared to leave her.

Usually, I'd come up, but I didn't trust myself with that right now.

"So," Molly said when she reached the building's steps. Molly studied me like she sensed something was up, but I wouldn't confirm or deny that.

"So what?" I said, still distant from her.

"You look like you have something on your mind, Enzo. If there's something you need to say, say it," she said.

"If I have something to say, I will," I countered.

"Good," she said, giving me her dazzling smile. "I'm glad that we agree. So say it."

"You're such a fucking headache." I sighed.

She shrugged.

"Pot, kettle, etc." Her lips lifted in a slight smile before she turned serious. "What's on your mind?"

Clearly, she wasn't going to let this go.

"Let's go upstairs and talk," I said.

"Come on." She started to walk, and I followed behind her, wondering how the hell this had happened. After all that bullshit about keeping my distance, and here I was.

Molly closed her door, and then went to the kitchen. I followed behind her and took the glass she handed me. She made this awesome flavored water with fruit and mint. It was delicious, sweet, a little spicy, refreshing.

Just like the woman herself.

I looked around Molly's kitchen and was again struck by the comfort I felt here. The entire apartment smelled faintly of lemons, the smell stronger here in her kitchen. I assumed it was whatever cleaner she used to keep the place spotless. I'd never seen her clean, but the only time there was ever anything out of place was because I'd moved it. From the chipped mug Molly held to the plush orange mat in front of the sink, everything about this place was Molly. I treasured it.

Molly took a sip of her own water and then sat her mug on the counter. She looked at me, clearly waiting.

Surprisingly patient.

I took a deep breath, then met her eyes.

"Did I scare you today?" I asked.

I tried to keep my voice strong, but at the end, I trailed off, became a little more quiet than I ordinarily would have been.

“Does it matter?”

I glared at her.

“I wouldn’t have asked if it didn’t matter, Molly.”

It would be easy to get pissed, but now that I had asked the question, I wouldn’t let myself get distracted.

“So what exactly are you asking? Are you asking if I was scared of how you beat the ever-loving fuck out of Fabiano?”

I nodded. “Yeah. That. I mean, I know one hundred percent latex-free balloons can be terrifying—especially when they are contorted into all kinds of shapes—but I think you handled those okay,” I said.

She was kind enough to smile at my pathetic attempt at a joke. That brief little lift of her lips wrecked me. Reminded me of how irretrievably gone I was, not like I’d forgotten. And then she leaned back, considering.

“No,” she finally said.

She spoke the words simply, as if she had thought about them and then made her decision and there was nothing else to it.

“You didn’t try to jump in,” I said.

She cocked her head and looked at me like I was the dumbest person on planet Earth.

“Of course I didn’t. What the fuck do I look like trying to break up a fistfight?” she said.

I laughed. “Smart girl.”

She smiled and then went serious. “But no, Enzo. I wasn’t afraid.”

She reached over and grazed her thumb against my knuckles.

“I guess I should have offered you some ice or something for those,” she said.

“Don’t worry about it,” I responded.

I barely felt a sting. And in truth—though I wouldn’t tell Molly that—I liked the pain. It reminded me of what I had done and who I had done it for.

“Although...”

“Why did you do that?” she said.

“Smack the shit out of Fabiano?”

“Yeah. I don’t know what you have going on with him, and I don’t care to, but popping off like that...” She trailed off.

“He called you a bitch,” I said simply.

“And he still has my two dollars, but that didn’t mean you needed to break his jaw,” she countered.

She smiled, but I grabbed her hand, holding her gaze until she met mine.

“Molly. Nobody—and I meannobody—disrespects you. They don’t even look at you wrong. Not while I’m there. And not if I hear about it. He disrespected you. He paid the price for that,” I said.

She nodded like she understood.

“Oh, I get it. So he talked shit about me, which is like talking shit about you, which is something that’s not acceptable in your world or whatever,” she said.

“No,” I said.

Something in my voice must have gotten her attention, because she looked at me, her eyes wide.

“He insulted you. He should die for that.”

“Come on, Enzo,” she said, trying to pull her hand from mine.

I didn’t let her go.

“I mean it, Molly. He did and he should have died. And if you hadn’t intervened, he might have.”

She blinked, then nodded.

I should have left well enough alone, but I couldn’t.

“Are you scared now?” I asked.

“Should I be?” she said.

“Probably,” I said.

She deserved the truth. Deserved so much more, but I could at least give her that.

“I’m not going to lie to you, Molly. Soft things, soft people, don’t survive my world. My mother didn’t,” I said.

I don’t know why I mentioned it, but once the words started, I couldn’t stop them.

“My mom said she was tough. That she could handle the life. But she couldn’t. So

she packed my sister up and left when I was five,” I said.

“Did she...?” Molly asked.

“Die?” I supplied.

She nodded, her expression fearful.

“Nah. She lives in Arizona,” I said.

Molly smiled, though I didn’t miss the tears glistening in her eyes.

“She made her choice. My father respected that. It didn’t need to be more dramatic than that,” he said.

“What about you?” she asked.

“What about me?”

“Your mother left you,” she said.

“She did. But I get it. She loved me. Do you know what the last thing she told me was?” I said.

“No,” she whispered.

I chuckled. “Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t know that. But she told me soft things don’t survive. So I couldn’t be soft. She told me she wasn’t soft, either—but she was leaving for me.”

“I don’t know your mother, and I don’t want to judge her, but she’s a liar. She left for

herself,” Molly said, her voice stern.

