



The Bear's Perfect Mate (Bear Creek Forever: Thornberg Vineyard #4)

Author: *Harmony Raines*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Finn strikes again! And this time it's Nero's turn to find his mate

One accidental proposal. Two fated mates.

And a love that changes everything.

After a painful betrayal, culinary artist Sophie Truro is determined to rebuild her life—and her brand, Eat It Simple with Sophie. A weekend in Bear Creek promoting a wedding expo is the perfect escape: no pressure, no paparazzi, and no more spotlight-stealing exes.

Then Nero Thornberg stumbles at her feet—literally—with an engagement ring in his hand.

The viral moment that follows flips Sophie's life upside down. Again.

She came to Bear Creek to focus on her career, not to fall for a brooding, impossibly handsome jeweler who makes her feel far too much.

Nothing about Nero Thornberg is simple.

And nothing about the way he makes her feel is either.

Falling at his mate's feet wasn't exactly how Nero Thornberg planned to meet the woman of his dreams.

But the moment he senses Sophie, he knows: she's the one.

She's also guarded, wary, and wounded. But somehow, he has to win her trust. And her heart.

But just as their bond begins to bloom into something deeper, Sophie's past threatens to destroy the future they're building.

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

“It’s perfect.” Nero held the diamond engagement ring up to the sunlight streaming through his workshop window.

Each tiny facet sent tiny rainbows across the workbench.

He’d spent countless hours crafting this particular piece, making sure every detail was flawless.

The central diamond, flanked by smaller stones in a vintage-inspired setting, nestled perfectly in the midnight blue velvet box.

Now all he had to do was drive to the wedding expo at The Catherine Hotel over in Bear Bluff so that Finn’s old school friend Pete could get down on one knee and propose to his mate.

If only we were getting down on one knee and proposing to our mate, his bear rumbled wistfully.

One day, Nero promised. But not today.

A quick glance at the clock made him curse under his breath. He had lost track of time once more and was now on the verge of being late. He closed the box with a snap, then gently placed it in the breast pocket of his waistcoat, giving it a reassuring pat to make sure it was secure.

His phone buzzed on the worktable. Finn’s message lit up the screen: All set. Meet me at stall 1.

“At least that’ll be easy to find,” Nero muttered, grabbing his suit jacket from the hook by the door. He fished his keys from his pocket, locked his studio, and headed for his car.

The convertible gleamed in the afternoon sun, its restored cherry-red paint job as immaculate as the day he’d finished it.

Unlike his brothers, who preferred their rugged trucks, Nero loved the elegant lines of his classic car.

He’d rescued it from an abandoned barn three years ago, painstakingly bringing it back to life, much like he did with his jewelry restorations.

He was a man who found equal satisfaction in creating the new and preserving the old.

Sliding behind the wheel, he started the engine, smiling at its smooth purr. With the weather so fine, he lowered the convertible’s roof and drove away from The Lookout, his home nestled in a small, wooded valley overlooking Bear Creek.

There was nothing like the rush of wind through his hair as he navigated the winding roads, skirting around Bear Creek and heading toward Bear Bluff. The massive rocky outcrop that gave the town its name loomed in the distance, catching the morning sunlight.

Remember when we used to race from the vineyard to the bluff? his bear asked, suddenly filled with nostalgia.

How could I forget? Nero replied as he recalled the fierce competitiveness his brothers had shared in their younger days. But now they had all mellowed.

Well, most of them had mellowed. Stanley could still turn anything into a competition if given half a chance.

His bear chuckled. We should race again one day. For old times' sake.

We should, Nero agreed. But Kris, Philip, and Alfie have other priorities.

Mates, his bear said wistfully. We cannot fault them for that.

No, Nero agreed. They have been lucky in love.

Maybe some of that luck might brush off on us, his bear said as the road dipped down out of the mountains.

What we need is one of Finn's matchmaking mix-ups. Nero slowed as the road split into two, and he took the right turn toward Bear Bluff.

That is exactly what we need, his bear said. But they both knew there seemed to be no rhyme or reason to Finn's matchmaking mix-ups. They happened when they happened, and Finn had as much control over it as the weather.

