



His Mafia Sweetheart: MM Mafia Romance

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Category: LGBT+

Description: There's no escaping Nico Caruso.

The gruff son of a notorious mafia boss has taken over my life—and my heart. Forced into his world after a rival family threatens my flower shop, I should fear this dark, dangerous man. But I can't resist him.

I see the way his intense gaze lingers on me, like he's battling his demons just to be near my light. With his walled heart slowly crumbling, I glimpse the beauty he tries to hide. He's a rose, thorns and all, and I'm utterly captivated.

When we cross the line, the passionate fire that ignites between us burns brighter than I ever imagined. But in his shadowed world of violence and betrayal, our forbidden love may be too explosive to conceal.

As the brutal mafia war escalates, will the ultimate choice have to be made between the cruel empire he was born into and the tender devotion I offer? Whatever his decision, I know I'm lost to him forever.

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ELI

The key slides into the lock with a satisfying click and I push open the door, breathing in the fragrant perfume of my little flower shop. Sunlight slants through the front windows, casting a golden glow over buckets of vibrant blossoms in every hue. Roses, lilies, daisies, peonies - a rainbow of petals and greenery just waiting to be transformed into works of art.

This is my happy place, my sanctuary from the gritty chaos of the city streets outside. When I'm elbow-deep in an arrangement, surrounded by beauty and life, everything else just fades away. It's like I can pour all my hopes and dreams into each bloom, crafting love stories and celebrations out of stems and leaves.

Sure, it's not the most practical career for a 26-year-old guy in New York. My childhood best friend Sophia is always on me to pursue my art, saying I'm wasting my talent in this "dinky little shop." But something about being a florist just feels right, like I'm tapping into a well of joy and creativity that I never knew I had. Each time a customer lights up at one of my arrangements, I get this warm glow in my chest, knowing I made their day a little brighter.

I'm humming tunelessly to myself as I start setting up for the morning, trimming stems and plucking withered leaves. The tiny bell over the door jingles and I glance up, my retail smile already stretching across my face. But the expression freezes as I take in the three burly men shouldering their way into my shop, their faces set in identical scowls. Uh oh. These guys definitely aren't here for a pretty bouquet.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" I ask, trying to keep my voice light and friendly despite

the sudden hammering of my pulse.

The one in front, a brute with slicked-back hair and a jagged scar bisecting his right eyebrow, steps forward and braces his meaty hands on the counter. He looks me up and down with open disdain, like I'm something unpleasant he just scraped off his shoe.

"You Eli Bloom?" he grunts.

I resist the urge to swallow nervously. "That's me. What can I do for you?"

Scarface exchanges a loaded glance with his cronies. "You can start by paying up. This is our territory now, and we expect a little...contribution from all the businesses on this block. For protection, see?"

My stomach drops into my scuffed sneakers. Protection money? From the freaking mafia? I've heard rumors of the crime families shaking down local shops, but I never thought they'd bother with my tiny little operation. I'm so far from a threat it's almost laughable.

Still, if there's one thing growing up in this neighborhood has taught me, it's that you don't show fear to bullies like this. It only makes them squeeze harder. So I square my shoulders and lift my chin, meeting Scarface's cold gaze head-on.

"I appreciate the offer," I say, choosing my words carefully. "But I don't need any extra protection. My shop is doing just fine as it is."

Scarface barks out a harsh laugh, the sound making me flinch despite my best efforts. "You don't seem to understand, kid. This ain't a request. You pay us, or bad things start happening to this pretty little shop of yours."

As if on cue, one of his goons reaches out and casually knocks over a metal bucket of sunflowers, sending them scattering across the tile floor. I suck in a sharp breath, my hands clenching into fists at my sides. The urge to drop to my knees and gather up the poor, crushed blooms is almost overwhelming.

"Please," I manage through gritted teeth. "I'm just trying to run an honest business here. I don't want any trouble."

"Trouble's all you're going to get if you don't shut up and pay what you owe," Scarface growls.

Before I can react, he snatches up a delicate glass vase brimming with white roses and smashes it against the counter. I flinch back as shattered crystal and bruised petals explode across the surface, glittering in the golden sunlight that now feels like a mockery.

Tears prickle hot at the backs of my eyes but I blink them ruthlessly away. I won't give these thugs the satisfaction of seeing me crumple. Even as they systematically destroy my shop, upending buckets and stomping on flowers with cruel, methodical intent, I hold myself stiff and still, my nails cutting bloody half-moons into my palms.

Just as Scarface raises a meaty fist, clearly intending to add a more personal touch to his communication, the bell over the door jangles again. All four of us whip our heads around to stare at the tall, dark figure filling the entrance, the morning light haloing him from behind so I can only make out the sharp angles of his silhouette.

The temperature in the room seems to plummet as the man steps forward, his expensive leather shoes crunching ominously over the carpet of broken stems and glittering shards. As he moves into the light, I get my first real look at him, and my breath catches in my throat.

He's devastatingly handsome, with chiseled features that look like they were carved from marble - high cheekbones, a strong jaw shadowed with dark stubble, full lips pressed into a grim line. His thick black hair is slicked back from a widow's peak, not a strand out of place. But it's his eyes that really grab me, fathomless and black as night, their intensity searing me to the bone.

He's dressed like an old-school gangster in a crisp black suit and blood-red tie, the fabric straining across his broad shoulders and powerful chest. Everything about him screams danger, from the coiled tension in his muscles to the lethal aura shimmering around him like heat haze off asphalt. This is a man who's no stranger to violence, a predator to the core.

The goons shrink back as he prowls forward, their cocksure swagger withering under his icy stare. Even Scarface looks suddenly nervous, his fists lowering to his sides.

"What's going on here, gentlemen?" the dark stranger asks, his voice a low, smoky rumble that prickles down my spine like the drag of a rose thorn. There's a subtle threat woven through the polite words, a steel fist wrapped in a velvet glove.

Scarface clears his throat and straightens up, trying to reclaim some of his former bluster. "Just having a little chat with Mr. Bloom here about his...financial obligations."

The stranger cocks his head, those obsidian eyes flicking over the carnage of my shop before locking onto my face. I feel that gaze like a physical touch, a trail of sparks igniting in its wake.

"Is that so," he murmurs. It's not a question. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're destroying an honest man's livelihood for no good reason."

Scarface's pasty face goes even whiter, his scar standing out in stark relief. "Look,

we don't want no trouble with you, Mr. Caruso. We're just following orders, yeah? The boss said every shop on this block pays up or gets a little reminder of who's in charge around here."

Mr. Caruso. The name slots into place with a sickening lurch. I've heard whispers about the Carusos, the most feared mafia family in the city. Their brutality is legendary, their reach limitless. And now one of them is standing in my ruined shop, those pitiless eyes raking over me like black flames.

Nico Caruso, I remember belatedly. The prodigal son, freshly returned from a long exile to take his place at his father's right hand. People say he's even more ruthless than the old man, a cold-blooded killer without a shred of mercy in his dark soul.

And he's looking at me like I'm a puzzle he's trying to figure out, that cruel mouth tipping up at one corner. "Well, it seems there's been a misunderstanding. This shop belongs to me now. And I don't take kindly to people messing with my things."

Wait, what? My head is spinning, trying to keep up with this dizzying turn of events. How can my shop belong to him? I've poured my blood, sweat, and tears into this place, building it up from nothing. He can't just waltz in and claim it, mafia prince or no.

I open my mouth to protest, but Nico silences me with a sharp look, those obsidian eyes frosting over with warning. Unease prickles through me, warring with the strange, unwelcome thrill that dances up my spine at the intensity of his focus.

Scarface and his buddies exchange uneasy glances, clearly weighing their options. After a long, tense moment, Scarface bobs his head in a jerky nod, conceding the field. "Our apologies, Mr. Caruso. We didn't know this was your place. It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't." Nico's voice is soft as silk, but the menace in it could cut glass. "Now get out of my sight before I lose my patience."

They scurry out like rats fleeing a sinking ship, the bell jingling wildly in their wake. And then it's just me and Nico, the air between us practically crackling with tension. I'm suddenly hyperaware of every detail - the way his suit hugs the lean lines of his body, the spicy, masculine scent of his cologne, the weight of his gaze pinning me in place like a butterfly on a cork board.

"I...thank you," I manage, my voice coming out embarrassingly breathy. I curse myself for sounding like a swooning damsel. "For stepping in. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come along."

Nico prowls closer, each measured step eating up the distance between us. This near, he's even more imposing, towering over me with that broad-shouldered bulk. I have to crane my neck back to hold his gaze, my heartbeat tap-dancing wildly against my ribs.

"I didn't do it for you," he says bluntly. There's no kindness in that beautiful, brutal face. "Like I said, this shop belongs to me now. And I protect what's mine."

I flinch at the casual possessiveness in his tone. "How can you just decide that? I've worked my ass off to make this place what it is. You can't march in and take it away from me!"

His eyes narrow and I immediately regret my flash of temper. This man could snap me in half without breaking a sweat. What the hell am I thinking, provoking him like that?

But I can't back down, not when it comes to the most important thing in my life. This shop is all I have, my entire world. Without it, I'm just another lost soul drifting in

this concrete jungle.

To my shock, Nico's lips quirk in what might almost be a smile, there and gone so fast I almost think I imagined it. "Relax, Sunshine. I'm not here to steal your precious flowers. But I am going to be your new landlord. And your personal bodyguard, effective immediately."

I gape at him, my mouth opening and closing soundlessly. Is he serious? A notorious mafia boss, babysitting me and my little shop? The idea is so absurd I almost want to laugh.

But there's nothing amusing about the look on his face or the grim set of that cruelly sensual mouth. He's not asking for my cooperation or approval. He's stating facts, laying out my new reality with all the warmth of a prison warden.

I wanted a protector, someone to keep the wolves from my door. But staring into Nico Caruso's frigid black eyes, I'm suddenly terrified I've just traded the frying pan for the fire.

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NICO

The moment I step into the flower shop, the cloying stench of crushed petals and greenery assaults my nose. It's a sickeningly sweet odor, undercut with the sharp tang of spilled water and the muskier tones of potting soil. The tile floor is a riot of color, like a kaleidoscope shattered across the surface - brilliant reds and pinks, buttery yellows, royal purples, all muddied and dulled by careless boots.

My lip curls in disgust as I take in the trio of thugs hovering over a slender figure in a green apron. Bianchi's boys, still too stupid to realize they're pissing on the wrong patch of turf. They've always been cocky little pricks, riding on the coattails of their boss's fading reputation. But messing with one of my fronts? That's a fatal mistake, and they're about to learn it the hard way.

My gaze cuts to the florist - Eli, I remember from the briefing. He's got balls, I'll give him that, glaring defiantly up at the Bianchi enforcers even as they loom over him. There's no fear in those vivid blue eyes, just a surprising spark of defiance, like a cornered alley cat unsheathing its claws.

I feel my eyebrow quirk up, my interest piqued despite myself. It's not often I meet someone with a spine in this business. Most people, they see the cut of my suit and the cold promise in my eyes, and they crumple like wet tissue paper, babbling and pleading for mercy they won't get.

But not this kid. Oh, he's wary, I can see it in the taut line of his shoulders and the white-knuckled grip he's got on the edge of the counter. But there's a core of steel in him, something unbending and unbreakable. It's almost...admirable, in a naive,

reckless sort of way.

Too bad for him, that kind of backbone is a liability in my world. It paints a target on your back, invites all sorts of trouble from people who see it as a challenge. And trouble is the last thing I need right now, with the feds sniffing around and the Bianchis getting bolder by the day.

I let my power precede me as I stalk into the shop, the soles of my Ferragamos crunching ominously over the litter of ravaged flowers. The temperature seems to plunge ten degrees as the goons register my presence, their cocksure posturing withering like frost-bitten blooms.

I see the moment recognition dawns, their faces draining of color as they put a name to my face. Nico Caruso, the prodigal son, the devil in Armani. I've cultivated quite the reputation since my return to the city, and it's always gratifying to see it having the desired effect.

"What's going on here, gentlemen?" I ask, my tone deceptively mild. The words emerge in a low rasp, rough with the edge of violence I can never quite shake.

The leader, a side of beef with more scar tissue than functioning brain cells, pastes on a sickly smile. "Mr. Caruso, what an unexpected pleasure. We were just having a friendly chat with young Mr. Bloom here about his...financial obligations."

I let my gaze rake over the carnage, the pools of filthy water, the crushed stems oozing sap like blood. "Looks real friendly."

I don't raise my voice, but the goon flinches like I've slapped him. "Just following orders, sir. The Bianchis told us to lean on every shop on the block, get them to pay up for protection. But if we'd known this was one of your places, we never would've
- "

I silence him with a look, my eyes going flinty. "This is one of my places now. And I won't ask you nicely again. Get the fuck out of here before I show you what happens to little boys who don't know how to play in the big leagues."

There's a frozen moment where I think the lead thug might actually be dumb enough to challenge me. His fists clench at his sides, his piggy little eyes darting to his buddies for backup. But self-preservation wins out over pride, and he signifies his crew with a jerk of his head.

"Our apologies, Mr. Caruso," he grits out through a rictus smile. "It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't." The words drip with silky menace, a thousand unspoken threats woven between the lines.

They scuttle out with their tails between their legs, the door chimes jangling wildly in their wake. And then it's just me and the florist boy, the air practically sparking with the tension crackling between us.

Eli clears his throat, drawing my gaze back to his face. Up close, I'm struck by how damn pretty he is, all golden curls and creamy skin, pink lips parted in an uncertain little smile. He looks like he belongs on the cover of some bodice-ripper romance novel, windswept and dewy-eyed.

"I...thank you," he says, the words emerging breathless and shaky. "For stepping in like that. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't come along when you did."

I feel my mouth tighten, annoyance warring with an unexpected tug of something softer, more sympathetic. I ruthlessly quash the feeling before it can take root. I'm not here to play white knight to some naive little civilian. I'm here because my father

ordered me to be, and because this shop is the perfect front for our less-than-legal revenue streams. Eli Bloom is nothing but a cog in the machine, a means to an end.

"I didn't do it for you," I rasp, holding his gaze with cold intensity. "This place belongs to me now. And I protect what's mine."

Something flares in those cornflower eyes, hot and defiant. "Yours? Excuse me, but I built this business from the ground up. It's mine, not some mafia trophy for you to throw your weight around."

I feel my eyebrows climbing my forehead, the corner of my mouth ticking up in grudging respect. Well, well. The kitten's got claws. Not that it'll do him any good in the long run. He's a lamb frolicking in the lion's den, too stupid to realize he's already been marked for slaughter.

"You've got a real fire in you, don't you, Sunshine?" I murmur, stalking closer with predatory intent. He holds his ground, tilting his chin up to maintain eye contact as I invade his space. The move puts our faces inches apart, close enough for me to see the gold flecks in his irises, to smell the crisp green scent clinging to his skin. "But you're out of your depth here. This isn't some quaint little Hallmark movie. It's the real world, and it's mean and brutal and it will chew you up and spit you out without a second thought. You're just lucky it was me who got to you first, and not the Bianchis or the Russians or any of the other circling sharks out there."

Eli swallows hard, his throat bobbing enticingly. This close, I can practically feel the warmth radiating off his skin, see the translucent blue of the veins pulsing beneath. It would be so easy to reach out and snap that slender neck, to silence the reckless words spilling from that pretty mouth.

But I don't. Because beneath the bravado, there's something...intriguing about Eli Bloom. Something that makes me want to dig my fingers in and peel back his layers,

to see what makes him tick. It's a dangerous curiosity, the kind that can get a man killed in my business. But I've never been good at resisting temptation.

"Well, lucky me," Eli murmurs, a hint of sarcasm lacing the words. "So what happens now? You just move in and start calling the shots?"

"Basically." I flash him a wolfish smile, all teeth and dark promise. "Congratulations, Sunshine. You've just acquired a new roommate. And a 24/7 bodyguard, courtesy of the Caruso family."