“You mad at my mom for walking out on me?” I asked.

It was kind of sweet, Molly being hurt on my behalf. It showed she cared, and that fucked me up.

“If you’re okay with it, I guess I am. And sometimes walking out is the best thing a parent can do. But they don’t have to make up stories about why or tell you that it’s for your own good,” Molly said.

I heard the bitter stirrings of familiarity there. Would have been able to guess that her story was much like my own, even if I hadn’t dug it up already.

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“You think the same about your folks?” I asked.

She shrugged.

“I know exactly who my parents were and who they weren’t. But I had my Gram. Better than a hundred of either one of them. So I can’t complain,” she said.

“Me, neither,” I said.

I went quiet then, my hand still in hers.

Her eyes met mine, and in a breath, the air changed.

In that moment, I felt closer to Molly than I had to any other person, including Nico, who I had known my entire life.

It scared the shit out of me.

And it was so intoxicating.

Made me feel higher than any drug I had ever taken.

I leaned over and kissed Molly softly.

And as I made love to her that night again and again, I knew I’d never be able to let her go.

NINE

Molly

Four Weeks Later

“You want anything else?” Hope asked.

I looked at the table in front of me and felt uncharacteristically queasy.

“I’ll pass,” I said.

A mild statement, which in no way reflected how I felt. In fact, looking at the spread—oatmeal, scrambled eggs, sausage, and fruit salad—all of my favorites, made me sweaty and dizzy at the thought of eating any of it.

“You all right, Molly?” Hope said, sounding concerned.

I tried to reassure her by making my voice as perky as I could manage. “I’m great. But we didn’t come here to talk about me.”

She smiled.

“And what did we come here to talk about?”

“You,” I said.

A smile spread across her face, and I couldn’t stop myself from smiling back. Hope was truly one of the best people I had ever met in my life. She deserved happiness, and to see her live it was a gift.

She looked at me, seeming to consider her thoughts. And then, finally, she said, “I’m great.”

And she meant it. I saw it in everything about her.

“That’s good, Hope,” I said. I reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “You deserve it.”

She was quiet for a moment, and then she looked at me.

“I do,” she said.

I cocked my head.

“Who are you?” I exclaimed.

She smiled shyly.

“What are you talking about?”

I glanced over her shoulder and saw a tall figure who I knew was her bodyguard.

“My Hope would never accept a compliment without pushing back.”

She shrugged.

“Well, everyone can change,” she said.

I smiled, and she smiled back, then looked at me seriously.

“So how are you and Enzo?”

“What makes you think there’s a me and Enzo?” I said.

“Have you forgotten who you’re talking to?” she said.

I wanted to argue, but then collapsed. I needed to talk to someone—and who better than Hope?

“We’re great,” I said.

She burst out laughing.

“You say that like it’s the worst news you’ve ever heard,” she said.

“It’s just not fair,” I said, not caring that I was pouting.

“What’s not fair?” she asked.

“He’s so fucking great. And I hate it.”

“I need you to make sense, Molly,” she said.

“I mean, if he was just some meathead or some idiot, we could fuck and leave it at that. But?—”

“But he’s that...and more. He’s?—”

I stared off, trying to stare dreamily.

“He’s fucking ridiculous as a human being. But he’s great. And he treats me?—”

“Don’t tell me he treats you anything other than perfect,” she said.

“Or—” I responded.

“Or he’ll have me to deal with,” she said.

“I know he would.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“He scares me, Hope,” I whispered.

“Huh?”

“I mean, if it was just that, it’d be one thing. But this...it’s so much more. He’s trying to wind his way into my heart. And there are no vacancies,” I said.

“Maybe there are,” she countered. “Maybe sometimes it walks up on you without you expecting it,” she said.

“So I should just go with this?” I said.

“You should do what makes you happy,” Hope responded.

I rolled my eyes at her.

“Hope, stop being so freaking diplomatic,” I said.

“Fine. What do you want, Molly?”

“Him,” I finally said.

“So there you go,” she said.

“Yeah but that’s stupid. I mean, the one time I think I want to try to build something, I choose Enzo of all people.”

“Who better?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe somebody who is less...Enzo.”

Hope laughed.

“You get what I mean,” I said.

“I do, but Enzo would never hurt you,” she said.

“And if he did, I assume he’d have to deal with you?”

“You know it.”

I got a whiff of something. I think it was the freshly squeezed grapefruit juice.

“Um, can I have a minute?" I said.

My stomach lurched and I stood and hurried to the restrooms.

Enzo and Nico had taken the chance to catch up.

I’d never admit it to Enzo, but this was one aspect of Enzo and Nico’s life that I appreciated. This restaurant was always packed, so to have it to ourselves was special. Luxurious, in an insulated-from-the-world kind of way that I never experienced before. The expensive cutlery, the soft jazz flowing from the speakers, the heavy, expensive-looking custom furniture that had clearly been designed for the space. It even smelled expensive, like aged wood, furniture polish, a faint floral scent that was present but not cloying. It felt like I’d been let in on a secret world.

And I enjoyed it.

Shallow, sure, but the truth was the truth.

I ventured down the hall and into the bathroom. The space was dimly lit, bright enough to see but not so bright as to be overpowering. The fixtures on the faucets were shaped like mermaids. Not something I'd usually enjoy, but it worked in this space. I splashed by some water on my face and by some miracle managed not to throw up.

Still, I stayed put until my stomach settled, and when I exited the bathroom, I felt almost human again.