At least today we get to witness Pete proposing to his mate, Nero's bear said.

We do, Nero said.

But as they neared the hotel, a strange prickling sensation crawled up the back of his neck, and his stomach lurched uncomfortably. Was this a sense of foreboding that the proposal might go wrong?

No, it just means you should have eaten breakfast, his bear chided.

I'll grab something after we deliver the ring, Nero promised, realizing all he'd consumed today was two cups of coffee. He'd been too focused on perfecting the final details of the commission to notice his hunger pangs.

Normally, he would have had the ring ready in plenty of time, but this had been a rush order. Pete, a photographer, had met his mate at another wedding expo two weeks ago and wanted to propose at this one. He saw it as a symbolic romantic gesture.

Nero shuddered at the thought. A public proposal wasn't Nero's style.

Not at all, his bear rumbled in agreement. A proposal should be private, intimate... But they respected that everyone had their own preferences. That variety kept his job as a jeweler interesting. If everyone wanted the same thing, he'd go crazy. It would stifle his creativity.

He sucked in a breath as he pulled into The Catherine Hotel's parking lot, and the uneasy feeling intensified. A fresh wave of... well, he could not put his finger on exactly how he felt. Not unease. Maybe anxiety.

Yes, that was probably it. He'd never been present when one of his rings was offered as a token of love, of commitment.

What if Pete presented the ring to his beloved, and she didn't like it?

Not going to happen, his bear said. Even though he shared Nero's sense of unease.

For a long moment, Nero sat with his hands still on the wheel, trying to steady himself. But he did not have the luxury of time, so he opened the car door and forced himself to get out.

You're right. I just need some food, he muttered, although he wasn't a hundred percent convinced that was the truth.

But he couldn't let Pete down. This was important.

This was about love. The same kind of love he'd witnessed every day of his life growing up with shifter mates as parents. The same kind of love he now saw between his brothers and cousins, who had recently found their own mates.

Nero knew this was one of the most important days in Pete's life.

He was about to create a memory that would last forever.

Setting the tone for his relationship, for his future life, with the woman he loved.

If the proposal went wrong, it would cast a shadow over everything, the engagement, the wedding, and maybe even their marriage.

Woah, hold on there, his bear rumbled. I think you're overreacting a bit.

Nero took a deep breath. His bear was right. This spiral of anxiety was unusual for him. He was typically the steady one among his brothers, the craftsman who approached life with the same precision he applied to his jewelry.

But nothing about today felt usual.

He patted his breast pocket once more, feeling the reassuring shape of the ring box.

Then he headed toward the hotel entrance, his footsteps strangely heavy.

Each step felt like trudging through treacle, yet something pulled him forward, like an

invisible force drawing him in.

The sensation reminded him of vertigo, that disorienting pull toward the edge when standing on a precipice.

Inside the hotel's smart lobby, Nero paused to get his bearings.

A sign with a flowing script directed guests to the Wedding Expo in the Grand Ballroom.

Nero had been here many times before. The space was impressive, with high ceilings, crystal chandeliers, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the immaculate hotel gardens, with the mountains in the distance.

Hell, the happy couple might even have their reception here after the proposal.

"Okay," Nero whispered to himself. "Find stall one, hand over the ring, then find something to eat before I pass out."

He wove through clusters of people in the reception area, brides-to-be with their fiancés, or moms and other family members, vendors carrying samples, and hotel staff directing traffic.

The double doors to the expo stood open, revealing a bustling scene of white and silver decorations, colorful flower arrangements, and the low hum of excited conversation.

As Nero stepped inside, the room seemed to spin around him. He took a few faltering steps forward, blinking to clear his vision. There, stall number one stood directly ahead.

Nero glanced around, but he couldn't see Finn. And for some reason, he couldn't sense him, either. It was as if something was jamming his shifter senses.

Just hand over the ring, his bear said. Then we'll go find Finn and grab a bite to eat.

But before he handed over the ring, Nero couldn't resist one last look at his creation. Pausing a few feet from the stall, he opened the box, admiring how the ballroom lights caught the diamond's facets.