His eyes go wide and incredulous, pink lips parting on a disbelieving huff of laughter. "You're joking, right? This is my home, my business. You can't just - "

"I can, and I am," I cut him off, my tone brooking no argument. "This place is a front now, and you're my cover. Which means your ass belongs to me until I decide otherwise. Get used to it, because I'm not going anywhere."

I can practically see the wheels turning behind his eyes, the instinct to argue warring with the dawning realization that he's well and truly trapped. After a long, charged moment, he exhales gustily and slumps back against the counter, the fight draining out of him.

"Fine," he grits out, sounding like the word physically pains him. "But let's get one thing straight, Mr. Caruso. I'm not some puppet for you to jerk around on a string. This is still my shop, my home. You're a guest here, not the king of the castle. Capiche?"

I can't help it - a bark of genuine laughter escapes me, rusty and unfamiliar. It's been a long time since anyone had the balls to talk to me like that, to stand up to me without flinching. There's a strange, foreign warmth kindling in my chest, a flicker of respect and something more dangerous, more unwelcome.

Attraction. Desire. The kind of wanting I ruthlessly buried years ago, when I learned the hard way that love is the deadliest weapon of all.

I clamp down on the feeling with brutal efficiency, my face smoothing back into its customary mask of icy control. "Whatever you say, Sunshine. Just remember - guest or not, I'm the one with the power here. It's in your best interest to stay on my good side."

Something knowing sparks in his gaze, a wry twist curving the corner of his mouth. "Somehow, I get the feeling you don't have a good side, Mr. Caruso."

My lips quirk into a blade of a smile, humorless and cold. "You're not wrong," I murmur.

The words hang between us, dark and loaded, as I turn on my heel and prowl out of the shop. I've got calls to make, strings to pull, contingency plans to set in motion. Because ready or not, Eli Bloom just became the most important piece on my chessboard. And I'll be damned if I let anything threaten my hold on him - not the law, not my enemies, and sure as hell not my own treacherous desires.

It's hours later, deep in the velvet dark of night, when I hear it - a muffled snuffle, a hitched little breath that carries through the thin walls of the apartment.

I'm stretched out on the bed, hands laced behind my head as I stare up at the water-stained ceiling. Sleep is an elusive mistress tonight, chased away by the adrenaline still buzzing through my veins and the relentless churn of my thoughts.

But at the sound of Eli's quiet tears, I go still, my entire body tensing like a bloodhound catching a scent. It's instinct to catalogue the noise as a potential threat, to brace for danger even here, in the supposed safety of this dingy little walk-up.

Except...there's no danger here. Just a lonely, lost boy mourning the normal life he's been forcibly ejected from. The realization sits sour on my tongue, an unfamiliar pang of something uncomfortably close to guilt needling at my chest.

I should tune him out, roll over and will myself into the oblivion of sleep. Tears are a weakness I can't afford, a liability that could bring my whole world crashing down around my ears.

But as the minutes drag on and the soft, hitching sobs continue to penetrate the thin barrier between us, I find myself incapable of ignoring them. Before I can stop myself, I'm rising from the bed and padding across the scuffed hardwood, my bare feet nearly silent.

I pause outside his door, my hand poised over the knob. This is a colossally bad idea. The smart move would be to turn around, to put as much distance between myself and Eli's messy, inconvenient emotions as possible.

But I've never claimed to be a smart man. Especially not when it comes to captivating little florists with summer sky eyes and too-big hearts.

"Eli," I call gruffly, tapping my knuckles against the door. "You good in there?"

The crying abruptly cuts off, replaced by a mortified snuffle and a rustle of bedding. "I'm fine," he calls back, his voice wavering tellingly. "Just...allergies."

A wry smile tugs at my mouth, though there's no real humor in it. "Allergies. Right. That must be why you're leaking like a sieve at 2 AM."

There's a watery huff of laughter, followed by the creak of floorboards. A moment later, the door swings open, revealing Eli in mismatched socks and an oversized Columbia sweatshirt. His eyes are red-rimmed and glassy, his nose pink from crying.

He looks achingly young and vulnerable, a far cry from the fiery spitfire who stood up to me this morning. It makes something clench painfully in my chest, a long-dormant protective instinct rising up to rattle the bars of its cage.

"What do you want, Nico?" he asks, exhaustion and resignation threaded through the words. "Come to gloat? To remind me who's really in charge here?"

I flinch before I can stop myself, the accusation landing like a sucker punch to the solar plexus. Is that really what he thinks of me? Some strutting cartoon villain, kicking him while he's down?

"No," I rasp, my voice emerging lower and rougher than I intended. "I just...wanted to make sure you were okay."

Something flickers in his gaze, there and gone too quick to decipher. Surprise, maybe. Or gratitude. "Oh. Well...I'm not, really. But I will be."

He lifts his chin, a defiant little gesture that sparks with echoes of the man who stood up to armed thugs this morning. "I'm tougher than I look, you know. I've survived worse than an uninvited houseguest with poor manners and a bad attitude."

Surprised laughter rumbles up from my chest, rusty but real. "Cute," I drawl, shaking my head. "But I'm not just a houseguest, Sunshine. I'm your warden and your own personal attack dog. Best get that through your head now, for both our sakes."

He rolls his eyes, the ghost of a smile pulling at his lips. "So you keep saying. But I'm not some blushing damsel in a tower, Nico. I can take care of myself."

"Maybe," I allow, holding his gaze. "But the sharks out there? They won't give a damn how tough you are. They'll rip you to shreds and use the pieces as chum without batting an eye. That's why I'm here - to make sure that doesn't happen."

"My hero," Eli deadpans. But there's a softness in his eyes, a glimmer of gratitude he can't quite disguise.

"I'm no one's hero, kid. Just a guy doing a job." I pause, weighing my next words carefully. "But for what it's worth...I'm sorry. For all of this. I know it's not what you wanted or asked for."

He blinks rapidly, his throat working as he swallows. For a second, I think he might start crying again, and I tense in preparation to beat a hasty retreat. But he just shakes his head, a wry little smile quirking his lips.

"Definitely not," he agrees. "But hey, at least I'm not bored, right?"

I snort, an unfamiliar warmth kindling in my chest. "Careful what you wish for, Sunshine. Stick with me long enough, you'll be begging for a little boredom."

"I'll take that under advisement." Eli hesitates, something uncertain and almost shy flickering over his expressive face. "And Nico? Thanks. For checking on me, I mean. You didn't have to do that."

"Yes I did," I murmur, almost to myself. Because it's the truth, even if I'm not ready to examine the reasons too closely. Eli is my responsibility now, for better or worse. His well-being, physical and emotional, is just another line item on the list of things I'll personally destroy anyone for threatening.

He's still looking at me, his eyes dark and fathomless in the low light spilling from his room. There's a heat there, banked but unmistakable, that sends an answering lick of fire curling through my gut.

Apologies for the abrupt cut-off. Here's the continuation and conclusion of Chapter 2:

It would be so easy to take what that look is offering. To push him back into the room and kickstart the desperate, clawing want that's rapidly replacing the exhaustion in his eyes. I can practically taste his surrender on my tongue already, hot and sweet as blood.

But I won't. Because Eli Bloom is not a prize to be won or a conquest to be claimed. He's a job, a responsibility, and the most dangerous kind of temptation. And if I give into this twisted thing sparking between us, even for a moment, it will consume us both until there's nothing left but ashes and regret.

So I take a deliberate step back, my hands clenching into fists at my sides. "Get some sleep," I rasp, my voice jagged with the effort of reining myself in. "Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

Something flashes in his eyes, too quick to decipher. Disappointment, maybe. Or relief. But he just nods, a jerky little bob of his head as he starts to close the door. "Right. Goodnight, then."

"Goodnight, Eli." The words feel weighted, tangled with a thousand things I can't say. Sweet dreams. Sleep well. I'm sorry for turning your life upside down.

The door snicks shut with a soft click, leaving me alone in the darkened hallway. For a long moment, I just stand there, listening to the rush of my own blood in my ears and trying to ignore the relentless pulse of arousal throbbing in my veins.

What the hell is wrong with me? I'm Nico fucking Caruso, the most feared man in three boroughs. I have blood on my hands and ice in my veins, a monster shaped by violence and hardened by loss. I'm not supposed to feel things like this, soft and warm and achingly tender.

But Eli, with his sunshine smile and his stubborn, reckless backbone...he makes me

want to feel. To be the kind of man who could be gentle, who could hold something precious without crushing it to dust.

It's a pipedream, a fantasy as flimsy as soap bubbles. I'll never be that man, no matter how desperately I might wish otherwise. My path is carved in stone and paved with bones, a one-way ticket to hell with no detours.

But as I force myself to turn away from Eli's door and stalk back to my own room, I can't shake the sinking feeling that it might already be too late. Because Eli Bloom, with his riot of sunny curls and his heart worn brazenly on his sleeve, has already started to slip past my defenses.

As I strip off my clothes and crawl into bed, my mind is a whirlwind of warring desires and cold, clinical strategies. I need to find a way to keep Eli safe without compromising my own armor. To protect him from the world I live in without letting him become a chink in the impassive mask I wear like a second skin.

It's a delicate balancing act, one I'm not at all sure I'm capable of pulling off. But as I drift into a restless sleep, one thought crystallizes with perfect, ruthless clarity.

Come hell or high water, I will keep Eli Bloom alive and whole. Because whether I like it or not, he's mine now. And I protect what's mine - no matter the cost.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

ELI

The scent of chocolate chip cookies permeates the tiny apartment, warm and sweet and achingly nostalgic. For a moment, as I pull the tray from the oven and inhale the comforting aroma, I can almost pretend that everything is normal. That there isn't a surly, devastatingly handsome mafioso lurking in my living room like a particularly dangerous piece of furniture.

Almost.

I sigh, setting the tray down on the counter with a clatter. Who am I kidding? There's nothing normal about this situation, no matter how many batches of comfort food I whip up. My life has turned into a bad mafia movie overnight, complete with brooding, dangerous men in expensive suits and a target the size of Texas painted on my back.

Nico Caruso. Even the name sends a shiver down my spine, equal parts fear and fascination. He's an enigma wrapped in a bespoke three-piece, a walking contradiction of icy control and barely leashed violence.

And now he's my roommate. My "protector", whatever that means.

I scoop the cookies onto a cooling rack with more force than necessary, my motions jerky and agitated. It's been three days since Nico barged into my life, and I still don't know what to make of him. He's hardly said a dozen words to me, his dark gaze inscrutable as he monitors my every move.

It's unnerving, being watched like that. Like I'm a bug under a magnifying glass, my every twitch and flutter analyzed for signs of weakness. The weight of his stare makes my skin prickle, my heart beat just a little bit faster.

But it's not fear, not entirely. There's something else mixed in with the unease, a treacherous curl of heat that licks through my veins when Nico's eyes linger just a little too long. A part of me, reckless and hungry, wonders what it would feel like to have the full force of that intense focus trained on me. To be the center of Nico Caruso's undivided attention, even for a moment.

I shake my head, dispelling the dangerous thought. That way lies madness, and probably a shallow grave. Nico is a killer, a cold-blooded predator. I'd have to be suicidal to entertain even a whisper of attraction to him.

And yet...

I can't help but remember the way he looked at me that first night, when he found me crying in my room. The way his voice softened, just a little, as he awkwardly offered comfort. There was something in his eyes, something raw and almost tender, that made me want to burrow into his arms and never let go.

Stupid. Naive. I'm projecting, seeing things that aren't there because I'm scared and lonely and so far out of my depth I might as well be drowning.

The clatter of boots on hardwood yanks me out of my spiraling thoughts. I look up to see Nico filling the kitchen doorway, his broad shoulders straining the seams of his black dress shirt. His hair is damp from the shower, curling slightly at his nape, and the scent of his woody aftershave reaches me even across the room.

"Something smells good," he says, his voice a low rasp that sends shivers skating down my spine.

I swallow hard, my mouth suddenly dry. "I made cookies," I say inanely, gesturing to the cooling racks like an idiot. "Chocolate chip. I thought...I thought maybe we could have some. Together."

Nico's eyebrows shoot up, a flicker of surprise crossing his chiseled face. "You baked...for me?"

I flush, feeling suddenly foolish. What was I thinking, trying to bond with a mafia killer over baked goods? "Not for you specifically," I mutter, picking at a loose thread on my apron. "I just...baking helps me think. Keeps my hands busy."

Something dark and knowing flashes in Nico's eyes, there and gone too quickly to decipher. "Idle hands are the devil's playthings, is that it?"

I blink, wrong-footed by the sudden shift in his tone. "What? No, that's not what I-"

"Relax, Sunshine," Nico drawls, the corner of his mouth ticking up in a ghost of a smile. "I'm just fucking with you."

He prowls closer, reaching past me to snag a cookie off the rack. I freeze, caught between the heat of his body and the cool granite of the countertop. He's so close, the crisp cotton of his shirt brushing my arm, the spicy scent of his cologne invading my senses.

"Careful," I rasp, my voice coming out all breathy and wrong. "They're still hot."

Nico ignores me, biting into the cookie with a crunch. His eyes flutter shut, a low hum of pleasure rumbling up from his chest. The sound shoots straight to my groin, desire unfurling hotly in my gut.

"Damn," he says, licking a stray crumb from the corner of his mouth. "That's fucking

delicious. Who knew you had hidden talents, Sunshine?"

I feel my cheeks heat, a giddy thrill zipping through me at the unexpected praise. "Oh, I'm full of surprises," I say lightly, trying for a teasing smile.

Something hot and intent sparks in Nico's gaze, his eyes dropping to my mouth. "Is that so?" he murmurs, his voice dropping an octave. "Maybe you'll have to show me some of these...surprises, one of these days."

My breath catches, my pulse stumbling drunkenly in my throat. Is he...flirting with me? No, impossible. This is Nico Caruso, stone-cold killer and unrepentant bastard. He doesn't flirt, he doesn't banter, and he certainly doesn't get all up in his hostage's personal space, close enough to kiss.

Except...he is. And goddamn it, I'm responding, my body betraying me with a flush of heat and a hitch in my breathing.

This is insane. Suicidal. I can't let myself fall for Nico's dark magnetism, no matter how much my treacherous heart might race at his proximity. He's dangerous, a lit match in a powder keg that could destroy us both.

I need to push him away. I need to re-establish some boundaries, remind both of us that he's here as my jailer, not my lover.

I open my mouth to do just that, to tell Nico to back the hell off and stop looking at me like he wants to devour me whole. But what comes out instead is a breathy, idiotic, "You've, um. You've got flour. On your cheek."

Nico blinks, the heat in his gaze cooling a degree. "What?"

I swallow, my hand rising of its own accord. "Just there," I murmur, my fingers

grazing the sharp cut of his cheekbone. His skin is warm, the hint of stubble prickling my fingertips. "Let me just..."

I brush the smudge of white away, my touch lingering a beat too long. Nico goes utterly still, his eyes locked on mine, his breath a hot gust against my wrist. The air between us crackles with tension, the kind of breathless anticipation that comes before a storm.

"Eli," he says, his voice rough and low. A warning. A plea.

I drop my hand like I've been scalded, taking a stumbling step back. "Sorry," I rasp, my face burning. "I don't...I didn't mean..."

Nico's jaw clenches, a muscle ticking in his cheek. He looks away, his hands flexing at his sides like he's physically restraining himself from reaching out. "It's fine," he grits out, the words clipped and cold. "Forget it."

A leaden weight sinks into my stomach, disappointment curdling on my tongue. Of course he's shutting me out, his walls slamming back up at the first sign of vulnerability. What the hell was I thinking, touching him like that? Like we were something more than reluctant allies, like I had any right to breach his impenetrable defenses.

"Right," I mutter, my throat tight and achy. "I'll just...I have some arrangements to finish up downstairs."

I push past him, my shoulder brushing his in the narrow confines of the kitchen. I feel the contact like an electric shock, a jolt of heat and wanting that makes me stumble.

Nico's hand shoots out, his fingers wrapping around my bicep to steady me. "Careful," he says, his voice low and gravelly.

I look up at him, my heart in my throat. His eyes are dark, turbulent, a maelstrom of emotions I can't even begin to decipher. But there's something else there too, something raw and almost...vulnerable. Like a crack in the impenetrable fortress of his control.