I started to walk back to the table, but heard voices. I smiled, recognizing the tenor of Enzo's voice, even though I couldn't make out his words.

As if I needed more proof that I was completely gone for this man.

How ridiculous that just hearing the sound of his voice made a stupid smile spread across my face.

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I found myself venturing toward the sound, eager to see him.

As I got closer, I made out the voices.

Enzo's.

Then Nico's.

I heard a laugh, one that reminded me of Enzo—the sound he made when he told one of his stupid jokes and tried to get me to laugh at it.

“You need to be honest,” Nico said.

“Honest?” Enzo responded.

“Yes. You care about her?” Nico said.

I froze. I shouldn't eavesdrop on anyone's conversation, let alone Nico and Enzo. But I knew in my bones they were talking about me.

Yet, even though I told my feet to move, they were rooted in the spot.

“Yeah. Tell her now. You said she told you she felt like she knew you from before,” Nico said.

“Ah, but that's nothing,” Enzo said.

“You need to tell her,” Nico said.

“So how do you expect this will go? I’ll say, ‘Hey, Molly, I love you. Also, you don’t remember this, but the very first night I saw you—one that you’ve forgotten—I drugged you?’”

He loved me.

He had drugged me.

I was disoriented, my mind trying to process what he had said.

I let my mind spin as I thought of it.

I remember waking up after a night out with Hope feeling a little sick to my stomach, and chalking it up to too much champagne.

He had drugged me...

I looked at the heavy wooden door.

Stupid...

That was the only word that rang through my mind. To think that I thought I loved him.

How stupid.

I looked at the door, then turned. My feet moved now without thought.

I didn’t stop—not even when the guard looked at me like he was ready to tackle me.

I didn't give him a chance. I didn't even say good-bye to Hope.

I just needed to be away from here.

Away from him.

I stepped out of the restaurant and kept going, moving as fast as my feet would carry me.

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Didn't stop until I was ten blocks away.

With every step, I remembered moments between us.

The way he had kissed me.

The way I gave myself to him freely, without reservation.

The way I'd shared parts of myself that I'd shared with no one else.

"So stupid, Molly," I said.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, doll."

I didn't have to look to recognize the voice.

I looked at Fabiano and the two huge men flanking him.

The meager breakfast I'd fought to hold on to came out in a rush. Fabiano looked like he wanted to cut my tongue out when my puke splashed on his shoes.

And to think I'd been sure this day couldn't get worse...

TEN

Enzo

“So are you going to take my advice?” Nico said.

I licked my lips. “I’ll consider it.”

“You should. You can make her understand,” he said.

“Thanks, cousin,” I said, patting Nico on the shoulder. “Let’s go.”

Before we left the private dining area, Nico scanned the room and then the hallway. He had always been alert, ready for anything. But now that he had found Hope, he was even more so.

“Hope,” he said when we entered the main dining room.

He smiled when she looked at him, and I wasn’t even sure if he realized it. I wondered if Molly did that to me. Wouldn’t be surprised if she did.

This thing with Molly was...wild. She was like a storm, beautiful, dangerous, incapable of being contained.

That was the only way to describe it.

Describe her.

Molly was everything I never knew I needed, everything I never knew I wanted. But now that I had her, I was determined to never let her go.

If I were a good man, one worthy of her, I would have let her go live her life.

But I wasn’t a good man.

I never had been.

She was mine.

There was no denying it.

No reason to try to fight it.

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We'd get past this, and I'd spend the rest of my life making it up to her.

"Did you pass Molly?" Hope said.

She didn't look especially alarmed—just a little confused.

"She's not with you?" I asked.

I tried to keep cool, but on instinct, I felt myself becoming concerned.

"She went to the restroom. I thought she had run into you on the way back," Hope said, a smile on her face.

"I haven't seen her."

I walked toward the front of the restaurant, saw the table, and noticed that Molly hadn't eaten much of her breakfast.

"Where's Molly?" I asked Giacomo, Nico's guard.

"She left about fifteen minutes ago," he said, like that was an acceptable answer.

"And you let her?" I said, my teeth clenched with rage, my voice low, quiet, calm in a way that I knew terrified Giacomo down to his core.

And it should. Because if something happened to Molly, I didn't know what I would do.

Or who I would do it to.

“I...” He looked at me and gulped, clearly not wanting to respond.

“Find her,” I said.

“I’m sure she’s fine. She wasn’t feeling well,” Hope said, but I looked at her and saw that she wasn’t convinced.

“She left without saying good-bye to you,” I said.

Hope didn’t have a response. But that was answer enough.

And suddenly...I knew.

“She heard me,” I said, looking at Nico.

Hope glanced between us, her brow furrowed. “Heard what?”

“You don’t know that,” Nico said, ignoring Hope.

He didn’t sound convincing.

“Heard what?” Hope repeated.

“I...”

I fidgeted, then took a second to roll my shirt sleeves up my forearms. I needed the break, something to distract me from the way my heart thundered. My shirt felt tight. Or maybe it was my skin. I felt like I was coming apart.

Molly was the only one that would put me back together.

Hope waited—not exactly patiently, but her stance and expression told me she’d get her answers.

I cleared my throat. “That night. At Carlo’s, when...”

“When your cousin threw me in the trunk of a car?” Hope said.

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“Yeah. I took Molly home and gave her a little something to help her forget what had happened.”

“Something like what, Enzo?” Hope said.

“Just a little MDMA.”

“You roofied her?” Hope said, her eyes bugging out.