Mesmerized, he stepped forward. But his foot caught on something, a loose carpet edge perhaps...

Or your own foot, his bear said.

Whatever it was, all Nero knew was that suddenly, he was falling. Pain shot through his legs as he landed on his knees, but he kept a firm hold of the ring.

Can this day get any worse? Nero attempted to get up but only managed to get one foot under him. As he sucked in a breath, he was aware of people gathering around him, their faces a blur. Their voices jumbled.

Nero looked around, just as the crowd parted, and there she was, standing in front of him.

His mate. The love of his life.

Of course! his bear said. That's why we had that funky feeling.

Nero shook his head, trying to clear the fog as the realization dawned on him. I... He tried to speak, but no words came out.

“Nero,” Finn was at his side, his hand under Nero’s elbow as he helped him to his feet. “What are you doing?”

Nero couldn’t tear his gaze from his mate as he said, “I was...the ring.”

The thought struck him like a freight train. He was supposed to hand over the ring so another man could propose to his mate.

It was as if the air had left his lungs. He turned a dazed expression on Finn.

“Is this your mystery man, Sophie?” a voice called out.

“Did you know he was going to propose?” asked another.

“It’s all a misunderstanding,” Finn was saying as he tried to calm the situation.

“No, it’s not,” Nero murmured.

“Oh yes, it is,” his mate was saying, her face like thunder over the mountains.

“This way,” Finn said, guiding Nero away from the growing crowd. People were pressing in, phones raised to capture what they thought was a romantic moment. Nero felt dizzy, overwhelmed by the scent of her, by her presence that called to his very core.

“Finn, you don’t understand,” Nero whispered urgently as his brother steered him toward a service corridor. “That’s her. My mate.”

“I got that,” Finn hissed back. “But that is Sophie Truro.”

“Who?” Nero asked.

Our mate, his bear said happily, but totally unhelpfully.

“Sophie Truro,” Finn repeated, his eyes narrowed. “She’s a chef... You know, the social media chef. Eat it simple with Sophie .”

Nero shook his head.

“Have you been living under a rock?” Finn asked.

Yes, his bear answered. A precious one—to make an engagement ring.

“So, she’s not about to get engaged?” Nero said with relief.

“No,” Finn said in exasperation. “You were supposed to take the ring to stall number twelve.”

“But you said to take the ring to stall number one.” Nero yanked his phone out of his pocket and tapped the screen. After scrolling through his messages, he turned the screen to Finn. “See?”

Finn’s face paled. He shook his head. “I don’t know how...”

As his voice trailed off, Nero shook his head. “Oh. My. Goodness.”

“Don’t say it!” Finn held up his hands and backed away.

“You did it!” Nero’s voice rose as he chuckled. “You made another matchmaking mix-up.”

“I did not ,” Finn insisted, looking around.

“You missed the two off the end of the message and sent me to stall number one. Where my mate was waiting for me,” Nero said. It seemed too far-fetched, too incredible. But the truth was there in the text.

“Just give me the ring and I’ll take it to Pete.” Finn held out his hand for the ring. It trembled slightly as Nero handed over the box. “Let’s just keep the...rest...you know, the text...between you and me.”

“Okay, if that’s what you want,” Nero said, even though he wanted to shout from the rooftops.

“It is,” Finn said, and turned on his heel and marched off.

Nero watched him go and then leaned back against the wall, his head down as he tried to make sense of what had just happened.

We found our mate, his bear reminded him.

Nero shook his head and then laughed, a sound of pure wonder escaping his lips. He had actually met his mate. After watching three of his brothers find their perfect matches, fate had finally led him to his own.

But his celebration was short-lived.

He sensed her before he saw her, his bear suddenly alert and wary.

When he looked up, Sophie Truro was striding toward him, her curvy body rigid with anger. Her dark eyes flashed dangerously, and her full lips—lips he longed to kiss—pressed into a thin line.

She does not look happy, his bear said.

She does not. Nero straightened immediately, suddenly aware of how that must have looked to her.