"Nico," I whisper, my voice cracking on the syllables. "I..."

The jangle of the shop bell shatters the moment, the sound as jarring as a gunshot in the charged silence. Nico's head snaps towards the stairs, his hand tightening on my arm.

"Stay here," he orders, his voice brooking no argument. And then he's gone, a whisper of silk and a creak of leather as he disappears down the stairs.

I stand frozen for a long moment, my heart rabbiting against my ribs. And then I hear it - the muffled thump of a body hitting the floor, the clatter of overturned furniture. A cry of pain, abruptly cut off.

Fear cinches tight around my lungs, icy talons sinking into my chest. Oh god. It's happening again, the violence and brutality of Nico's world spilling over into mine like a noxious tide.

I should stay put. I should let Nico handle it, trust that he knows what he's doing. But the thought of him down there alone, outnumbered and outgunned, makes my stomach twist with dread.

I'm moving before I can second-guess myself, my feet carrying me down the stairs and into the chaos of the shop. The scene that greets me makes my blood run cold, my breath freezing in my lungs.

The shop is in shambles, torn petals and broken glass littering the floor. And in the

middle of it all is Nico, his shirt torn and bloodied, his face a mask of cold fury as he grapples with a snarling, beefy thug.

There are two more men sprawled at Nico's feet, groaning and clutching at various wounds. But the third assailant is still on his feet, a glittering knife clenched in his fist as he slashes at Nico's belly.

"No!" The scream rips from my throat, high and terrified.

Nico's head whips towards me, his eyes widening in shock and fear. The thug takes advantage of his distraction, lunging forward with the knife. The blade sinks into Nico's shoulder with a sickening thud, a crimson stain blooming across the white of his shirt.

Nico roars in pain and fury, his fist smashing into the thug's face with a crunch of cartilage. The man goes down hard, his skull bouncing off the tile with a hollow thunk.

And then it's over, the sudden silence broken only by Nico's labored breathing and the wet, gurgling gasps of the downed men.

"Eli," Nico rasps, his eyes wild and desperate as he staggers towards me. "What the fuck are you doing down here? I told you to stay put!"

I shake my head mutely, my throat closed up with terror. "You're hurt," I manage, my voice a strangled whisper. "Oh god, Nico, you're bleeding."

He glances down at his shoulder, at the sticky redness seeping between his fingers. "It's fine," he grits out, even as his face pales to a sickly gray. "Just a scratch. I've had worse."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut, the casual brutality in them making me flinch. How can he be so cavalier about being stabbed, about the violence that clings to him like a second skin? What kind of life has he led, that this is just another day at the office for him?

But beneath the bravado, I can see the pain etched into the lines of his face, the way his jaw clenches as he tries to hold himself together. He's hurting, in more ways than one, and the sight of it cracks something open in my chest.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I'm closing the distance between us, my hands coming up to frame his face. "You're not fine," I whisper fiercely, my thumbs stroking over the stubble on his jaw. "You're hurt and bleeding and probably in shock. We need to get you to a hospital, or at least patch you up before you bleed out on my floor."

Nico shakes his head, a wry twist to his mouth. "No hospitals," he says, his voice gravelly with pain. "Too many questions. I've got a first aid kit upstairs, I can take care of it."

"Like hell you can," I snap, a sudden flare of anger burning through the fear. "You can barely stand up straight, much less stitch yourself back together. Let me help you, Nico. Please."

He stares at me for a long moment, something unreadable flickering in the depths of his eyes. And then, to my shock, he nods, his shoulders slumping in defeat. "Okay," he rasps, leaning into my touch like he can't help himself. "Okay, Sunshine. You win."

Relief crashes through me, dizzying in its intensity. I slide my arm around his waist, taking some of his weight as I guide him towards the stairs. He leans on me heavily, his breath coming in short, pained gasps, and the trust in that simple gesture makes

my heart clench.

I get him settled on the couch, his ruined shirt tossed carelessly to the floor. In the harsh light of the living room, the wound in his shoulder looks even worse, a jagged gash oozing blood.

My hands shake as I rip open the first aid kit, nausea churning in my gut. I'm no doctor, no combat medic. I don't know the first thing about stitching up knife wounds. But Nico is counting on me, trusting me to take care of him, and I'll be damned if I let him down.

I clean the wound as best I can, my fingers gentle as I dab at the torn flesh with antiseptic. Nico hisses through his teeth, his hands fisting at his sides, but he doesn't pull away.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, my voice cracking. "I know it hurts. I'm trying to be careful."

Nico huffs out a strained laugh, his eyes glassy with pain. "You're doing fine, Sunshine. Believe me, I've had worse bedside manner."

I swallow hard, my throat tight. "I hate that you can say that," I whisper, my fingers trembling as I thread the curved needle. "I hate that this is normal for you, that pain and violence are just another day at the office."

Nico's quiet for a long moment, his eyes searching my face. "It's all I know," he says finally, his voice low and rough. "All I've ever been good for. Hurting people, breaking things. It's in my blood."

My heart clenches, a fierce ache blooming behind my ribs. "That's not true," I say fiercely, tying off the last stitch with shaking fingers. "You're more than what you do, Nico. More than the sins of your father. You protected me today, put yourself in

harm”s way to keep me safe. That”s not nothing.”

He stares at me, something raw and achingly vulnerable flickering in his dark eyes. ”Eli,” he rasps, his hand coming up to cup my cheek. ”You don”t...you don”t know the things I”ve done. The kind of man I am.”

I lean into his touch, my eyes fluttering shut. ”Then show me,” I whisper, turning my head to press a kiss to his palm. ”Let me see the man beneath the mask, Nico. The one who bakes cookies with me and bleeds for me and looks at me like I”m something precious.”

Nico makes a low, wounded sound, his fingers tightening on my jaw. ”You are,” he growls, his voice ragged with emotion. ”Precious. Too fucking precious for a beast like me to touch.”

I open my eyes, meeting his gaze head-on. ”I”m not afraid of you,” I say softly, my heart in my throat. ”I”m not afraid of this, of us. I trust you, Nico. With my life, and with my heart.”

Something shatters in his expression, the last of his walls crumbling to dust. And then he”s hauling me into his lap, his mouth crashing down on mine in a bruising, desperate kiss.

I gasp into the kiss, my hands fisting in his hair as I open for him. Nico”s tongue sweeps into my mouth, claiming me, consuming me, and I melt into him with a needy moan.

His hands are everywhere, sliding beneath my shirt to map the contours of my back, dipping into the waistband of my jeans to grip my hips. I can feel the heat of him, the coiled strength in his muscles, and it sets me on fire, my blood singing with want.

But as his fingers brush the button of my fly, I freeze, sudden uncertainty dousing my desire like a bucket of ice water. We're moving too fast, the heat between us burning out of control, and as much as I want this, want him, I'm not ready for the inferno.

I tear my mouth away, panting harshly against his jaw. "Wait," I rasp, my hands splaying across his chest. "Nico, wait. We can't...not like this. Not when you're hurt and bleeding and hopped up on adrenaline. I don't want to be just another battle high, another adrenaline-fueled mistake."

Nico stills, his breath gusting hot against my throat. For a moment, I'm terrified he's going to ignore me, to take what he wants regardless of my hesitation. But then he's pulling back, his eyes dark and heavy-lidded as he searches my face.

"Okay," he rasps, his hands gentling on my hips. "Okay, Sunshine. We'll slow down. I'd never force you, never hurt you. I just...I want you so fucking much. It scares me, how deep this goes."

I shiver, my heart clenching at the raw honesty in his words. "I want you too," I whisper, my fingers tracing the edge of his jaw. "So much it terrifies me. But I need to know it's real, Nico. That I'm not just a convenient outlet, a way to blow off steam."

His eyes soften, his thumb brushing tenderly across my bottom lip. "You're not," he says roughly, his voice thick with emotion. "You're everything, Eli. Fucking everything."

I make a soft, broken sound, my heart swelling until it feels like it might burst. And then I'm kissing him again, soft and slow and achingly tender, pouring every ounce of my fear and longing and desperate, terrifying love into the press of my lips.

And as Nico kisses me back just as gently, just as reverently, I feel a flicker of hope

kindle to life in my chest. Maybe, just maybe, we can find a way to make this work. To carve out a place for ourselves amidst the chaos and the violence, a sanctuary built on trust and devotion and the stubborn, unshakeable belief that love can conquer all.

But as Nico's hands tighten on my waist, his body tensing beneath mine, I know our troubles are far from over. The specter of his world still looms over us, dark and hungry and poised to strike. And if we're not careful, it will devour us whole, leaving nothing but ashes and regret in its wake.

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NICO

The pounding bass of the club thrums through my bones, the flashing neon lights painting lurid colors across the undulating mass of bodies on the dance floor. The air is thick with the stench of sweat and spilled liquor, the sticky-sweet tang of cheap perfume and cheaper cologne. It's the kind of place where sins are bartered like currency, where secrets are spilled as easily as the vodka sloshing in the glasses.

Normally, I thrive in this environment. The grit and grime, the pulse and grind of flesh on flesh - it's as close to home as I've ever known. A place where I can lose myself in the physicality of it all, drown out the chaos in my head with the pounding rhythm of the music.

But tonight, even the bass can't drown out the thoughts churning in my brain. Thoughts of golden curls and summer-sky eyes, of a smile as bright as sunshine on a field of wildflowers. Thoughts of Eli fucking Bloom, the man who's somehow burrowed under my skin like a splinter I can't shake loose.

It's been a week since the attack at the flower shop. A week since I spilled my blood on Eli's floor, since he stitched me back together with trembling hands and a tenderness that cracked me open like an eggshell. A week of heated glances and lingering touches, of a tension so thick it's like wading through molasses.

I want him. Fuck, I want him so badly it's like a physical ache, a hollow yearning in my gut that no amount of booze or anonymous fucks can fill. I dream about him, about the satin-soft glide of his skin beneath my fingertips, the breathy catch of his moans in my ear. I wake hard and aching, my cock throbbing in time with the

relentless pounding of my pulse.

It's a fucking liability, this bone-deep hunger for a man I have no business wanting. A distraction I can't afford, not with the Bianchis breathing down my neck and the feds sniffing around my father's operation. I need to be sharp, focused, ruthless. I can't let myself be compromised by a pair of pretty blue eyes and a smile that could melt a glacier.

"You're thinking too hard, brother. I can practically see the smoke pouring out of your ears."

I startle at the voice in my ear, my hand twitching towards the gun holstered at my side. But it's just Tommy, my idiot kid brother, grinning at me with a mouthful of too-white teeth.

"Fuck off," I growl, taking a swig of my whiskey. The glass clinks against my teeth, the burn of the alcohol searing my throat. "I'm not in the mood for your shit tonight, Tommy."

He just laughs, the sound carrying over the thump of the music. "You're never in the mood for my shit, Nico. That's why you love me - I keep you on your toes."

I roll my eyes, but I can't quite bite back the twitch of my lips. Damn him, but the kid's not wrong. For all his playboy antics and devil-may-care attitude, Tommy's always had a knack for cutting through my bullshit. He sees me, the real me, beneath the icy exterior and the hardened shell of violence and cynicism.

"So, you gonna tell me what's got your panties in a twist?" he asks, signaling the bartender for another round. "Or am I gonna have to beat it out of you?"

I snort, my fingers tightening on my glass. "As if you could take me, little brother.

I've been wiping the floor with your scrawny ass since we were in diapers."

Tommy grins, sharp and feral. "Maybe. But I fight dirty, and you know it."

He's not wrong. For all my superior strength and skill, Tommy's always been a wily little bastard. Quick and cunning, with a vicious streak a mile wide. It's what makes him such a valuable asset to the family, and such a pain in my fucking ass.

"It's nothing," I mutter, draining the last of my whiskey. The ice clinks in the empty glass, a mocking counterpoint to the hollow ache in my chest. "Just...business shit. The usual."

Tommy cocks his head, his eyes narrowing. "Bullshit," he says, his voice low and intent. "This is about flower boy, isn't it? The pretty little civilian you're playing house with."

I stiffen, my fingers clenching around the empty glass. "Watch your fucking mouth," I snarl, a hot flush of anger crawling up the back of my neck. "Eli's not...it's not like that."

Tommy's eyebrows shoot up, a slow, wicked grin spreading across his face. "Oh, it's Eli now, is it? Not Bloom, or the florist, or that annoying fucking twink you got saddled with? Interesting."

I glare at him, my jaw clenching so hard I can feel my teeth creak. "Drop it, Tommy. I'm not in the mood for your fucking games."

He holds up his hands in mock surrender, his eyes glinting with mischief. "Hey, no games here, brother. Just calling it like I see it. And from where I'm standing, it looks like you've got it bad for a certain golden-haired ray of sunshine."

I squeeze my eyes shut, pinching the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger. Fuck. Is it that obvious? Am I wearing my stupid, hopeless crush on my sleeve for anyone to see?

"It doesn't matter," I grind out, my voice rough and raw. "Even if I did...feel something for him, which I don't, it wouldn't change anything. He's a job, a means to an end. Getting tangled up with him would be a fucking disaster."

Tommy's quiet for a long moment, his gaze heavy on the side of my face. When he speaks again, his voice is uncharacteristically serious, almost gentle. "Nico. Look at me."

I drag my eyes open, meeting his gaze reluctantly. There's no trace of mockery or amusement in his expression now, just a fierce, almost tender understanding.

"I know you think you're too far gone for something like this," he says quietly, his hand coming up to grip my shoulder. "That you're too broken, too tainted by the life we lead to deserve a shot at happiness. But that's bullshit, and you know it. You're not our father, Nico. You're not doomed to follow in his footsteps, to let this world swallow you whole."

I flinch, my throat tightening with a sudden swell of emotion. "Tommy..."

"No, shut up and listen to me for once, you stubborn bastard. You've been carrying the weight of this family on your shoulders since we were kids, and it's fucking breaking you. I see it every day, the way it eats at you, the way it hollows you out little by little. And I won't stand by and watch it happen anymore. Not when there's a chance for something better, something real."

I swallow hard, my eyes stinging with the threat of tears. Fucking hell. Leave it to Tommy to cut right to the heart of me, to lay me bare with a few well-placed words.

"It's not that simple," I rasp, my voice cracking like rusted metal. "Even if I wanted to pursue this thing with Eli, even if I thought for a second it could work...the risks are too high. If my enemies found out, if they tried to use him against me..."

"Then you fucking annihilate them," Tommy says fiercely, his eyes blazing with conviction. "You protect what's yours, no matter the cost. That's what you've always done for me, for the family. Why should it be any different for the man you love?"

The word hangs between us, stark and unavoidable. Love. Is that what this is? This clawing, desperate hunger, this ache in my chest that feels like it might split me in two? I don't know. I've never...I've never felt anything like this before. Never let myself want something, someone, with such reckless abandon.

But looking into my brother's eyes, seeing the unwavering faith and support shining back at me...I feel something loosen in my chest. A tightly-wound knot of fear and self-loathing, unraveling thread by thread.

"Okay," I rasp, the word tearing out of me like a bullet from a wound. "Okay, Tommy. I'll...I'll try. For him, for a chance at something real...I'll try."

Tommy's grin is blinding, his hand tightening on my shoulder. "Damn right you will. And I'll be right there with you, brother. Every step of the way."

Something warm and fierce blooms in my chest, a rush of gratitude and affection for this reckless, loyal idiot I'm lucky enough to call my blood. I pull him into a rough hug, thumping his back hard enough to rattle his teeth.

"Thank you," I mutter gruffly into his shoulder, my voice choked with emotion. "For always knowing what I need to hear, even when I'm too chickenshit to admit it."

Tommy laughs, squeezing me back just as hard. "That's what brothers are for, asshole. Now go get your man before I do it for you."

I pull back, swiping at my eyes with the back of my hand. "Fuck off," I grumble, but there's no heat in it. "As if he'd give you the time of day, you scrawny little punk."

Tommy just grins, smug as a cat in cream. "Never underestimate the Caruso charm, brother. It's a powerful thing."