“Well, it beat the alternative,” I said. My voice tumbled out of my mouth like stones being ground to gravel. I tried hard to ignore the little kick in my gut with each word. I’d done what I needed to to keep her safe.

I refused to feel bad about it.

“And you didn’t tell her?” Hope said.

I noticed that she didn’t try to argue with my words. She knew better than anybody else that someone in Molly’s position would ordinarily be killed.

“How was I going to tell her? That’s what Nico and I were talking about,” I said.

“And she heard you, and now she’s run off,” Hope said.

“We don’t know that.”

“You—Enzo, I’m sure she just got upset and needs a little bit to think through things.

Just go to her house, make sure she's okay, but then give her space," Hope said.

She looked at me, her expression stern.

"Space?" I said.

"Don't be foolish, Enzo. You know Molly. You can't try to push her. Just let her deal with this, and when she's ready to talk to you, she will," Hope said.

"You should listen to her," Nico added.

"Sounds like a stupid idea," I muttered.

But I knew they were right.

Molly was tough. That was for sure. There was no way in the world she would talk until she was ready.

So I'd give her space.

I frowned, the very thought making me want to rebel.

But Molly needed to understand that this wasn't over.

She'd get past it.

And until then, I'd wait.

But first, I walked to her place, determined to make sure she was okay.

I smiled as I looked up at the building. Even with the peeling paint, the cracked third

stair Molly always warned me about, the overall tired appearance, it felt like home because of her.

Anywhere would feel like home if Molly was there.

I knew this place wasn't nearly nice enough for Molly. But I preferred it to my own luxury penthouse.

Molly's tiny apartment felt as close to home as I had experienced since I was a child, so I wouldn't force her to leave it.

At least, not yet.

We'd get past this.

There was no other alternative.

So I'd pretend I was patient, keeping her close, and be ready to tell her how I felt.

I reached her building, prepared to knock on the door.

Noticed that it was broken again. The frame I'd made sure was reinforced was splintered. The knob was busted, hanging uselessly against the door.

"Franco!" I called out to the guard I'd put on Molly's place.

Just inside the foyer, I saw him.

One of Don Carlo's older soldiers.

Near retirement—so suited for the kind of protection detail Molly needed.

And I realized I had made a terrible mistake.

Because Franco was dead.

And Molly was gone.

ELEVEN

Molly

“Enzo is going to come for me,” I said.

I didn’t sound as confident as I had hoped, which said nothing about how I felt.

“Enzo doesn’t even know you’re gone, doll,” Fabiano said.

My stomach curdled at the sound of that pet name from him.

Hearing it from Enzo warmed my heart.

Hearing it from Fabiano made my skin crawl.

But I refused to let it show.

“Why am I here, Fabiano?” I said.

“You don’t mean shit to me, but you’ll work good enough for bait,” Fabiano said.

“Well, I guess I appreciate the honesty,” I responded dryly.

“That smart fucking mouth of yours is gonna get you in trouble,” Fabiano said.

His voice was no more intimidating now than it had been the night he tried to mug me. But then, I hadn’t been tied to a chair after being driven to God knows where. Now, though, my wrists were raw from the tape, my throat dry, and feet freezing because the open-toed shoes I thought were so cute were no match for the frigid concrete floor.

So no—Fabiano’s voice wasn’t intimidating.

But the fact that I had been kidnapped definitely was.

“I don’t have anything to do with this,” I said.

“Enzo said you’re his. So you do,” he said.

“How?”

“Doll, you’re just leverage. So shut the fuck up and don’t get on my nerves, and you’ll be fine. For now,” he said.

Well, that was about as succinct a summary of my circumstances as I could have hoped for.

Fucked.

Yeah.

And even as I sat there—at the mercy of Fabiano, who I knew would cut my eyes out just as soon as talk to me—all I thought about was what I had heard.

He had drugged me.

It was ridiculous. Beyond stupid.

But even here, now, in this circumstance, that betrayal stung.

Buzzed under my skin like electricity—and shame.

I had wasted time talking to Hope about what I wanted, how I felt—and yet again, I proved how stupid I was.

Falling for the man who had drugged me? Lied to me?

It made me wonder if any of those moments I played over and over in my head had meant anything at all.

Was this all part of some sick game?

It made no sense. I had nothing to offer Enzo. So why bother with the charade? String me along when I was just one big joke?

I felt tears prick—but refused to let them fall.

Fabiano would think I was afraid of him. And even though now was definitely not the time for pride, I refused to let him think that.

“How much do you think Enzo will pay for you?” Fabiano said.

“I’m assuming that question was rhetorical,” I said.

To my surprise, Fabiano smiled.

“You know, you’re actually pretty funny. I wish you had better taste in guys,” he said.

“You and me both, Fabiano,” I muttered.

He tilted his head, looking interested.

“Trouble in paradise?”

“You don’t give a shit,” I said.

“No. Just trying to make conversation. But have it your way,” Fabiano said.

He seemed unperturbed, so I was shocked when he cut a long length of duct tape and pressed it against my lips.

“Since you can’t be nice,” Fabiano said.

Enzo might not care about me—but when I got my hands on that asshole...

I wanted to giggle but swallowed it down.

What would I do?

I fell in love with a man who drugged me.

I wasn't gonna do shit about shit.

I just needed to focus on getting out of this situation alive. Which meant ignoring the pin and needles in my hands and feet. And not thinking about how much skin I would lose when the tape came off. No, I'd think about getting out of here. That was all that mattered...