The man who had caused such a chaotic scene was laughing in the corridor.

She'll think it was a set-up, his bear said. She'll think we did it on purpose.

Nero opened his mouth, wanting to explain, wanting to tell her why he'd been so distracted. That the last thing he would ever want to do was hurt her or make a fool of her. But no words came.

"So you thought that was funny?" Her voice cut through the air between them and sliced into his soul. "What was it, some publicity stunt? Did you get enough footage for your social media followers?"

"No," he insisted, holding up his hands. "It was an accident. I was supposed to take that ring to stall twelve, not one."

No, it was fate, his bear reminded him with absolute certainty.

Sophie crossed her arms, skepticism evident in every line of her body. "You know what I think?" she asked, her voice deceptively calm. "I think Tito Alvarez paid you to do this. Paid you to humiliate me in public."

Nero felt as if he'd been slapped. "No," he said, shaking his head emphatically, all humor vanishing instantly. "I would never...could never do that to you."

The raw sincerity in his voice seemed to surprise her. She took a step back, her face paling as understanding dawned. "So, you're one of those!"

Nero reeled at the anger in her voice. "One of what?"

I don't think we want to know, his bear moaned. This was not how either of them had expected their first encounter with their mate to go.

Instead of answering, she spun around, her hair whipping through the air. "Stay away from me," she threw over her shoulder, already walking away.

But how could he do that when she was his fate, his future?

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

Sophie would like to say she'd never been so humiliated in her life. But that would be a lie.

No, she had been much more humiliated than this. Just not quite to publicly.

"Sophie?" She turned at the sound of her name, momentarily disoriented by the commotion. With a start, Sophie remembered why she was at the wedding expo, and it was not for a proposal.

"Can I get a selfie and an autograph?" asked a young woman in a T-shirt with the slogan, Eat it simple with Sophie .

"Sure," Sophie smiled, stepping forward to lean in beside the young woman who held out her phone. The camera clicked, capturing them both in a moment of forced cheerfulness that Sophie hoped didn't look as strained as it felt.

"Thanks!" The young woman stepped back, beaming as she examined the photo. "I'm such a fan. Your simple lemon-thyme roasted chicken is the best thing I've ever made. My boyfriend proposed the night I cooked it for him! And now we're here planning our wedding."

Sophie's smile tightened slightly at the mention of proposals, but she managed a warm laugh. "That's wonderful! I'm so glad it worked out for you."

Before she could retreat, two more women approached, phones in hand.

"Sophie! We love your Insta! Could we get a picture, too?"

She obliged, posing with them as they gushed about her five-ingredient pasta sauce and how they'd followed her series on simple and affordable dinner parties. Sophie found herself caught up in their excitement and enthusiasm, despite her earlier humiliation. Which they tactfully did not mention.

Or maybe it had not been that big a deal. Most of her followers knew she was a no-drama kind of person. That she wasn't just an eat-simple kind of woman, but that she also followed a keep life simple mantra.

"Your recipes saved my sister's bridal shower after her caterer let her down last minute," one of them said. "I was so nervous when she asked me to help her out, but they turned out fantastic. And they were so tasty, everyone thought I'd slaved for hours!"

"That's exactly the point," Sophie replied, feeling a small surge of pride. "Good food doesn't have to be complicated."

As she chatted with them, the hair on the back of her neck prickled. Someone was watching her. Sophie glanced up and immediately locked eyes with him ...the man who had "proposed" to her. He stood across the room, those intense, dark eyes fixed on her with an expression she couldn't quite read.

Her heart rate quickened as she turned away.

Why did he have to be so ridiculously handsome?

With his broad shoulders filling out that tailored suit and those strong artist's hands.

.. She frowned, irritated at her own reaction.

She was definitely on the rebound. Hard on the rebound.

But then, it had only been two days since her life had imploded. Her romantic life, at least.

Her professional life, on the other hand, was soaring. It was why she'd been invited to this expo in the first place, because she'd somehow become a social media influencer.