I flip him off, but I can't quite suppress the answering grin tugging at my lips. For the first time in longer than I can remember, I feel something like hope fluttering in my chest. A tentative, fragile thing, but real and precious all the same.

Bolstered by Tommy's support and my own reckless determination, I throw myself into planning the perfect first date. I want to do this right, to show Eli that I'm serious about exploring this thing between us. That he's more than just a job, more than just a convenient warm body to lose myself in.

I settle on a secluded botanical garden on the outskirts of the city, a lush oasis of flowers and greenery hidden behind high stone walls. It's the kind of place Eli would love, a riot of color and beauty amidst the grit and grime of the urban jungle.

When I pitch the idea to him, his eyes light up like fucking Christmas trees, his smile so bright it's almost blinding. "Really?" he breathes, his hands fluttering excitedly. "You want to take me to a garden? On a...a date?"

I shrug, feigning a nonchalance I don't feel. "If you want to call it that, sure. I just thought...I know how much you love flowers, and I wanted to do something nice for you. To show you that I...that I appreciate you. Beyond just the job, I mean."

Eli's smile softens, his eyes going warm and liquid. "Nico," he murmurs, stepping

closer to me. His hand comes up to rest on my chest, right over the hammering of my heart. "You don't have to do anything special to show me that. Just being here, just...being you, is enough."

I swallow hard, my throat clicking. "Yeah, well. Maybe I want to do something special, did you ever think of that? Maybe I want to spoil you a little, treat you the way you deserve to be treated."

Eli's breath catches, his fingers curling into the fabric of my shirt. "And how do I deserve to be treated?" he asks softly, his gaze heavy-lidded and full of heat. "Like a precious orchid under glass? Or like a wildflower swaying in the wind?"

Fuck. The image those words conjure, of Eli splayed out amidst a tangle of wildflowers, his skin gleaming with sweat and his hair haloed in gold...it slams into me like a freight train, desire spiking through my veins like a drug.

"Like both," I rasp, my voice rough and raw with want. "Like everything, Eli. You deserve everything I can give you, and more. Let me...let me show you. Let me give you a perfect fucking day, one shining moment outside the madness of our lives."

Eli's eyes flutter shut, a shuddering breath escaping his parted lips. When he opens them again, they're blazing with a fierce, almost desperate longing. "Yes," he whispers, his hand sliding up to cup the back of my neck. "Yes, Nico. Take me away from all of this. Make me forget, just for a little while."

It's all the permission I need. I capture his mouth in a searing kiss, our teeth clacking and noses bumping in our eagerness. Eli opens for me instantly, his tongue sliding hot and slick against my own as he arches into my touch.

I walk him backwards until his shoulders hit the wall, my thigh sliding between his legs to press against the hardening bulge of his cock. He whimpers into my mouth,

his hips rolling against me in desperate little circles. It's fucking intoxicating, the way he comes alive under my hands, the way he melts and molds against me like he was made to fit there.

I deepen the kiss, my tongue plundering the hot, slick cavern of his mouth as my hands roam restlessly over his body. I slip them beneath the hem of his shirt, skimming over the smooth, heated skin of his back before dipping lower to cup the firm globes of his ass. Eli moans into the kiss, arching into my touch like a cat in heat.

Emboldened by his response, I tear my mouth from his to blaze a trail of hot, open-mouthed kisses down the column of his throat. Eli tips his head back with a gasp, his fingers tangling in my hair as I latch onto the sensitive skin beneath his ear. I suck and nibble at the spot, worrying it with my teeth until I'm sure I've left a mark. A brand, a claim, a visible reminder that he's mine.

"Nico," Eli pants, his voice thready and desperate. "Please, I need...I need..."

"Tell me," I growl against his skin, my hands kneading the firm muscle of his ass. "Tell me what you need, baby. I'll give it to you, anything, everything..."

"Your mouth," he gasps, his hips bucking against my thigh. "I need your mouth on me, please..."

Fuck yes. I drop to my knees in a heartbeat, my fingers making quick work of his belt and zipper. I tug his jeans and boxer briefs down just enough to free his straining erection, the hard, velvet-smooth length of it slapping against his belly.

I take a moment to admire the sight of him, flushed and leaking and so goddamn beautiful it makes my chest ache. And then I'm leaning forward, my tongue darting out to lap at the bead of moisture at his tip.

Eli cries out sharply, his hips jerking forward as if pulled by a string. I pin him to the wall with a forearm across his hips, holding him steady as I take him into my mouth inch by torturous inch.

He's hot and heavy on my tongue, the taste of him salty-sweet and intoxicating. I hollow my cheeks and suck hard, swirling my tongue around the sensitive crown before sinking down until the head of his cock nudges the back of my throat.

"Oh fuck," Eli sobs, his fingers scrabbling for purchase on my shoulders. "Nico, your mouth, it's so...fuck, it's perfect, you're perfect..."

I moan around him in response, the broken desperation in his voice stoking the flames of my own desire. I bob my head in a steady rhythm, taking him deep and then pulling back to tease the tip with flicks of my tongue.

Eli writhes against the wall, his thighs trembling and his abs clenching as he fights the urge to thrust into my mouth. I can tell he's getting close by the way his moans pitch higher, his fingers tightening almost painfully in my hair.

Part of me wants to push him over the edge, to taste his release on my tongue and feel him shatter apart in my hands. But a bigger part of me wants to make this last, to draw out the sweet, agonizing build of pleasure until he's a babbling, incoherent mess.

So I pull off with a filthy, wet pop, licking my lips to chase the taste of him. Eli whines at the loss, his hips twitching forward in a futile search for friction.

In a flash, I'm back on my feet, spinning Eli around to face the wall. I press up against his back, my still-clothed erection nestling into the cleft of his ass as I grind against him desperately. Eli pushes back into me with a moan, his hands scrabbling for purchase on the smooth surface.

I reach around to wrap my fingers around his spit-slick cock, stroking him in time with the roll of my hips. My other hand slides down to tease at his entrance, circling the furred muscle with the pad of my thumb.

Eli gasps and clenches around my finger, his head dropping back onto my shoulder. "Please," he pants, his voice ragged and wrecked. "Nico, please, I need you inside me..."

Fuck, the temptation is overwhelming. To just kick his legs apart and sink into the tight heat of his body, to claim him wholly and irrevocably. I'm so hard it hurts, my cock throbbing in the confines of my slacks.

But before we can get too carried away, I force myself to pull back, my breathing ragged and my heart thundering in my ears. I turn him around so we're facing each other again, my cock painfully hard as I tuck his straining erection back into his boxers, his whine making my shaft twitch.

"Wait," I pant, pressing my forehead against his sweat-dampened nape. "Not here, not like this. I want...I want to do this right, Eli. I want our first time to be perfect, to be everything you deserve."

Eli makes a soft, desperate sound, his fingers digging into my shoulders. "It will be," he rasps, his eyes fever-bright and glazed with desire. "It will be perfect, Nico. Because it's with you. That's all I need, all I want. Just you."

Fuck. The naked adoration in his gaze, the raw, unbridled want...it's almost enough to shatter my resolve. But I cling to it stubbornly, determined to give Eli the romance and tenderness he deserves.

"Tomorrow," I promise, brushing a soft, lingering kiss over his lips. "I'll pick you up at noon, and we'll spend the whole day together. Just you and me, no distractions, no

interruptions. And then...then I'll take you home, and I'll show you just how much I want you. How much I...how much I feel for you."

Eli shudders against me, a soft, broken moan spilling from his lips. "Tomorrow," he echoes, his eyes shining with anticipation. "I can't wait, Nico. I can't wait to be yours, in every way that matters."

Neither can I, I think fiercely, pulling him into a crushing embrace. Neither can fucking I.

But as I bury my face in the soft golden curls at his nape, breathing in the warm, green scent of him...a cold tendril of unease unfurls in my gut. An icy premonition, a sense of impending doom that has the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

Because even as I hold Eli in my arms, even as I let myself imagine a future where we can be together without fear or hesitation...I can't shake the feeling that we're being watched. That somewhere out there, in the shadows and the hidden places, eyes are trained on us with malicious intent.

And if my instincts are right, if my worst fears are about to be realized...then tomorrow might not be the beginning of our happily ever after. It might be the beginning of the end, the first domino in a chain reaction that will bring my world crashing down around my ears.

But as Eli sighs and snuggles deeper into my embrace, his heart beating in perfect sync with my own...I know that I'll fight like hell to keep him safe. To keep this fragile, precious thing between us alive and blooming, no matter the cost.

Even if it means going to war with my own father, the man who molded me into the monster I am today. Even if it means tearing apart everything I've ever known, everything I've ever been.

For Eli...for a chance at love, at redemption, at a future beyond the bloodstained legacy of my past...

I'll burn the whole fucking world down.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

ELI

The secluded garden is a fairytale come to life, all twinkling lights and fragrant blooms beneath a canopy of stars. Nico's hand is warm and solid in mine as we meander down the winding path, our shoulders brushing with every step.

I can't stop smiling, my cheeks aching with the force of my joy. This whole day has been like something out of a dream - the laughter, the sweet, stolen kisses, the way Nico looks at me like I'm the most precious thing he's ever seen. I keep waiting for the clock to strike midnight, for reality to come crashing back in.

But as Nico tugs me to a stop beneath a sprawling oak tree, his eyes molten and intent on mine, I realize that this is no dream. This is real, and it's happening, and I never want it to end.

"Eli," he murmurs, his free hand coming up to cup my cheek. His thumb strokes over my cheekbone, the calluses rasping deliciously against my skin. "You have no idea how long I've wanted this. Wanted you."

My breath catches in my throat, my heart rabbiting against my ribs. "I want you too," I whisper, turning my head to press a kiss to his palm. "So much, Nico. I feel like I've been waiting my whole life for you."

He makes a rough, desperate sound, and then his mouth is on mine, hot and demanding and perfect. I melt into the kiss with a sigh, my lips parting eagerly beneath the onslaught of his tongue.

Kissing Nico is like standing at the heart of an inferno, heat and hunger consuming me from the inside out. I can taste the wine we shared at dinner, rich and heady, and beneath it, the dark, smoky flavor that is pure him. It's intoxicating, addicting, and I know I'll never get enough.

Nico walks me backwards until my shoulders hit the trunk of the tree, the rough bark scraping deliciously against my skin through the thin fabric of my shirt. His body is a furnace against mine, all hard planes and coiled strength, and I can't help but arch into him, seeking more of that delicious friction.

"God, look at you," he rasps, his lips trailing down the column of my throat. He nips at my pulse point, soothing the sting with his tongue, and I shudder, my head tipping back against the tree. "So fucking beautiful, Eli. I want to touch you everywhere, taste every inch of you."

"Please," I gasp, my fingers tangling in his hair. "Nico, please, I need you to touch me."

He groans, low and guttural, and then his hands are everywhere, skating over my ribs, my hips, the curve of my ass. He grips my thighs and hitches me up, encouraging me to wrap my legs around his waist, and oh. Oh.

The new angle brings our groins into perfect alignment, the hard ridge of his cock pressing against mine through the barrier of our clothes. I can't stop the desperate little whimper that escapes my throat, my hips rolling mindlessly against his as I chase the exquisite pressure.

"Fuck," Nico grits out, his forehead dropping to rest against mine. "You're killing me, sunshine. If we don't slow down, I'm going to end up fucking you right here against this tree."

A bolt of molten lust spears through me at the thought, my cock throbbing almost painfully in the confines of my jeans. "And that would be a bad thing?" I rasp, my nails raking down the flexing muscles of his back.

Nico shudders, his grip tightening on my thighs. "It would be fucking incredible," he admits, his voice low and rough with strain. "But I want our first time to be in a bed, Eli. I want to spread you out and take my time with you, make it so good you forget your own name."

Oh god. Oh god oh god oh god. If he keeps saying things like that, I'm going to spontaneously combust. "Yes," I pant, my head swimming with need. "Yes, Nico, please. Take me home, take me to bed."

He doesn't need to be told twice. We barely make it back to the car, our hands grasping and roaming as we stumble down the path, exchanging frantic, biting kisses. By the time we reach my apartment, I'm trembling with anticipation, my skin feeling too tight for my body.

The moment the door clicks shut behind us, Nico is on me, his mouth hot and hungry as he walks me backwards towards the bedroom. We leave a trail of clothing in our wake - a shoe here, a belt there, buttons pinging off the hardwood as we tear impatiently at each other's shirts.

And then we're falling onto the bed in a tangle of limbs, our skin flushed and damp with sweat. Nico braces himself above me on his elbows, his dark hair falling over his brow, his eyes glittering with desire and something infinitely tender.

"Hi," he murmurs, the corners of his mouth curling up in a soft smile. He brushes a lock of hair off my forehead, the gesture unbearably sweet. "Fancy meeting you here."

A breathless laugh bubbles up in my throat, joy and love and aching fondness expanding in my chest until I feel like I might burst with it. "Smooth talker," I tease, leaning up to brush a kiss over his smiling mouth. "You know just what to say to get a guy naked."

Nico hums, low and approving, as he trails his lips down my jaw, my throat, the wildly fluttering pulse at the base of my neck. "Oh, I'm just getting started, baby. By the time I'm done with you, the only word you'll remember is my name."

And then he sets about making good on that promise, his mouth and hands taking me apart with devastating skill. He maps my body with lips and tongue and teeth, finding all the secret places that make me gasp and moan and writhe beneath him.

Time loses all meaning as he works me over, pleasure building and cresting in endless waves. He teases me to the brink again and again, backing off just before I can tumble over the edge, until I'm a sobbing, pleading wreck, my fingers clenched in the sheets, my hips arching helplessly off the bed.

"Please," I beg, my voice thin and thready with need. "Nico, please, I can't...I need you inside me, need you to fuck me, please..."

"Shhh," he soothes, his hands smoothing over my trembling thighs. "I've got you, baby. I'm going to give you what you need, fill you up so good..."

The blunt head of his cock nudges against my entrance, slick with lube and my own desperate arousal. And then he's pressing forward, breaching me in one long, slow slide that punches the air from my lungs and makes stars explode behind my eyes.

My back arches off the bed as he bottoms out, my body stretching and burning around the thick, heavy weight of him. It's almost too much, too intense, but Nico gentles me through it, peppering my face with soft kisses as he lets me adjust.

"Breathe, baby," he coaxes, his voice low and soothing. "Just relax, let me in. I've got you, I promise."

And I do. I breathe out on a shuddering sigh, my muscles unclenching, my body opening to welcome him deeper. And then he starts to move, long, deep strokes that drag over that sweet spot inside me, making me see stars.

The bedroom is dark, lit only by the thin sliver of moonlight spilling through the crack in the curtains. Our bodies move together on the sweat-damp sheets, a tangle of slick skin and grasping hands, our breaths mingling in harsh pants and bitten-off moans.

"Nico," I gasp, my back arching off the bed as he drives into me, his hips snapping against mine in a relentless rhythm. "Oh god, yes, just like that..."

He groans, low and guttural, his teeth sinking into the sensitive flesh of my shoulder. The sting only heightens the pleasure, my nerve endings singing with sensation as he takes me higher and higher.

I've never felt anything like this before, this bone-deep connection, this sense of utter rightness. It's like Nico's touch has awakened something in me, some hidden well of desire and need that I never knew existed.

"Fuck, Eli," he rasps, his voice rough with strain. "You feel so fucking good. So perfect around my cock, like you were made for me."

I whimper, my nails raking down the flexing muscles of his back. I can feel my release building, coiling hot and tight at the base of my spine. "I'm close," I pant, my hips rocking frantically against his. "Nico, please, I need..."

"I know, baby," he soothes, his hand slipping between our straining bodies to wrap

around my aching cock. "I've got you. Come for me, Eli. Let me feel you."

He strokes me in time with his thrusts, his grip tight and perfect. It only takes a handful of twisting pulls before I'm coming with a silent scream, my vision whiting out with the force of my climax.

Nico follows me over the edge with a guttural shout, his hips stuttering against mine as he spills himself deep inside me. I cling to him as he shudders through the aftershocks, my heart so full it feels like it might burst.