"Boss, I have something?—"

Apparently, I had drifted off, because when I heard talking, I opened my eyes and looked over at Fabiano. He had his phone pressed against his ear, looking intent.

"There's a meet. One hour. I'll be there," Fabiano said.

"You awake, doll?"

I nodded.

"Good. Now it's time to go find out what you're worth," he said.

I said nothing. Didn't even nod.

Instead, I grimaced when he pulled the tape off my arms and legs and then stood up.

My knees ached with stiffness and my wrists and ankles burned where the tape had been.

But it was as good as I'd felt in hours.

I'd been taped to a dentist chair and had intentionally kept myself from thinking about why it was in this place.

I let the blood flow return to my limbs, and followed Fabiano to a black luxury sedan.

He threw a blindfold over my face and pushed me into the passenger seat. "In you go," he said.

"That's really not necessary," I said.

"Quiet," Fabiano snapped.

The ride felt interminable.

I tried to keep track of the minutes by counting, but when I realized I'd gone through the three hundreds twice, I knew I was lost.

Still, sometime later—maybe twenty minutes, maybe longer—the SUV turned sharply to the left, and after a while, slowed.

Nerves had my stomach feeling like water.

I had never been more afraid than I was at that single moment. But I forced myself to keep my composure.

"You came with backup?" Enzo said.

I heard his voice but couldn't see him through the blindfold.

But still—my relief was immediate.

I told myself it was natural. After all, who wasn't relieved to hear a friendly voice after they were kidnapped?

“Where is the payment?” Enzo asked.

“How much?” Fabiano asked.

“One hundred thousand.”

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“Is your family willing to risk a war over a hundred grand?” Enzo asked.

“None of your concern. Just hand over the cash,” Fabiano said.

Enzo was silent for a moment, but I easily pictured his face.

“You mean to tell me they’re willing to take the risk but don’t want to own up to it? Exactly what you’d expect from a Genovese,” Enzo said.

Fabiano growled.

“I can take a souvenir. Is that what you want?” Fabiano said.

“Take the blindfold off,” Enzo said.

The blindfold was gone, and I blinked, my eyes burning as they tried to focus.

I glanced over and saw Nico—waiting. In front of him, Enzo.

I wanted to throw myself in his arms but stayed still, torn between my heart, that wanted comfort, and my head, that demanded distance.

“Fabiano,” Enzo said.

“What?”

“You’re a fucking idiot,” Enzo said.

In the next breath, he reacted, lifting the gun at his waistband and pulling the trigger.

Fabiano fell down. Crumpled like a paper doll.

“I just needed him to hear that before he died,” Enzo said. Then he looked at me, completely unbothered by the dead man ten feet away from us. “Why’d you leave the restaurant?”

I glanced at him, looked at Fabiano’s body, then looked back at Enzo.

He hadn’t hesitated. And I should have been focused on that.

“Is there something you want to tell me, Enzo?” I said.

“Molly, I drugged you. I’m an asshole. You gotta get over it,” he said.

I thought I had wanted that. But hearing the words unleashed a terrible anger.

“Enzo,” I said as he rubbed my wrists, frowning at the marks there. Then I glared at him. “I want to slap the hell out of you. But I won’t. But take me home—and stay out of my sight.”

“Fine,” Enzo said.

The ride to my apartment was tense, thick with anger.

"You can go now," I said when we reached my apartment.

He acted like I hadn’t said a word.

“Fuck off, Enzo,” I growled when he followed me inside.

He didn't move an inch.

I was suddenly exhausted and decided to ignore him. Practically an impossibility—but somehow, with Enzo in my space, making it seem much smaller, I managed.

And he didn't even try to speak to me again—something I was grateful for as I lay in bed.

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Just like I told myself I was grateful when I woke up and he was gone.

I wanted to stay buried under the covers, ignoring the world outside. But hiding wouldn't change anything, so I dragged myself out of bed and into the bathroom.

"You look like shit, Molly," I said to my reflection.

I did, but I supposed it made sense.

After all, I had been kidnapped.

And got your heart broken.

I ignored that thought, turned off the light, and padded down the hallway.

I hated to admit it, but my place felt so different, so empty, without him.

"You know what he did, Molly," I said before I chuckled.

This fucker had me so out of sorts, I was talking to myself out loud.

As if I needed more proof that Enzo was no good for me.

I'd known that but ignored it for the thrill.

Sure, I'd told myself whatever was going on with Enzo was on a stopwatch.

It couldn't have lasted.

Even though little embers of hope had tried to burn through, I'd forced myself to be realistic. Eventually, reason would have prevailed and Enzo and I would have gone our separate ways.

So in truth, I should have been grateful for what I'd found out. Getting kidnapped was one thing, should have been enough to prove that Enzo was far too dangerous and that I needed to keep my distance.

And if that hadn't done it, there was the fact that he had drugged me.

Lied to me.

It was as simple as that. Proof of who and what Enzo was.

Sure, it stung, but I'd get over it.

Get over him.

I told myself that as I dressed, pausing for a moment to remember that I was wearing my trusty black overalls. The same ones I'd worn the second time I'd met him.

Not the second time, stupid. You forgot that because he drugged you, I reminded myself.

That memory sat sour on my tongue, and had bile burning at the back of my throat. But I welcomed the pain.

If everything I had felt with Enzo wasn't a fantasy, it was based on a lie.

I could never, ever, allow myself to forget it.