But as the sweat cools on our skin and our breathing slows, I feel Nico start to pull away, his shoulders tensing beneath my hands.

"Nico?" I ask, my voice small and uncertain in the sudden quiet. "Is everything okay?"

He sits up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. His back is to me, the broad expanse of his shoulders rigid with tension.

"This was a mistake," he says, his voice cold and distant. "I shouldn't have let it go this far."

I feel like I've been doused in ice water, my stomach plummeting to my toes. "What? Nico, what are you talking about? How can you say that, after what we just shared?"

He shakes his head, still not looking at me. "It doesn't matter. It was a moment of weakness, a lapse in judgment. It won't happen again."

Hurt and disbelief war for dominance in my chest, my eyes stinging with the threat of tears. "Bullshit," I choke out, my voice cracking. "You don't get to just dismiss this, Nico. Not after everything. Please, talk to me. Tell me what's going on."

But he's already standing, pulling on his clothes with jerky, mechanical movements. "I can't," he says, his voice thick with some unnameable emotion. "I'm sorry, Eli. But this ends here. It has to."

And then he's gone, the soft snick of the door closing behind him like a gunshot in the sudden stillness.

I curl into myself, silent sobs wracking my frame as hot tears spill down my cheeks. I don't understand. How could everything have changed so quickly? How could Nico just walk away, after the way he touched me, the way he held me like I was something precious?

The thought sustains me through the long, bleak hours of the night, as I hug Nico's pillow to my chest and inhale the fading scent of his skin. He couldn't fake what I saw in his eyes, that raw, almost desperate tenderness. Something else is going on here, something he's not telling me.

The sharp rap of knuckles against my apartment door jolts me out of my spiraling thoughts. For a moment, my heart leaps into my throat, hope surging through me in a dizzying rush. But then I hear a familiar voice calling my name, and my shoulders slump in mingled relief and disappointment.

"Eli? Open up, it's me."

I drag myself out of bed on leaden legs, not bothering to throw on more than a ratty pair of sweatpants. My hair is a wild tangle, my eyes red and puffy from crying, but I can't bring myself to care.

Sophia takes one look at my blotchy, tear-stained face and pulls me into a bone-crushing hug, her tiny frame belying her strength. "Oh, honey," she murmurs into my hair, her hand rubbing soothing circles on my back. "I'm so sorry. What happened?"

The story spills out of me in fits and starts, my voice choked and wavering. Soph listens without comment, her eyes going dark and flinty as I describe Nico's abrupt departure, the coldness in his voice as he shut me out.

"That fucking bastard," she hisses when I'm finished, her fingers clenching into fists at her sides. "I'll kill him. I'll rip off his balls and feed them to him, see how he likes that."

Despite everything, a weak chuckle escapes my raw throat. "Down, girl," I rasp, wiping at my eyes with the heel of my hand. "Violence isn't the answer, remember?"

Sophia huffs, but some of the blazing anger fades from her expression. "Fine. But Eli, honey...you can't let him do this. You can't let him just walk away without a fight. You love him, don't you?"

My throat tightens, fresh tears threatening to fall. "I do," I whisper, my voice cracking. "God help me, Soph, but I love him so fucking much."

She nods, her eyes soft with understanding. "Then you have to go after him, Eli. You have to make him see that what you have is worth fighting for, no matter what spooked him."

I take a shuddering breath, my chin lifting in determination. "You're right," I say, my voice gaining strength. "I'm not giving up on him. Not now, not ever."

Sophia smiles, fierce and proud. "That's my boy. Now go get your man. And give him hell for making you cry, you hear?"

I press a grateful kiss to her cheek before sprinting for the door, snagging my keys and a hoodie on the way out. I peel out of the parking lot in a screech of rubber, my heart pounding in my throat as I speed through the predawn streets.

I find Nico at the warehouse by the docks, the dimly lit space filled with the acrid scent of gunpowder and stale cigarette smoke. His men tense as I stride across the concrete floor, their hands twitching towards their weapons. But Nico holds up a staying hand, something unreadable flickering in the depths of his dark eyes as he watches me approach.

"What are you doing here, Eli?" he asks, his voice carefully blank. "I thought I made myself clear last night."

"No," I say, my chin lifting stubbornly. "You didn't. You gave me some bullshit excuse and ran away, and I want to know why. I deserve an explanation, Nico. I deserve the truth."

He flinches like I've struck him, his mask slipping for just a moment before he shuts his expression. "The truth?" he laughs, the sound harsh and bitter. "The truth is that I'm no good for you, Eli. The truth is that my world, my life...it's too fucking dark and twisted for someone like you. If you were smart, you'd run as far and as fast as you can in the opposite direction."

I shake my head, hot tears pricking at the backs of my eyes. "I don't care about that," I say fiercely, my voice trembling with the force of my conviction. "I don't care about your world or your darkness, Nico. I care about you. I love you, all of you, even the broken parts. And I know you love me too, even if you're too scared to admit it."

Nico goes utterly still, his face draining of color. For a moment, I think I've gotten through to him, that he's going to pull me into his arms and never let me go.

But then his expression hardens, his eyes going cold and flat. "You're wrong," he says, each word falling like a hammer blow. "I don't love you, Eli. I can't love you. What happened between us was a mistake, a weakness I can't afford. And I won't let

it happen again.”

I reel back like he’s slapped me, my heart shattering in my chest. ”Nico,” I plead, my voice breaking on a sob. ”Please. Please don’t do this. We can find a way, we can make it work. Just give us a chance.”

But he’s already turning away, his broad shoulders rigid with finality. ”Go home, Eli,” he says, his voice leaden with exhaustion. ”Forget about me, about us. It’s better this way, for both of us.”

And then he’s gone, striding out of the warehouse and out of my life, his men falling into step behind him like loyal shadows.

I crumple to my knees on the cold concrete, gasping sobs tearing at my throat as I curl into myself. It feels like Nico’s ripped my still-beating heart from my chest, leaving me broken and bleeding in his wake.

But even as despair crashes over me in overwhelming waves, a small, stubborn spark kindles to life in my shattered heart. This isn’t over, I think fiercely, my tears drying on my cheeks. I won’t let Nico throw away what we have, not without a fight.

He can push me away all he wants, but I know the truth. I saw it in his eyes, felt it in his touch. He loves me, as deep and true as I love him.

And come hell or high water, I’m going to make him admit it.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

NICO

The whiskey burns going down, a familiar fire that does nothing to thaw the ice in my veins. I welcomed the numbness, the bitter anesthetic of cheap booze and cheaper company. Anything to dull the ache in my chest, the gnawing hollow where my heart used to be.

It's been two weeks since I walked away from Eli, since I shattered both our hearts in the name of keeping him safe. Fourteen endless, grey days of throwing myself into the family business, of burying myself in blood and bullets and the cold comfort of power.

I tell myself it's better this way, that Eli's better off as far away from my world as possible. That the light in his eyes, the sweetness of his smile, would only be tarnished by the filth and violence that cling to me like a second skin.

But late at night, when the booze has worn off and the nameless bodies have gone, the truth whispers through the cracks in my walls. The truth that I'm a coward, a fool who threw away the best thing that ever happened to me out of fear and stubborn pride.

I can still feel the silk of Eli's skin beneath my fingers, taste the sunshine of his kiss on my tongue. Can still hear the way he gasped my name like a prayer, the broken sobs that shook his slender frame as I walked away and didn't look back.

Those memories are a special kind of torture, a penance I force myself to relive in vivid detail. Because I deserve the pain, the gnawing ache of regret. I deserve to

suffer for breaking the heart of the only person who ever looked at me and saw something worth loving.

The sharp rap of knuckles against my office door jolts me out of my wallowing. I toss back the rest of my whiskey and scrub a hand over my face, straightening my tie with the other.

"Come in," I call, my voice raw and gravelly from disuse and too much alcohol.

The door swings open to reveal Tommy, his normally cocky grin nowhere to be found. There's a grim set to his jaw, a hard light in his eyes that I've rarely seen before.

"We need to talk," he says without preamble, shutting the door firmly behind him.

I raise a brow, feigning a nonchalance I don't feel. "Oh? Thought you were too busy chasing skirts and snorting coke to bother with the family business these days."

Tommy's mouth tightens, his gaze sharpening. "Cut the shit, Nico. You know damn well why I'm here."

I lean back in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest. "Enlighten me."

"Eli," Tommy says bluntly, and just the sound of his name is enough to make my heart clench painfully. "You need to pull your head out of your ass and fix this mess before it's too late."

I feel my expression shutter, a cold mask slamming down. "There's nothing to fix," I grit out through clenched teeth. "I did what I had to do to keep him safe. To keep him out of our world."

Tommy scoffs, shaking his head in disgust. "Bullshit. You did what you always do when things get real - you ran. You pushed him away because you're too chickenshit to fight for what you want."

Anger flares hot in my gut, my hands curling into fists on the arms of my chair. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about," I snarl, leaning forward to glare at my brother. "You think I wanted to hurt him? To break his fucking heart? I did it to protect him, Tommy. To keep him away from the poison of our family."

"And how's that working out for you?" Tommy challenges, his voice rising to match mine. "You think Eli's happy right now? Safe? He's fucking miserable, Nico. He loves you, and you abandoned him."

I flinch, the words hitting me like a punch to the solar plexus. I know he's right, know that I've likely destroyed any chance of happiness Eli and I might have had. But the alternative - the risk of Eli getting caught in the crosshairs of our world - is unthinkable.

"It's better this way," I rasp, the words tasting like ash on my tongue. "Eli deserves a normal life, a future unburdened by my sins. I can't give him that, Tommy. I'll never be able to give him that."

Tommy's face softens, understanding warring with frustration in his eyes. "You're not Dad, Nico," he says quietly, the words landing like a gut punch. "You're not doomed to follow in his footsteps, to let this life swallow you whole. You have a choice."

I bark out a harsh laugh, the sound scraping my throat raw. "Do I? Because from where I'm sitting, it looks like my choices are pretty fucking limited. I'm the heir to a goddamn crime empire, Tommy. There's no walking away from that, no happily ever after in the cards for me."

"Bullshit," Tommy snaps, slamming his hand down on my desk. The sudden violence of the gesture makes me tense, my instincts screaming danger even as my rational mind knows my brother would never hurt me.

"You're just scared," he continues, jabbing a finger at me. "Scared of taking a risk, of reaching for something real. Well, let me tell you something, brother - love is always a risk. It's messy and complicated and it fucking hurts sometimes. But it's worth it, Nico. Eli is worth it."

I squeeze my eyes shut, pain lancing through my chest like a hot poker. I want to believe him, want to throw caution to the wind and go after the man I love with everything I have. But the cold, ruthless pragmatist in me knows it's a pipe dream.

"Even if I wanted to..." I start, my voice rough and ragged. "Even if I thought for a second that Eli would forgive me, that we could make it work...it's too late, Tommy. I burned that bridge to ashes."

Tommy opens his mouth to argue, but before he can get a word out, a sharp knock sounds at the door.

"Boss?" Luca's voice, tight with urgency. "We got a problem."

I straighten in my chair, ice flooding my veins. "Come in," I bark, my hand already reaching for the gun holstered at my ribs.

Luca enters, his normally stoic face etched with lines of tension. "Just got word from our guy in the Bianchi crew," he says without preamble. "Apparently, Stefano's feeling cocky after the stunt at Bloom's shop. He, uh...he sent you a message."

I narrow my eyes, dread coiling in my gut like a snake. "What kind of message?"

In answer, Luca holds out his phone, a video already queued up on the screen. With a sense of foreboding, I hit play.

The video is grainy and poorly lit, shot on a shaky cell phone camera. But I would recognize that riot of golden curls, that defiantly lifted chin anywhere.

Eli. Bound to a chair in the middle of a dank, dirty room, a slip of black fabric tied around his eyes. His shirt is torn and stained with what looks like blood, and the sight makes a red haze descend over my vision.

"Smile for the camera, pretty boy," a gruff voice sneers from off-screen. A hand fists in Eli's hair, yanking his head back and forcing a pained grunt from his throat. "Got a special message for your boyfriend. You want to tell him what's going to happen to you if he doesn't play ball?"

Eli's jaw clenches, his bound hands curling into fists. "Fuck you," he spits, and pride surges in my chest alongside the icy terror. "Nico's going to rip you apart for this, you sick bastard."

The man laughs, ugly and mean. "Big talk from a guy tied to a chair," he mocks. "But don't worry, sweetheart. We'll make sure your boy toy gets a front-row seat to the show."

The video cuts off abruptly, leaving me staring at a frozen image of Eli's bloodied, defiant face. For a moment, I can't breathe, can't think past the rushing in my ears and the red mist clouding my vision.

They have Eli. They have my beautiful, brave boy, and they're hurting him. Because of me, because of my family, because of the toxic, poisonous world I tried so hard to keep him safe from.

"Nico," Tommy's voice cuts through the static, tight with worry. "What are we going to do?"

I raise my head slowly, meeting my brother's gaze with a cold, deadly calm. "We're going to get him back," I say, my voice steady and sure despite the rage and terror churning in my gut. "And then we're going to burn the Bianchi family to the fucking ground."

I stand, checking the clip in my gun before sliding it back into its holster. My movements are precise, mechanical, every inch the ruthless mafioso I was raised to be. But inside, I'm a maelstrom of fear and fury, of bone-deep terror at the thought of Eli at the mercy of those sadistic bastards.

Hold on, baby, I think fiercely, my heart clenching painfully in my chest. I'm coming for you. I'll always come for you.

I gather my men with clipped, terse commands, my mind racing with strategies and contingencies. I'll rip apart the city block by block if I have to, burn my way through the Bianchi ranks until I find Eli and bring him home.

And then...then I'll spend the rest of my life making this right. Proving to Eli that he's my heart, my home, my everything. That no force on this earth could keep me from his side, not anymore.

I failed him once, let my fear and pride drive me to push him away. I won't make that mistake again. I can't.

Because a life without Eli in it, a future without his sunshine smile and his gentle heart...that's no life at all. And I'll fight like hell, I'll walk through fire and blood and bullets, to keep him safe.

To keep him mine, in every way that matters.

As we load up and head out into the night, grim determination settles over me like a second skin. I'm coming for my boy, and God help anyone who stands in my way.

The Bianchi family has no idea the hell they've just unleashed. But they're about to find out what happens when you cross Nico Caruso.

And may God have mercy on their souls...because I sure as fuck won't.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

ELI

The cold metal of the chair bites into my skin, the ropes binding my wrists chafing with every desperate twist and pull. I don't know how long I've been here, trapped in this dank, musty darkness with only the skittering of rats and the drip-drip-drip of a leaky pipe for company.

Hours? Days? Time loses all meaning in the pitch black, my world narrowed down to the frantic pounding of my heart and the throbbing ache in my skull.

I try to stay calm, to cling to hope even as fear claws at my throat like a living thing. But it's hard, so hard, when every breath tastes of mold and hopelessness, when every shift of my aching body reminds me of the horror of my situation.

Kidnapped. Beaten. Trussed up like a pig for slaughter, bait in a trap meant to ensnare the man I love more than my own life. It's like something out of a nightmare, a twisted mockery of the fairytale I thought Nico and I were building together.

Nico. Just the thought of him sends a pang of longing through my chest, so fierce it steals my breath. I can still feel the heat of his skin against mine, the rasp of his stubble against my throat as he claimed me with lips and teeth and tongue. Can still hear the reverent rasp of his voice in my ear, whispering promises of forever in the heated darkness.

"I love you," he breathed against my lips, his voice raw and aching with sincerity. "God, Eli, you have no idea how much I fucking love you. You're my everything, baby. My heart, my home, my reason for breathing."

I cling to those words now, a talisman against the darkness threatening to swallow me whole. Nico loves me. He loves me, with a depth and ferocity that takes my breath away. Whatever his reasons for pushing me away, for shattering my heart with cold words and colder eyes...it wasn't because he stopped caring.

It was to protect me, to keep me safe from the brutal world he was born into. The world that's now dug its claws into me, determined to use me as a pawn in their bloody games.

The sound of footsteps echoing in the darkness jolts me out of my thoughts, my heart leaping into my throat. A key grates in a rusted lock, hinges screaming in protest as a heavy door swings open. Light floods the room, blinding after so long in the dark, and I flinch away, squinting against the sudden glare.

"Well, well. Looks like Sleeping Beauty's finally awake."

The voice is cold, mocking, with a thick Italian accent. I force my eyes open, blinking rapidly to clear the spots from my vision. A man stands before me, tall and broad-shouldered, his expensive suit straining over his muscular frame. His hair is slicked back from a cruel, handsome face, his dark eyes glittering with malice.

I recognize him instantly from the whispered warnings traded like currency in Nico's world. Stefano Bianchi, the vicious young upstart determined to carve out a bloody empire of his own. The man who ordered his thugs to trash my shop, who set this whole nightmare in motion.

"Fuck you," I rasp out, my voice raw and scratchy from dehydration. "What the hell do you want from me, you psycho?"

Stefano grins, the expression sending a chill down my spine. "Aw, come on now, bello. Is that any way to talk to your host?"

He prowls closer, the heady scent of his cologne making my nose itch. "As for what I want...well. I thought that would be obvious." He reaches out, trailing a finger down my cheek in a perverse mockery of a caress. I jerk away, my skin crawling at his touch.

"I want Nico Caruso to suffer," Stefano purrs, his voice dripping with false sympathy. "I want him to know the agony of having his heart ripped still-beating from his chest. And you, my pretty little pawn...you're going to help me do it."

Nausea rolls in my gut, a cold sweat breaking out on my brow. "Go to hell," I spit, putting every ounce of disgust and defiance I can muster into the words. "Nico will never give you what you want. He's too smart to fall for your sick little games."

Stefano laughs, the sound like nails on a chalkboard. "Oh, I think he will," he croons, trailing the cold edge of a knife down the side of my neck. I freeze, hardly daring to breathe as the wickedly sharp blade kisses my skin.

"See, I've been watching you two lovebirds for weeks now. Seen the way he looks at you, like you hung the fucking moon. The great Nico Caruso, brought to his knees by a pair of pretty blue eyes and a perky ass."

Stefano's grin widens, his eyes glinting with cruel amusement. "He'll come for you, bello. And when he does...I'm going to flay the skin from his bones, inch by agonizing inch. I'm going to make him scream for mercy, beg for death...and you're going to watch every second of it."

Horror clogs my throat, tears stinging my eyes as I imagine the brutal scene he's describing. Nico, broken and bleeding, his beautiful face twisted in agony as this sadistic monster tears him apart. The thought is unbearable, a nightmare made flesh.

"You're insane," I whisper, my voice cracking on a sob. "Nico will kill you for this,

you sick fuck. He'll rip you apart with his bare hands for daring to touch me."

Stefano's smile is a blade, sharp and cruel. "We'll see about that," he purrs, the flat of his blade pressing harder against my windpipe. "Personally, I can't wait to watch the light die in his eyes when I slit your pretty throat. Maybe I'll even fuck his corpse in the puddle of your blood, hmm? A final fuck you to the great Nico Caruso."

Bile surges up my throat, revulsion and terror twisting my stomach into knots. This can't be happening. This can't be real, this waking nightmare of blood and violence and sickening depravity.

Nico, my fierce, beautiful warrior...he can't fall to this madman's blade. He can't. The world would be a colder, darker place without the fire of his smile, the tenderness of his touch. A place I don't want to imagine, can't imagine living in.

But before I can spit my defiance, before I can tell Stefano to go fuck himself with his own knife...the distant pop-pop-pop of gunfire shatters the tense silence. Shouts ring out, the thud of running feet, the unmistakable sounds of chaos and violence.

Stefano stiffens, his head whipping towards the door. "What the-"

He never gets to finish the thought. Because in the next heartbeat, the door explodes inward in a hail of splinters and shrapnel, a dark figure wreathed in smoke and fury filling the frame.

"Nico," I breathe, my heart stuttering in my chest. He's here. He came for me, just like I knew he would. My beautiful, brave protector, my avenging angel in a tailored suit and blood-spattered skin.

Nico's eyes find mine across the room, wild and desperate and blazing with a love so fierce it steals my breath. "Eli," he rasps, his voice cracking on my name. "Baby, are

you-”

But before he can finish the question, Stefano is moving, a wordless snarl of rage tearing from his throat. He lunges for me, the knife flashing silver in the dim light, aiming for the vulnerable hollow of my throat.

I squeeze my eyes shut, bracing for the bite of the blade, the hot rush of my own blood. But the pain never comes. Instead, there’s a meaty thud, a strangled grunt...and the warm splatter of liquid across my face.

I wrench my eyes open, my heart in my throat...and the world tilts on its axis, a scream lodging in my chest.

Nico stands before me, his beautiful face pale and shocked. Stefano’s knife protrudes from his chest, buried to the hilt in the meat of his shoulder. Blood blooms across the white of his shirt, vivid and obscene, a crimson flower unfurling in terrible slow motion.

”No,” I choke out, straining against my bonds. ”No, no, nonono Nico, oh God-”

Nico sways on his feet, his eyes glazing over with pain and shock. But even as his knees buckle, even as he crumples to the dirty floor in a boneless heap...he’s raising his gun, the barrel trained on Stefano’s snarling face.

The shot cracks out like thunder, deafeningly loud in the close confines of the room. Stefano’s head snaps back, a spray of red mist and thicker things painting the wall behind him. He crumples like a puppet with its strings cut, his eyes wide and staring in death.

I barely spare him a glance, too focused on Nico. My Nico, my heart, my everything, bleeding out on the filthy concrete floor. I thrash and strain against the ropes binding

me, heedless of the way they cut into my skin, the warm trickle of my own blood down my wrists.

"Nico," I sob, my vision blurring with desperate tears. "Nico, baby, hold on. Just hold on for me, okay? I've got you, I've got you, just stay with me."

Impossibly, blessedly, the ropes give way with a snap, the fibers fraying beneath my frantic struggles. I lunge forward, hitting my knees beside Nico's crumpled form. My hands hover uselessly over the ruin of his chest, the horrible wound pulsing with each labored beat of his heart.

"Eli," he rasps, his voice wet and choked with blood. One trembling hand comes up to cup my cheek, painting my skin with the slick heat of his life's blood. "Eli, I'm...I'm so sorry. For everything, for pushing you away, for being so fucking scared-"

"Shh," I choke out, pressing my forehead to his. Tears drip from my eyes to slide down his pale, clammy cheeks. "Don't try to talk, baby. Save your strength. We'll get you out of here, get you to a hospital-"

"No time," he grits out, his breath rattling in his chest. "Need...need you to know. Before I...before..."

"Don't," I sob, my heart shattering in my chest. "Don't you dare say goodbye, Nico Caruso. Don't you fucking dare."

A ghost of a smile flits across his bloodless lips, his fingers spasming weakly against my cheek. "Not...not goodbye," he whispers. "Never goodbye, Eli. I love you, always love you, even...even if I don't...don't make it."

A broken sound tears from my throat, a wail of pure agony. "You will," I rasp,

pressing desperate kisses to his face, his lips, his fluttering eyelids. "You'll make it, Nico, because I won't fucking let you die on me. Not now, not ever. We have a whole life to live together, baby. A future to build, a love to celebrate. You promised me forever, and I'm holding you to it."

Nico's eyes flutter open, hazy and unfocused but so full of love it takes my breath away. "Forever," he echoes, his voice a thready whisper. "Sounds...sounds perfect, sunshine. Forever...with you..."

His voice trails off, his eyes slipping shut as his hand goes limp against my cheek. Panic surges through me, a tidal wave of icy terror.

"Nico?" I gasp, patting desperately at his pale, still face. "Nico, baby, open your eyes. Open your eyes for me, please, please don't leave me--"

But he's still and silent, his chest barely rising with each shallow, shuddering breath. The blood is everywhere, coating my hands and soaking into my jeans, the metallic reek of it clogging my nose and mouth.

Distantly, I hear shouting, the thunder of feet on stairs. Nico's men, swarming the building like avenging angels. But it's all background noise, a distant buzz drowned out by the roaring in my ears, the shattering of my heart.

All I can see is Nico, my beautiful, brave warrior, lying broken and bleeding in my arms. All I can feel is the icy grip of fear, the soul-deep knowledge that if I lose him...I lose everything.

"Stay with me," I plead, gathering him close and rocking him like a child. "Stay with me, Nico, please. I love you, I love you, I can't do this without you. Please, baby...please don't go where I can't follow."

The words pour out of me like a prayer, a desperate plea to a God I've never believed in. I'll do anything, be anything, if it means Nico will open his eyes. If it means I won't have to face a bleak, colorless world without his light to guide me.

I press my tear-streaked face to his chest, listening to the thready flutter of his heartbeat. Each precious thump against my cheek is a tiny miracle, a fragile thread of hope in the darkness.

"Come back to me," I whisper, my lips brushing the bloody ruin of his shirt. "Come back to me, Nico. I'm here, I'm right here...and I'll never let you go again. Never, never, never..."

I cling to him like a lifeline, like he's the only thing keeping me tethered to sanity. The world fades away, narrowing down to the two of us, the precious beat of his heart against mine.

And as the shouts grow louder, as the thunder of running feet draws closer...I pray to every god and devil I know that it won't be too late. That Nico will keep breathing, keep fighting, keep holding on to me and the love we've fought so hard for.

Because a life without him...is no life at all. And I'll move heaven and hell, I'll fight through blood and bullets and the very fires of damnation...to bring him back to me.

To bring him home, where he belongs. Forever, and always.

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NICO

Pain. It's the first thing I'm aware of as I struggle up from the depths of unconsciousness. A deep, throbbing ache in my shoulder, radiating out through my chest and down my arm. Each breath feels like fire in my lungs, the simple act of drawing air an agony.

But beneath the pain, beneath the fog of drugs and exhaustion...there's a warm, solid presence at my side. A hand clutching mine, callused fingers twined through my own. The scent of green, growing things and sunshine, achingly familiar.

"Eli," I rasp, my voice a sandpaper scratch in my throat. "Eli, are you...are you okay?"

The hand in mine tightens, a choked sob echoing in the quiet room. "Am I okay? Jesus Christ, Nico, you're the one who got stabbed. You almost...you almost died in my arms, you self-sacrificing asshole."

I force my eyes open, squinting against the harsh fluorescent light. Eli's face swims into view, those summer-sky eyes red-rimmed and puffy, his golden curls a wild tangle. He looks wrecked, exhausted, like he hasn't slept in days.

But he's here. He's alive and whole and safe, and the relief of it crashes over me like a tidal wave. I came so close to losing him, to having his blood on my hands in the most literal sense. The thought makes my stomach turn, bile rising in my throat.

"Had to," I croak, my thumb stroking over his knuckles. "Couldn't let him hurt you.

Couldn't...couldn't lose you, sunshine. Not again."

Eli makes a wounded sound, fresh tears spilling down his cheeks. "You fucking idiot," he chokes out, bringing my hand to his lips. He presses a fervent kiss to my palm, his breath hot and damp against my skin.

"Don't you ever, ever do that again, you hear me? I can't...I won't survive losing you, Nico. It would kill me, just as surely as a bullet to the heart."

I swallow hard, my own eyes stinging with the threat of tears. "I'm sorry," I rasp, cupping his jaw with a shaking hand. "I'm so fucking sorry, Eli. For everything. For pushing you away, for being such a coward, for almost dying on you like that--"

He silences me with a kiss, his lips soft and desperate against my own. I drink him in like a man dying of thirst, my hand sliding into his hair to pull him closer. He tastes of salt and sorrow, of joy and relief and love, so much fucking love I feel like I might shatter with the force of it.

"No more apologies," Eli breathes against my mouth, his forehead pressed to mine. "No more secrets, no more pushing me away. We do this together now, Nico. You and me, come hell or high water. Okay?"

I nod, my throat too tight for words. I've never been good at this, at baring my soul and letting someone see the broken, jagged pieces of me. But for Eli...for this brilliant, brave, beautiful man who owns my heart and soul...I'll try. I'll rip myself open and bleed truth, if that's what it takes to keep him by my side.

The days pass in a haze of pain and healing, of whispered confessions and fervent promises. Eli never leaves my side, his presence a balm to my battered body and soul. He holds me through the worst of the pain, murmuring sweet nonsense and brushing the sweat-soaked hair from my brow.

And in the quiet moments, the stolen snatches of peace...he looks at me with such raw, naked love, it takes my breath away. Like I'm something precious, something cherished beyond measure. Like I'm the center of his whole fucking universe, the sun around which he orbits.

It's terrifying and humbling and exhilarating all at once. I've never been loved like this, with such wholehearted devotion and unwavering faith. I feel like a fraud sometimes, unworthy of the gift Eli's offering me so freely.

Because as much as I love him, as much as I want to build a life with him...I'm still the man I've always been. The killer, the monster, the soulless bastard who was born and bred for violence and brutality.

Can I really walk away from that? From the only life I've ever known, the bloody legacy that's carved into my bones? The thought of facing my father, of telling him I'm leaving the family business to play house with a fucking florist...it makes my blood run cold.

He'll never allow it. He'll hunt us to the ends of the earth, burn everything we love to ash and dust. And that's if he's feeling merciful. More likely, he'll make an example of Eli, torture him in front of me until I'm begging for death, for the sweet release of a bullet between the eyes.

The thought makes me sick to my stomach, cold sweat breaking out on my brow. I can't let that happen. I won't let that happen, not to Eli. He's the one pure thing in my life, the one shining light in a sea of blood and darkness. I'd rather cut out my own heart than see that light extinguished.

But what choice do I have? I can't go back to the way things were, can't pretend that Eli doesn't own me body and soul. The mere thought of letting him go, of watching him walk away and build a life without me...it's like a knife to the gut, a physical

ache that steals my breath.

I'm trapped between two impossible choices, damned if I do and damned if I don't. And the worst part is, I know Eli sees it. He sees the turmoil tearing me apart, the fear and indecision shadowing my eyes.

He doesn't push, doesn't demand answers I can't give. But I feel the weight of his gaze on me, the silent plea in those summer-sky eyes. Choose me, they seem to say. Choose us, choose the life we could have together. Please, Nico...don't throw away the best thing that's ever happened to us.

It all comes to a head one night, as we lay twined together in the tangled sheets of my bed. Eli's head is pillowed on my chest, his fingers tracing idle patterns on my skin. The air between us is charged, heavy with all the words we're not saying.

"Nico," Eli whispers, his voice small and vulnerable in the darkness. "I need...I need to know what happens now. With us, with...everything."

I close my eyes, a shuddering breath escaping my lungs. "I don't know," I answer honestly, my throat tight and aching. "I want...fuck, Eli, I want so many things. I want to wake up next to you every morning and fall asleep with you in my arms every night. I want to build a life with you, a future that's not stained with blood and bullets. I want...I want you, more than I've ever wanted anything in my miserable fucking life."

Eli makes a soft, wounded sound, his fingers clenching against my skin. "Then have me," he breathes, tipping his head back to meet my gaze. His eyes are shining with unshed tears, his lips trembling with emotion. "I'm yours, Nico. Heart, body and soul. I always have been, from the moment you first walked into my shop and turned my world upside down."

I swallow hard, my heart slamming against my ribs. "It's not that simple," I rasp, my voice cracking with the force of my longing. "My father...the family...they'll never let me go, Eli. They'll hunt us down, make us pay for daring to defy them. I can't...I can't put you in that kind of danger. Not again. It would fucking destroy me if something happened to you because of me."

Eli's jaw clenches, a fierce light sparking to life in his eyes. "I don't care," he says, low and intense. "I don't care about the danger, or the risks, or the fucking mafia. All I care about is you, Nico. Us. What we have, what we could be together."

He sits up, the sheets pooling around his waist. In the moonlight filtering through the curtains, his skin glows like polished marble, his hair a halo of spun gold. He's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, and the sight of him steals the breath from my lungs.