Somehow, I managed to go to work and got through most of the day. Eventually, I felt almost normal.

Until it was time to close.

“Ugh, what is that awful smell?” I muttered as I arranged the cleaning products, trying to ignore my turning stomach.

If nothing else, working at the shelter would give you a stomach of steel. We kept the facility impeccably clean, but new animals were usually in bad shape, so cleaning and grooming them was standard operating procedure.

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I'd been overjoyed when I'd found a great shampoo and managed to secure a sponsorship from the distributor. Best of all, I'd loved the smell. It was a faint honeysuckle scent that wasn't overpowering and didn't irritate the dogs.

But when I grabbed the open bottle to refill it, I almost threw it out of my hands, intent on getting the awful stench away from me.

"They must have changed the formula," I said to myself.

I waited till my stomach calmed, finished up my work, and headed home.

But as I walked, a feeling settled over me, one that I couldn't ignore.

I made a brief detour, hoping, praying I was wrong.

But when I looked down at the two little lines, I wasn't surprised.

Maybe, on some level, I had known. It wasn't like we had done anything to prevent it.

Still, I stared at the piece of plastic, unbelieving.

But it was true.

I was pregnant.

With Enzo Moretti's baby.

TWELVE

Enzo

“Let me do the talking,” Nico said.

“I don’t need you to speak for me, Nico,” I said.

“Let me do the talking, Enzo,” Nico repeated.

I didn’t argue with him, but I didn’t need Nico to speak for me. My pulse was pounding in my ears, and my throat felt tight. I was on edge. Ready for a fight.

Or worse.

But I’d take what came. I had done what I did and would stand on it.

Yes, Nico was good at managing Don Carlo, but I didn’t need to hide behind my cousin.

I wouldn’t hide behind my cousin.

Don Carlo’s security waved us in, and Nico and I ascended the front stairs like we had countless times before. The mansion looked the same. Classic architecture, grand empty hallways that screamed wealth and sadness.

But this time felt different. The air, always heavy with the weight of Don Carlo’s weakness and regret, felt even more oppressive today.

Because there was a chance I might not leave.

That should have bothered me more than it did.

But I didn't give a fuck.

Whatever punishment Don Carlo saw fit to mete out was well worth it.

And I'd kill Fabiano a thousand times over if I could.

Even thinking about Fabiano having the nerve to touch Molly made me want to kill him all over again. My body tensed, still ready for the fight.

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“Unclench your fists,” Nico said.

I hadn’t realized I’d clenched them, but I followed my cousin’s instructions, and together, we walked to the don’s office.

“You wanted to see us, Don Carlo?” Nico said.

The old man was wearing his standard attire: smoking jacket, leather slippers, cigar in his mouth.

He looked tired and ancient, even more so than usual. His skin was more papery now, and his finger trembled, though I noticed he tried to stop them.

But I understood him now in a way I hadn’t before.

I had never said it to Nico, but I had never understood why losing his wife and son had shaken him so.

It was part of the life.

I realized now how foolish I had been.

Molly was alive, and I would do everything in my power to make sure she stayed that way long after I was gone.

But the absolute torture of not knowing she was okay, the thought of losing her...

Don Carlo lived that every day.

Lived with the regret of knowing he hadn't been able to save his family.

Yeah.

I understood him now in a way I hadn't before.

"If the cigars or my enemies don't put me in the grave, you will, huh, Enzo?" the don said.

I smiled. "I'm..."

"It's handled, Don Carlo," Nico interjected.

"Nico, I was talking to Enzo," the Don said.

Nico looked at me, and I nodded.

To my surprise, my cousin relented, and I knew he wouldn't say anything more. Nico often complained that looking after me was a full-time job, but when I looked at him, I was sure I saw a respect that I hadn't seen before.

"I take full responsibility," I said, my gaze unwavering as I stared at Don Carlo.

"For what?" Don Carlo said.

"I killed Fabiano Genovese and two of his men. I also torched the Genovese warehouse."

"And where are the bodies?" Don Carlo said.

“They've been disposed of,” I responded.

“So they won't even get a proper burial,” he said.

“They got the burial they deserved,” I responded.

The don's thick, bushy brows arched.

“This wasn't business related?” he said.

“No, it wasn’t,” I responded.

“So you violated a truce and killed—all without approval,” he said.

“I did, Don Carlo,” I said.

“You don’t sound sorry, Enzo,” he said.

“Because I’m not,” I responded.

“You made an oath to this family. Part of that oath was obedience.

You broke it. Yet you won’t even pretend to regret it?” he said.

Nico shifted next to me. I didn’t look at him.

Instead, I kept my gaze on Don Carlo and made sure my eyes were on his when I spoke.

“No. I don’t regret it. Not one bit. And, if I were so lucky, Fabiano would come back to life so I would have the joy and pleasure of killing him again,” I said.

I went quiet then, waiting for Don Carlo’s response. Each second stretched, taut, the weight of the silence pressing down. But still, I refused to blink.

“She must be special,” he finally said.

“She is,” I responded without hesitation.

“It’s going to cost you,” he said.

“She’s worth whatever the price,” I said.

“Fabiano’s family will receive an appropriate tribute. And fifty percent of what you earn is mine for the next year,” he said.

“Yes, Don Carlo,” I said.

“Now, fuck off,” he said.

The old man lit his cigar, and Nico and I left without another word.

We didn’t speak until we were back in his car.

“You got the cash?” he said.

“Yes, I have it,” I responded.

“You don’t seem happy,” Nico said.

“You want to talk about my feelings, cousin?” I said.

“Not particularly, but you just slipped out of a capital offense with barely a slap on the wrist. Seems like you should be more excited,” he said.

I knew he was right, but I looked at him and said what was on my mind.

“What’s the point without her?”

Nico didn't offer me an answer.

Molly

“Have you thought about what you want to do?”

“No,” I said.

The doctor, an older South Asian woman with kind brown eyes, smiled at me. “I’ll have the receptionist give you some information,” she said.

“Thank you,” I responded and started to tear up when she patted my hand. Her skin was warm and dry, and the simple touch nearly undid me.

It made me think of my grandmother, and how much I missed her and the past that was gone.

It made me think of Enzo, and how much I missed him and the future that could never be.

I coughed and wiped my eyes. “Stupid hormones,” I said.

“I know,” she responded.

The woman patted my hand again and then left, and I got dressed. The crinkle of the paper on the table and the paper gown felt thunderous in the quiet. They’d tried to decorate the place, walking the line between professional and welcoming, and in truth, they hadn’t done a half bad job. Best of all, even the antiseptic scent that burned my nostrils wasn’t so bad. This wouldn’t be the worst place to see this through if that was what I decided to do.

This doctor’s appointment had just been a formality.

I was pregnant.

Thinking that didn't send me reeling as it had in the last few days. But having it confirmed did put a bit of a different spin on things. It was real now. Like really real. And the truth somehow felt heavier than I'd expected and lighter than a feather all at the same time.

First and foremost, I'd have to talk to Enzo. I didn't want to do that.

Or rather, I wanted to talk to him badly, but didn't feel like I was equipped.

But how I felt was now secondary.

I still wasn't sure what I was going to do, but he deserved to know.

And as soon as I gathered my courage, I'd tell him.

On the walk home, I felt lighter than I had in days. I'd made it through whatever life hurled at me.

This would be no different.

I had my grandmother to thank for that. And I knew, no matter what, Hope was in my corner. I looked around at the scenery I so often ignored. Saw the way the rays of sunlight bounced off the concrete, felt the air on my skin, not too cold but brisk enough to remind enough to feel, the sounds of traffic, music floating out of windows as I passed by.

All of it together bursting with life.

I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face.

Still smiling, I rounded the corner and stopped in my tracks.

I would have recognized him anywhere, and even from down the block, I could tell it was Enzo. Some part of me wondered if I was imagining him.

But that couldn't be. Nothing I could imagine compared to the man standing in front of me. Even with the distance between us, I felt him, could feel that gravitational tug that pulled me toward him

I forced the smile off my lips and looked into his eyes. "You coming to drug me again, Enzo? Maybe do worse?"

"I just came to talk," Enzo said.

The jerk couldn't even give me the courtesy of acting defensive.

I frowned, but then gestured toward the door to my apartment building.

Enzo followed me up the stairs.

"I haven't seen anything about Fabiano on the news," I said once we were inside my apartment.

“You won’t,” he said.

I didn’t know what it said about me that I didn’t feel bad about that.

But I couldn’t muster an ounce of sympathy for Fabiano.

Instead, I stared at Enzo, my mind whirling with a thousand questions before I settled on one.

“If I ask you a question, will you be honest with me?” I said.

“Yes,” he responded.

Despite everything, as stupid as it made me, I believed him. God help me, I believed him. “You should have killed me that night, shouldn’t you?”

“Yeah,” he said.

I arched a brow. “Why didn’t you?”

“Because...” He trailed off, and I shook my head.

“Remember, Enzo, honest.”

“I will. I’m just trying to think of the best way to say it.”

“Don’t think of the best way to say it,” I said. “Just say it.”

My voice was sharper than I intended, and I hated that my emotions took me over. Felt those stupid tears that I could barely control burning at the corners of my eyes. I prayed I could keep them from falling, but I wouldn't put money on it.

"The truth is I saw you and Hope that night. Two innocent people just out having a good time. You didn't deserve to die."

"We didn't deserve to die?" I whispered.

"You didn't. And I know that shouldn't have mattered, but I couldn't make myself do it. So I took the only other option I could," he said.

"Would you ever have told me that you'd drugged me?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Nico said I should," he said.

"I heard him," I said.

"Yeah. I figured."

"But you still might have kept it to yourself," I said.

He nodded.

"Yeah."

"Well, at least that's the truth," I said.

"It is."

He looked at me, his expression fierce, intense.

“Molly, if you want someone to be perfect, that’s not me,” he said.

“Don’t I know it?” I said.

He gave me a small smile, but then turned serious. As serious as I had ever seen him.

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“I’m not fucking perfect. I’m going to make mistakes. But you have to know that I love you. I think I might have loved you since the first time I saw you,” he said.

“Yeah, right, Enzo,” I said.

His expression didn’t change.

“I told you no lies. And it’s true. I don’t fucking understand it, but that doesn’t mean it’s not true. The thought of hurting you, the thought of you in pain...”

He shook his head, then looked at me.

“I can’t bear that,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

‘I want you to forgive me. I pray that you forgive me. And I haven’t prayed for anything since I was five years old. But if you can’t, know that I’ll respect that,” he said.

I looked at him skeptically.

“You’d be the bigger man? Let me go?”

He shrugged.

“I mean, I’d try. Probably fail. But point is, Molly, I don’t want to hurt you.

I love you,” he said.