"I love you," he says, the words ringing with conviction. "I love you more than life itself, Nico Caruso. And I'll be damned if I let your father or anyone else stand in the way of that love. So you have a choice to make, right here and now. You can choose fear and loyalty to a toxic, poisonous way of life...or you can choose me. Choose us, and the future we could build together."

Eli takes my face in his hands, his touch achingly gentle. "I'm not asking you to change who you are," he whispers, his breath ghosting over my lips. "I know the darkness is a part of you, the violence and the ruthlessness. I've always known that, and I love you anyway. All I'm asking is that you love me enough to fight for us. To believe that what we have is stronger than their hate and their bullets and their fucking blood oaths."

I stare at him, my heart in my throat and my pulse pounding in my ears. In that moment, with Eli's eyes boring into mine and his hands cradling my face like I'm something precious...the choice is crystal clear. The only choice, the only path

forward that doesn't end in misery and regret.

"Okay," I rasp, the word tearing out of me like a bullet from a wound. "Okay, baby. You win. I choose you, I choose us. Fuck the family, fuck my father and his poisonous empire. I'm yours, Eli. Now and forever, come hell or high water."

Eli's smile is blinding, brighter than the fucking sun. He surges forward, capturing my lips in a kiss that sears me to the bone. I groan into his mouth, my hands coming up to fist in his hair, to pull him closer until there's not a breath of space between us.

"I love you," Eli gasps against my lips, his fingers scrabbling at the hem of my shirt. "God, Nico, I love you so much it hurts. I need you, need to feel you inside me, claiming me, making me yours."

"Yes," I growl, tearing at his clothes with desperate, clumsy fingers. "Fuck, baby, you have no idea how much I need you too. Need to bury myself in you, make you scream my name until you forget there was ever a world outside this room."

We come together in a tangle of limbs and gasping breaths, our naked bodies moving in a rhythm as old as time itself. Eli arches beneath me, his throat bared and his eyes wild with pleasure as I sink into the tight, slick heat of him.

"Nico," he keens, his nails raking down my back as I begin to move. "Oh fuck, yes, just like that. Harder, please, I need...I need..."

I swallow his pleas with my mouth, kissing him with all the desperate hunger clawing at my gut. I snap my hips forward, driving into him with deep, powerful strokes that punch the breath from his lungs.

"That's it, baby," I rasp, my lips moving over the racing pulse in his throat. "Take it, take everything I have. It's all for you, only ever for you."

Eli sobs brokenly, his head thrashing on the pillow as I fuck into him with increasing urgency. The sound of our flesh slapping together mingles with our harsh pants and bitten-off moans, a symphony of raw passion and unrestrained need.

"I love you," I breathe, the words pouring out of me like a prayer. "Fuck, Eli, I love you so goddamn much. You're everything to me, do you understand? My whole fucking world, the beat of my heart, the air in my lungs."

Eli's eyes fly open, his gaze locking with mine. The depth of emotion I see there, the raw, naked love and trust...it steals the breath from my lungs, makes my pounding heart stutter in my chest.

"Show me," he whispers, his hands coming up to frame my face with impossible tenderness. "Show me how much you love me, Nico. Make me feel it in every inch of my body, in every corner of my soul."

I groan, low and guttural, and redouble my efforts. I pour everything I am into each roll of my hips, each drag of my lips over Eli's feverish skin. Every touch, every gasped endearment, every shuddering moan...they're vows, sacred and unbreakable.

I love you. I adore you. I'll fight for you until my last breath, my last beat of my heart. You're mine, and I'm yours, and nothing in this world or the next will ever tear us apart.

Eli cries out, his body going taut as a bowstring beneath me. I can feel him tightening, his inner muscles fluttering around my driving cock as his climax hurtles towards him like a freight train.

"That's it, baby," I coax, my hand snaking between our sweat-slicked bodies to wrap around his weeping erection. "Come for me, let me feel you lose control. I've got you, I'll always have you, now and forever."

"Nico," Eli sobs, his back bowing as his orgasm crashes over him. "Oh fuck, oh god, Nico!"

His release splatters hot and wet between us, his channel clamping down on me like a vise. The feel of him coming undone in my arms, the sound of my name on his lips like a benediction...it's too much, too intense to resist.

With a hoarse shout, I bury myself to the hilt and let go, emptying myself deep inside Eli's welcoming body. Wave after wave of pleasure rolls through me, whiting out my vision and shorting out my higher brain functions until there's nothing but sensation, nothing but the man in my arms and the overwhelming force of my love for him.

We reach our peak together, Eli's scream of ecstasy mingling with my own guttural shout. For a moment, there's nothing but white-hot bliss, the entire universe narrowed down to the two of us, shaking and clinging to each other like we're the only solid things in a world turned to quicksand.

"I love you," Eli pants against my sweat-dampened throat, his lips curved in a smile I can feel. "God, Nico, that was...that was incredible."

"You're incredible," I murmur back, brushing a tender kiss over his temple. "I can't believe I ever thought I could live without this, without you. You're my whole fucking heart, Eli Bloom."

He lifts his head, his eyes shimmering with unshed tears and a love so pure it steals my breath. "And you're mine," he whispers fiercely. "Always and forever, Nico Caruso. No matter what happens, no matter what we have to face...I'm yours, and you're mine. Unbreakable, unstoppable."

I crush my mouth to his in a searing kiss, pouring all the love and devotion and bone-deep certainty I feel into the press of my lips. And when we finally break apart,

gasping and grinning like lovesick fools, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this is where I'm meant to be.

In Eli's arms, in his heart, in the blinding light of his love...I'm home. And come hell or high water, I'll fight like the devil himself to make sure I never have to leave again.

And later, as we lay spent and sated in the tangled sheets, trading lazy kisses and murmured promises...I feel something settle in my chest. A quiet certainty, a bone-deep knowing that this is right. That Eli is my salvation and my future, the only thing worth fighting for in this fucked-up, blood-soaked life.

"I love you," I breathe against his smiling mouth, the words a vow and a prayer all in one. "Forever and always, sunshine. You and me against the world."

Eli hums happily, snuggling deeper into my embrace. "Forever and always," he echoes, his fingers lacing with mine over the steady thump of my heart. "I love you too, Nico Caruso. More than the stars love the sky."

And in that perfect, shining moment...I believe him. I believe in us, in the strength of what we've built together. And I know that no matter what tomorrow brings, no matter what demons we have to face...

We'll face them together, hand in hand and heart to heart. Unbreakable, unstoppable...and head over heels in love.

ELI

The morning dawns gray and overcast, a fitting match for the somber mood that's settled over the apartment. Nico stands by the window, his shoulders tense and his gaze distant as he stares out at the waking city. The sight of him, strong and solid and achingly beautiful, makes my heart clench in my chest.

I slip out of bed, padding across the room on silent feet. Nico doesn't stir as I come up behind him, my arms slipping around his waist and my cheek pressing between his shoulder blades. I breathe him in, the warm, musky scent of his skin soothing the anxious flutter in my stomach.

"Hey," I murmur, pressing a soft kiss to the nape of his neck. "How you holding up, tough guy?"

Nico sighs, his hands coming up to cover mine where they rest on his stomach. "Honestly? I'm fucking terrified," he admits, his voice low and gravelly. "I've faced down guns and knives and all manner of fucked-up shit...but the thought of facing my father, of telling him I'm walking away from the family? It's the scariest thing I've ever had to do."

I tighten my hold on him, trying to pour all my love and support into the simple touch. "I know, baby. But you're not doing it alone, remember? I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere. We're in this together, no matter what."

Nico turns in my arms, his dark eyes soft and vulnerable in a way I've never seen before. "I don't deserve you," he rasps, his hand coming up to cup my cheek. "I

don't deserve this chance at happiness, this fucking miracle of your love. But I swear to God, Eli, I'll spend the rest of my life trying to be worthy of it. Of you."

Tears prick at the backs of my eyes, my heart swelling with a love so fierce it steals my breath. "You already are," I whisper fiercely, rising up on my toes to press my forehead to his. "You're everything to me, Nico Caruso. Everything I've ever wanted, everything I never knew I needed. And I'll stand by your side through hell and high water, through anything and everything this fucked-up world can throw at us."

Nico makes a rough, desperate sound, his mouth slanting over mine in a kiss that sears me to the bone. I pour everything I am into the press of my lips, every ounce of love and devotion and bone-deep certainty. I need him to feel it, to know that he's not alone, that he'll never be alone again.

We break apart, breathless and flushed, our hearts pounding in sync. Nico rests his forehead against mine, his eyes closed and his breath gusting warm and damp over my lips.

"Okay," he says, quiet but determined. "Okay, let's do this. Let's go face the fucking music and start our life together. No more hiding, no more fear. Just you and me, sunshine, against the whole damn world."

Pride and love surge through me, so strong they make me dizzy. This man, this beautiful, brave, impossible man...he's mine, heart and soul. And I'll fight like hell to keep him, to protect the future we're building together.

The drive to Salvatore's estate is tense and quiet, the only sound the low purr of the engine and the thud of our hearts in our chests. Nico's hand is white-knuckled on the steering wheel, his jaw clenched so tight I'm afraid he'll crack a tooth.

I reach over, covering his hand with my own. "Breathe, baby," I murmur, stroking my thumb over his taut knuckles. "It's going to be okay. We're going to get through this, I promise."

Nico flashes me a tight, grateful smile, his hand turning beneath mine to lace our fingers together. "I know," he says, quiet but certain. "With you by my side, I feel like I can do anything. Face anything."

My heart clenches, a lump rising in my throat. "Damn right you can," I say fiercely. "You're the strongest person I know, Nico. And I'm so fucking proud to be yours, to stand with you today and every day."

Nico lifts our joined hands, pressing a fervent kiss to my knuckles. "I love you," he rasps, his dark eyes bright with emotion. "More than my own life, more than anything in this world or the next. Always and forever, Eli Bloom."

"Always and forever," I echo, the words a vow and a promise. Come hell or high water, I'll be by this man's side. No force on earth could tear me away, not now, not ever.

We pull up to the sprawling mansion, all cold stone and towering columns. It looks like something out of a gothic novel, a looming testament to wealth and power and age-old secrets. The sight of it makes my skin crawl, a shiver of unease skating down my spine.

But I square my shoulders and lift my chin, determined to be the strength Nico needs. We walk up the steps hand in hand, our backs straight and our heads held high. Nico doesn't hesitate as he pushes open the heavy oak door, striding into the dimly lit foyer with a confidence I know he doesn't feel.

Salvatore is waiting for us in his study, seated behind a massive mahogany desk like a

king on his throne. He looks older than I remember, his hair more silver than black, the lines of his face carved deep with age and stress. But his eyes are as cold and piercing as ever, a shade of pale blue that reminds me of ice over deep water.

"Nico," he says, his voice deceptively mild. "I wasn't expecting you. And I see you've brought...company."

His gaze flicks to me, a sneer twisting his thin lips. The distaste in his expression, the thinly veiled contempt...it makes anger flare hot in my gut, my hands curling into fists at my sides.

But Nico just lifts his chin, staring his father down with unflinching resolve. "Eli is more than just company," he says, quiet but firm. "He's my partner, my love, my entire fucking world. And that's what I'm here to talk to you about, Father."

Salvatore's eyes narrow, his fingers steepling on the desk before him. "Is that so? And what, pray tell, do you have to say about this...dalliance of yours?"

Nico takes a deep breath, his hand tightening on mine. "It's not a dalliance," he says, his voice ringing with conviction. "It's the real thing, the forever kind of love. And I'm here to tell you that I'm done, Father. Done with the family business, done with the blood and the violence and the constant fucking fear. I'm leaving, and I'm taking Eli with me."

Silence. Deafening, suffocating silence, broken only by the thunderous pounding of my heart. Salvatore stares at Nico, his face a mask of shock and disbelief. And then, slowly, his features contort with rage, a vein throbbing in his temple.

"You ungrateful little shit," he seethes, rising slowly from his chair. "After everything I've done for you, everything I've given you...you'd throw it all away for what? A piece of ass and a happily ever after that doesn't fucking exist?"

Nico flinches like he's been slapped, but he doesn't back down. "It's not about that," he says, his jaw tight with strain. "It's about wanting something more, something better than this life of darkness and destruction. Eli showed me that I could have that, that I could be more than just another cog in the machine of our fucked-up family legacy."

Salvatore laughs, the sound harsh and mocking. "And you believe him? You think this fairy tale he's spun for you is real, that you can just walk away and play house like the past never happened?" He shakes his head, a cruel smile twisting his lips. "You're weak, Nico. Weak and pathetic, just like your mother. She thought she could leave too, thought she could escape the life. And look what happened to her."

Nico goes rigid beside me, a low, wounded sound escaping his throat. I see red, a haze of fury descending over my vision. How dare he? How fucking dare he use Nico's mother against him, twist the knife of her loss to keep him in line?

"Shut up," I snarl, taking a step forward. Nico's hand tightens on mine, a silent plea for restraint, but I ignore it. I can't, not when this bastard is hurting the man I love with every poisonous word.

"You don't know a damn thing about love," I say, my voice shaking with rage. "You don't know a thing about Nico, about the kind of man he is. He's not weak, he's the strongest fucking person I've ever met. Strong enough to break free of your toxic bullshit, to choose his own path. And I'll be damned if I let you shame him for it."

Salvatore's eyes flash, his hand twitching towards the gun I know is holstered beneath his jacket. But I don't flinch, don't back down. I'm done letting this man terrorize the person I love most in this world.

"Nico is a good man," I continue, my voice ringing with conviction. "A kind man, a brave man. A man who loves with his whole fucking heart, who would move heaven

and earth for the people he cares about. And that's not weakness, Salvatore. That's strength, the kind of strength you can't even begin to understand."

A muscle tics in Salvatore's jaw, his face flushing an ugly, mottled red. For a moment, I think he's going to lunge across the desk and strangle me with his bare hands. But then, to my shock...he slumps back in his chair, all the fight draining out of him like water from a cracked vessel.

"You really love him, don't you?" he asks, his voice tired and old. "You'd stand against me, against the whole fucking world, to be with him."

"Yes," I say simply, without hesitation. "I would. I will. Always and forever, no matter what."

Salvatore is silent for a long moment, his gaze distant and unfocused. When he speaks again, his voice is quiet and heavy with an emotion I can't name.

"I never understood it," he says, almost to himself. "The way she looked at me, the way she loved me. Like I was the center of her whole goddamn universe, even when I didn't deserve it. Even when I broke her heart again and again with my coldness, my cruelty."

He looks up, his eyes meeting Nico's. "I loved her," he rasps, the words a confession and a plea. "Your mother. I loved her more than my own life, more than anything in this world or the next. But I was a coward, too afraid to choose her over the family, over the only life I'd ever known. And it destroyed her, Nico. It destroyed us both."

Nico makes a soft, wounded sound, his eyes bright with unshed tears. "Papa," he whispers, the old childhood endearment slipping out unbidden. "I...I didn't know. I'm so sorry."

Salvatore shakes his head, a bitter twist to his lips. "Don't be sorry," he says gruffly. "Be better. Be braver than I was, Nico. Don't make my mistakes."

He takes a deep breath, his shoulders squaring as he meets Nico's gaze head-on. "If this is what you want, if he is what you want...then go. Leave this life behind and never look back. Build something real, something worth fighting for. And know that...that I'm proud of you, son. For having the courage to do what I couldn't."

Nico makes a choked sound, a tear slipping down his cheek. He lunges forward, pulling his father into a crushing embrace. Salvatore stiffens for a moment, his arms hanging awkwardly at his sides. But then, slowly, he brings them up to wrap around Nico's shoulders, his eyes squeezing shut as he holds his son close.

"Thank you," Nico rasps, his voice muffled against Salvatore's shoulder. "Thank you, Papa. I...I love you."

Salvatore clears his throat, pulling back to clasp Nico's face in his hands. "I love you too, my boy. More than you'll ever know." His gaze flicks to me, something like grudging respect in his eyes. "Take care of him, Eli. Love him like he deserves to be loved. And never, ever let him go."

I nod, my throat too tight for words. I reach out, tangling my fingers with Nico's, our hands fitting together like two pieces of a puzzle.

"I won't," I vow, my voice ringing with certainty. "I swear it on my life, on everything I hold dear. He's my heart, my home, my forever. And I'll spend every day for the rest of my life proving it to him."

Nico makes a soft, wondering sound, his eyes locking with mine. The love I see there, the pure, unbridled joy...it takes my breath away, makes my knees go weak with the force of it.

We bid Salvatore a murmured farewell, walking out of that gloomy, oppressive house with our heads held high and our hearts soaring with hope. As we climb into Nico's car, as we peel out of the long, winding driveway...I feel lighter than I have in years, the weight of secrecy and fear lifting from my shoulders like a physical thing.

We did it. Against all odds, against every force that sought to tear us apart...we fucking did it. We chose each other, chose love, chose a future beyond the darkness and despair.

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Sunlight streams through the stained glass windows of the quaint little chapel, painting the aisle in a kaleidoscope of vibrant colors. The air is thick with the heady scent of flowers - roses and lilies and dahlias, a riotous explosion of petals and greenery. It's like standing in the heart of a garden, lush and verdant and bursting with life.

But none of it compares to the sight of Nico waiting for me at the altar, his dark eyes shining with love and wonder as he watches me walk towards him. He's breathtaking in his tailored black suit, a single red rose pinned to his lapel. A symbol of our love, of the passion and devotion that brought us to this perfect, shining moment.

Luca stands at Nico's side, his ever-present smirk softened into a genuine smile. Tommy is next to him, his eyes suspiciously bright as he winks at me. And in the front row, Sophia beams at me through her tears, her hand clutched in her wife Alana's.

My found family, the people who stood by us through every trial and tribulation. The ones who believed in our love even when the world sought to tear us apart. My heart swells with gratitude, with a joy so fierce it steals my breath.

At last, I reach Nico's side, my hands immediately seeking his. His fingers lace with mine, his calluses rasping against my skin in a way that feels like home. Like forever, like eternity stretching out before us in an endless golden road.

"Hi," I whisper, my voice thick with emotion. "Fancy meeting you here, stranger."

Nico's lips quirk, his thumb stroking over my knuckles. "Wouldn't miss it for the

world, sunshine. You ready to make an honest man out of me?"

"With all my heart," I breathe, the words a vow in themselves. "Forever and always, Nico Caruso."

The ceremony passes in a blur of laughter and tears, of heartfelt promises and soaring violin music. And then, at long last, the words I've been longing to hear...

"I now pronounce you husband and husband. You may kiss your groom."

Nico's hands cup my face, his dark eyes bright with unshed tears. "I love you," he rasps, his voice raw with emotion. "I love you, Eli Bloom. Forever and always."

"Forever and always," I echo, rising up on my toes to meet his lips in a searing kiss.

The world falls away, narrowing down to the two of us. To the perfect press of Nico's mouth against mine, the salt of our mingled tears, the thundering of our hearts beating in synchronicity.

In this moment, I feel invincible. Untouchable, unbreakable. Like nothing in this world or the next could ever tear me from Nico's arms, from the sheltering harbor of his love.

As I hold Eli in my arms, as I seal our union with a kiss that sears me to my very soul...I marvel at the winding path that brought us to this perfect, shining moment. The obstacles we overcame, the battles we fought, the scars we earned in the name of our love.

It wasn't easy, God knows. There were moments when I thought I'd lost him forever, when the darkness of my past threatened to swallow us both whole. But Eli...my beautiful, brave, impossibly stubborn Eli...he never gave up on me. On us.

He stood by my side through every challenge, every setback and heartbreak. He loved me fiercely, recklessly, with a devotion that humbled me to my knees. And in doing so, he taught me how to love in return. How to open my battered heart and let the light in, how to believe in the power of forever.

I never thought I'd have this. Never thought I'd find a love that could withstand the bloody legacy of my family, the violence and brutality that ran in my veins like poison. But Eli...he saw beyond the monster, beyond the killer and the criminal. He saw the man beneath, the one who yearned for something more than an early grave and a lifetime of regrets.

He saved me, in every way a person can be saved. And now, with his hand in mine and his ring on my finger...I know that I'll spend the rest of my life saving him right back. Loving him, cherishing him, building a future together that's filled with laughter and light and the kind of bone-deep happiness I never thought I'd get to feel.

As we turn to face our cheering loved ones, as Eli tucks himself against my side with a smile brighter than the sun...I feel a peace settle over me. A quiet certainty that this, right here...this is where I'm meant to be. Where I've always been meant to be.

By Eli's side, for better or worse. Through sickness and health, through every twist and turn of this wild, unpredictable life.

Forever and always, till death do us part.

The bell above the door jingles merrily as I step into the flower shop, the familiar scent of earth and greenery wrapping around me like a hug. It's been six months since Nico and I said our vows, six months of laughter and love and learning to navigate this new chapter together.

It hasn't been easy, adjusting to civilian life. Nico still wakes sometimes in the dead of night, his body shaking and his skin damp with cold sweat. The nightmares cling

to him like cobwebs, remnants of a past he can never fully escape.

But I'm always there to hold him, to smooth his hair back from his brow and murmur soft words of comfort. To remind him that he's not that man anymore, that he's so much more than the sum of his sins.

Together, we're learning to heal. To pick up the broken pieces of our pasts and fashion them into something new, something stronger and more beautiful than before. And at the heart of that healing...is this little shop, with its riot of color and its shelves overflowing with vibrant blooms.

Nico took over the business shortly after we returned from our honeymoon, his eyes shining with a tentative hope as he signed the paperwork. "I want to build something," he told me, his voice rough with emotion. "Something good, something pure. Something that creates life instead of taking it away."

And oh, how he's thrived. Watching him work, his strong hands gentle as he coaxes stubborn blooms to unfurl...it takes my breath away. He pours his heart into every arrangement, every artfully sculpted display. And in doing so, he's slowly learned to tend to the garden of his own soul. To nurture the parts of himself that were once withered and barren, to coax them back to vibrant, thriving life.

My heart swells with pride as I watch him now, bent over a spray of delicate orchids with a look of fierce concentration on his handsome face. He's in his element here, surrounded by beauty and life and the kind of peace he never thought he'd get to feel.

And I...I get to witness it all, get to stand by his side and bask in the light of his hard-won happiness. Get to love him, support him, remind him every single day that he's worthy of this second chance, this beautiful new beginning.

It's a privilege and an honor, one I'll never take for granted. Not as long as I live.

I sense Eli's presence before I see him, a sudden warmth kindling to life in my chest. It's like my very soul recognizes him, reaches out to intertwine with his in an invisible embrace.

I straighten up from the orchids, a smile already tugging at my lips as I turn to face him. And there he is...my sunshine, my saving grace, the love of my fucking life. He's leaning against the counter, his blue eyes soft and warm as he watches me work.

"Hey there, handsome," he murmurs, his voice like honey and smoke. "Come here often?"

I smirk, prowling towards him with a heat in my gaze that has nothing to do with the temperature of the shop. "Only when there's a hot piece of ass behind the counter," I purr, caging him in with my arms. "Why, you offerin'?"

Eli grins up at me, his arms looping lazily around my neck. "Might be," he hums, his fingers toying with the short hairs at my nape. "If you ask real nice and promise to be a gentleman."

"Oh, I'll show you nice," I growl, dipping my head to nip at his throat. "So fucking nice you'll forget your own name, sunshine."

Eli's laughter is a bright burst of sound, his head tipping back to give me better access. I take full advantage, sucking a mark into the smooth column of his neck, reveling in the shaky moan it pulls from his lips.

Christ, I'll never get enough of this. Of him, of the way he responds to my touch like it's a revelation every single time. Like I'm a miracle, a gift he'll never stop being grateful for.

A sudden jingle of the bell has us springing apart, our breathing ragged and our faces flushed. I'm half ready to snarl at whatever unfortunate soul has interrupted us...but

the words die on my tongue as I catch sight of our visitor.

"Dad?" I rasp, my eyes widening in shock. "What...what are you doing here?"

Salvatore stands in the doorway, his normally immaculate suit rumpled, his eyes suspiciously bright. He looks older than I've ever seen him, his face lined with exhaustion and something that looks achingly close to regret.

"I wanted to see you," he says quietly, his gaze flicking between Eli and me. "Both of you. I wanted...I needed to apologize."

Eli stiffens beside me, his hand finding mine and lacing our fingers together. I squeeze back, a silent promise. I'm here. I've got you. We're in this together.

"Apologize for what?" I ask carefully, my guard slamming up. "For trying to keep us apart? For making my entire life a living hell? Take your fucking pick, Dad."

Salvatore flinches, a sheen of tears glazing his icy blue eyes. "All of it," he rasps, his voice cracking. "Everything I put you through, every ounce of pain and fear I caused. I was wrong, Nico. So fucking wrong."

He takes a shaky breath, his gaze seeking out Eli's. "And you...I owe you the biggest apology of all. The way I treated you, the things I said...it was unforgivable. You're a good man, Eli. A better man than I could ever hope to be. And you make my son happier than I've ever seen him. I was blind not to see that, not to cherish it for the gift it is."

Eli swallows hard, his grip on my hand tightening. "I...I don't know what to say," he manages, his voice thick with emotion. "I never thought I'd hear those words from you, Salvatore."

My father nods, a single tear tracing down his weathered cheek. "I know," he says

hoarsely. "And I don't expect your forgiveness, either of you. God knows I don't deserve it. But I...I want you to know that I'm trying. I'm going to be better, going to do better. For you, for any...any grandchildren you might bless me with someday."

My heart clenches, a lump rising in my throat. I never thought I'd see this day. Never thought I'd witness my father, the ruthless king of a bloody empire, brought to his knees by the power of love. By the strength of the bond Eli and I have forged, unbreakable and true.

"It's a start," I manage, my voice raw and aching. "A damn good start, Dad."

Eli nods beside me, a shaky smile on his lips. "We've got a long road ahead of us," he says softly. "A lot of healing to do, on all sides. But...I'm willing to try if you are, Salvatore. For Nico's sake, and for the sake of the family we're building together."

Salvatore's answering smile is a fragile, tentative thing...but it's real, and it's a fucking miracle. "I'd like that," he rasps, clearing his throat gruffly. "I'd like that very much, son."

The sun is setting by the time Salvatore takes his leave, painting the sky in streaks of orange and pink. Nico and I stand hand in hand in the doorway of the shop, watching until his car disappears around the corner.

"Do you think he meant it?" I ask softly, leaning my head on Nico's shoulder. "All that talk of change, of being better?"

Nico sighs, pressing a kiss to my hair. "I hope so, sunshine. God, I really fucking hope so. But even if he doesn't...even if he backslides into old habits...it won't change anything. Not for you and me."

I turn in his arms, looping my own around his waist. "No," I agree, my heart in my eyes. "Nothing could ever change what we have, Nico. What we've fought for, what

we've built together. You're my forever, my always. My beginning, middle and end."

Nico's smile is a soft, precious thing, his dark eyes shining with love. "Sap," he teases gently, dipping his head to brush a kiss over my lips. "But you're not wrong. We've weathered every storm, pushed through every obstacle. And we'll keep doing it, for the rest of our lives. Together."

"Together," I echo, the word a vow. "No matter what the future holds, no matter what challenges we face...as long as I have you by my side, I know we can conquer anything."

(Nico's POV)

Later, as the shop lies quiet and still, I pull Eli into the back room, the air thrumming with a sudden urgency. He comes willingly, a knowing smile on his kiss-swollen lips, his eyes dark with desire.

I push him up against the wall, my body aligning with his like two puzzle pieces slotting into place. He arches into me with a breathy moan, his hands fisting in my hair as I claim his mouth in a searing kiss.

"I love you," I rasp against his lips, my hands roaming restlessly over his body. "Fuck, Eli, I love you so much. Need you, need to be inside you..."

"Yes," he hisses, his head thudding back against the wall as I palm him through his jeans. "Please, Nico, don't make me wait. Want you so bad, want to feel you..."

I groan, grinding against him urgently. We're both hard already, aching and desperate, the air around us thick with the scent of arousal.

We undress each other with frantic, fumbling hands, unwilling to stop kissing long

enough to do it properly. But finally, blessedly, we're skin to skin, Nico's heat searing me from head to toe as he presses me back against the wall.

It only takes a moment for him to prepare me, his fingers clever and sure as they work me open. And then he's lifting me up, urging my legs around his waist as he positions himself at my entrance.

"Ready?" he pants, his forehead pressed to mine, his eyes black with hunger.

"Always," I gasp, my nails digging into his shoulders. "Now, Nico, please..."

He pushes forward in one smooth, relentless thrust, filling me up, stretching me wide. I cry out at the sudden fullness, my head slamming back against the wall as he begins to move, setting a pace that's just shy of brutal.

It's exactly what I need, what I crave. The pleasure is sharp and sweet, edged with an ache that only stokes the flames higher. I'm lost to it, lost to him, drowning in sensation as he takes me apart with every snap of his hips.

Eli is a vision in my arms, his hair a wild tangle, his skin flushed and slick with sweat. He's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, and he's mine, all mine, every inch of him from the curve of his smile to the pounding of his pulse against my lips.

I drive into him like I'm trying to crawl inside his skin, like I'm trying to fuse us together into one perfect, panting entity. He clenches around me, his heat gripping me like a vise, and I groan brokenly into the sweat-damp hollow of his throat.

"Close," I rasp, my rhythm faltering as the pressure builds at the base of my spine.

"Fuck, sunshine, I'm not gonna last..."

"Let go," Eli pants, cradling my face in his shaking hands. "I've got you, love. Now and forever, I've always got you."

And that...that's all it takes. Eli's voice, his touch, the sheer devastating love shining in his eyes...it hurls me over the edge with a force that knocks the breath from my lungs. I bury my face in his neck as I come, muffling my shout against his sweat-dampened skin.

Eli follows me a heartbeat later, my name a reverent cry on his lips as he pulses hot and wet between our bodies. We ride it out together, shaking and gasping, clinging to each other like we're the only solid things in a world turned to quicksand.

In the aftermath, we sink to the floor in a tangle of trembling limbs, trading soft, panting kisses as we come down from the high. Nico cradles me against his chest, his fingers threading through my hair, his lips brushing my temple with a tenderness that makes my heart ache.

"I love you," I murmur, turning my head to nuzzle into his palm. "More than anything, more than everything."

Nico's answering smile is brighter than the sun, his dark eyes soft and warm as they drink me in. "I love you too, Eli. Forever and always, till the end of my days and beyond."

We stay like that for a long while, wrapped up in each other amidst the fragrant blooms and the golden afternoon light. And as Nico holds me close, as he presses gentle kisses to my hair and murmurs sweet promises against my skin...I feel a sense of peace wash over me. A bone-deep certainty that this, right here...this is where I'm meant to be. Where we're meant to be.

Together, in love, building a life and a future that's filled with joy and laughter and the kind of soul-deep connection most people only dream of. It hasn't been easy, God knows. We've fought and bled and wept to get to this point, to carve out a place for ourselves amidst the wreckage of our pasts.

But looking at Nico now, at the incandescent happiness radiating from every inch of him...I know that every trial, every tear, every moment of fear and doubt...it was all worth it. He was worth it, and he always will be.

My heart, my home, my partner in every sense of the word. The man who taught me how to love without fear, how to trust in the strength of what we've built together. The man who saved me, even as I saved him right back.

With Nico by my side, I know that we can weather any storm. That we can face any challenge, overcome any obstacle, as long as we have each other to lean on.

And as we exchange a soft, knowing smile, our fingers twining together like vines...I feel the last of the tension drain from my body, replaced by a warmth that suffuses me from head to toe.

This is just the beginning for us, I know. The first chapter in a love story that will span years, decades, a lifetime. There will be ups and downs, moments of darkness amidst the light. But through it all, we'll have each other. A port in every storm, a shelter from every tempest.

Forever and always, till death do us part...and even then, beyond the veil, into whatever waits for us on the other side.