My stupid, traitorous heart melted as he spoke the words, and I worried whatever was left of it had fallen into his hands just like the rest of me had.

“Do you even know what that is?” I said.

“For a long time, I had no fucking idea, but when I look at you, I know.

I love you, Molly. And I will forever.”

I teared up, and Enzo frowned.

“I didn’t think I’d ever see the day that Molly would cry,” he said.

“Goes to show how much you know. I cry all the time,” I said.

He looked at me skeptically. “Since when?”

“According to the doctor, about eight weeks now,” I said.

He looked at me, frowned.

“What are you saying, Molly?”

I twisted my hands in front of me, suddenly nervous. “Enzo, I’m pregnant.”

His mouth flopped open, then closed. Then he looked at me with confusion and shook his head.

“Pregnant?” he said.

“Yeah,” I responded.

He didn’t say anything. Just stared at me, and the tension just built and built, the silence so thick and heavy the air crackled with it.

“Well, aren’t you gonna say anything?” I finally said when I couldn’t take it any longer.

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Still, he didn't say anything. But what he did do was pull me into a hug so tight I could barely move.

"Pregnant," he said as he pulled back and looked at me.

He held my face in his hands and then kissed me.

"Pregnant," he whispered against my lips.

"Enzo," I said.

He pulled back, because he must have heard something in my voice.

I looked into his eyes, and he stared at me.

"What do you want? What do you need? Anything, doll," he said.

"Just promise me that there won't be any more secrets between us," I said.

"No more. If you can find it in your heart to forgive me, I promise I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you. And I promise you that I will do whatever I have to

to make sure you and this baby have the life you deserve," he said.

He pulled back a moment, staring into my eyes.

“I love you, Molly,” he said.

Then he looked down, put his hand over my stomach, his thumb brushing over my abdomen like I—like we—were the most precious things in the world.

And just like that, any lingering fear, any reservations faded into nothing.

“And I love you,” he said.

I looked at him, some part of me still marveling, unable to believe.

But another part of me—the much bigger part of me—knowing I was exactly where I belonged

“We love you, too.”

THIRTEEN

Molly

Two months later

I felt a strange kind of peace, walking into the shelter with one hand on my belly and the other in Enzo's.

The air still smelled like cheap coffee and dog shampoo, though my stomach didn't lurch.

Nothing had changed.

But everything had changed.

I wasn't just Molly anymore.

I was Molly, fiancée of Enzo Moretti, the Moretti capo who had taken out three Genovese soldiers without blinking.

Molly, soon-to-be mother of Enzo's child.

Enzo squeezed my hand. "Want me to wait in the car?" he asked.

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“You’re volunteering to leave? You usually hover like a mother hen,” I said.

“Well, I thought I’d be generous. I don’t know how much longer I’m going to let you do this,” he said.

I tilted my head. “Let me?”

He gave me a quick kiss. “You heard me, doll.”

I stared at him, still in a black suit. Still dangerous. But different now. Enzo would never be soft, but I saw in gentleness when he looked at me. Saw the love all over his face.

Saw that he loved me, just as I loved him.

That I was his and he was mine.

Forever.

I smiled brighter. “The doctor said it was fine. And soon enough, I won’t be able to work anyway, so thank you for letting me enjoy this.”

Enzo

“This is nice,” I said later that afternoon after I’d finally gotten Molly to leave the shelter.

I had killed men with quieter hands than the ones I was now using to fold baby clothes.

Molly sat on the floor of our bedroom, surrounded by onesies and tiny socks and a baby book that had her tearing up every other page.

“You’re crying again,” I said when she didn’t answer.

She sniffled. “Hormones. And also, have you seen this stuff? It’s so tiny. Can you believe our baby is going to be this small?”

I glanced down at the tiny socks and tried to stop myself getting emotional.

“You have a point,” I said.

She smiled at the look on my face and set the book down.

“Come here.”

“I’m busy,” I said.

“Come here, Enzo.”

I went. Because I always fucking did.

And I always fucking would.

She pulled me down until I sat between her legs, my back against her chest, and her hands rubbing circles over my shoulders.

“I love you, Enzo Moretti,” she whispered in my ear.

“Not nearly as much as I love you,” I said.

I kissed her and then pulled back. “I have a surprise for you.”

“Another one? I mean, you already gave me a baby,” she said.

“Yup, another one.”

I pulled an envelope out of the baby book.

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“Were you hiding that in my book?” she said.

“Yeah, I mean with all the crying, I figured you’d never make it to the end.”

She slapped my arm and then took the envelope.

“It’s for after the baby comes,” I said.

She opened the envelope and read the paper. “Plane tickets. To Rome,” she said.

I watched her, trying to gauge her reaction. “You told me how much your grandmother loved travel shows about Rome. I know she never got to go, so I thought we could.” I rubbed her stomach. “The three of us.”

Her eyes softened, and she kissed me again.

Then she pulled back.

“I can’t believe how much things have changed since that night,” she said.

I entwined my fingers with hers.

“Yeah, I guess I should thank Fabiano for trying to—” I said.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” she interjected.

“I love you, Molly,” I said, staring up into those beautiful brown eyes.

“I love you, too, Enzo,” she said.

I kissed her, but she pulled back.

I stared down at her. “What’s wrong?” I said, my voice tense.

“Nothing,” she said, a smile on her face as she grabbed my hand and pressed it against her bump.

She looked into my eyes, and I knew the love I saw there was reflected tenfold in mine.

“I think the baby just kicked,” I said as I smiled through unshed tears.