She'd been posting on social media for a couple of years, building a small but loyal following, but things had really taken off when she shared the recipes she'd created for her best friend's wedding. They were simple and stylish, which aligned perfectly with her "Eat It Simple, Sophie" brand.

She thanked her fans and turned to head toward stall number one, the scene of the crime. It wasn't exactly how she'd dreamed of being proposed to.

Sophie had always dreamed of a more romantic setting for a proposal. Certainly not a room filled with strangers with their phones raised, capturing her shock for their social feeds.

No, in her fantasies, it had always been somewhere secluded and meaningful, perhaps at sunset in a vineyard, or beside a mountain lake with wildflowers dancing in the breeze.

There would be champagne chilling in an ice bucket, and it would be just the two of them, sharing that perfect, intimate moment.

The thought made her chest ache. Had she really believed Tito might be that person? The man who would drop to one knee and offer her forever? She swallowed hard, remembering how easily she'd been swept up in the fantasy, letting herself believe in happily-ever-after despite all the warning signs.

"Such a fool," she whispered to herself. She now doubted Tito had ever been capable

of that kind of romance, because he was not capable of that kind of love. His betrayal had done more than end their relationship; it had poisoned something vital inside her. The ability to trust. To believe.

Sophie felt the telltale burning behind her eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath.

No. She absolutely would not cry here in public.

Not when there was every chance someone might capture it on their phone and post it online.

She hated the idea that Tito might see it and think her tears were for him.

Because they were not. No, they were for the dream that had died inside her. The dream he had killed.

She reached the stall, decorated with her Eat it Simple with Sophie brand logo and free handouts containing her favorite recipes.

The sight of her brand logo—her name in clean, simple lettering against a soft blue background—brought a brief moment of calm. This was what she should focus on. Not the humiliation of a fake proposal or the sting of Tito's betrayal.

But then she froze mid-step. Fake-proposal man was walking directly toward her, his determined stride eating up the distance between them.

Sophie swallowed hard. She would much prefer it if he'd kept his distance. After hearing him laughing in the corridor earlier, she was going to need all her self-control not to be rude. And rude did not fit her brand.

Oh, why couldn't today have gone smoothly? Why can't you keep it simple, Sophie?

she thought with an ironic smile at herself.

“Excuse me,” his deep voice was even more appealing up close, with a hint of gravel that sent an unwelcome shiver down her spine. “I wanted to apologize properly for what happened earlier.”

Sophie squared her shoulders and faced him, determined to remain professional despite the flutter in her stomach. “Which part?” She kept her voice low, mindful of the people nearby who might be watching. “The fake proposal or laughing in the corridor?”

He winced as if she had physically struck him. “Please,” he said, his expression earnest. “It really was a misunderstanding. I’m Nero Thornberg. I made that ring for someone else...my brother texted me the wrong stall number. And well, I must have tripped...”

“Nero Thornberg?” Sophie repeated, recognition dawning. “The jeweler?”

He nodded, a hint of surprise crossing his features. “You’ve heard of me?”

“My best friend, Melissa, has one of your pieces. She never stops showing it off.” Sophie hated that she was engaging with him, but curiosity was getting the better of her. “So you’re saying what happened was...an accident?”

“Completely,” he assured her, then he hesitated. “Though I have to admit, when I saw you, I...”

Something in his gaze made her heart skip a beat. It was intense, almost reverent, as if he was seeing something in her that no one else could.

“You what?” she prompted, suddenly needing to know.

A middle-aged man approached them, clutching one of her recipe cards.

Nothing made her happier than the fact that her fan base was so diverse, spanning all walks of life.

From the elderly couple in their seventies who loved her comforting stews, to the young, single mom who swore by her quick weeknight dinners. “Excuse me, Sophie?”

“Yes,” Sophie smiled, though inwardly she sighed. As much as she appreciated her fans, right now she would much rather continue her conversation with her fake fiancé.

She really needed to stop thinking of him in terms of marriage. Even if he sure looked like marriage material in that sharp suit and intense eyes that seemed to see right through her.

Sophie cleared her throat, aware that she was practically drooling over the guy in the same way her fans drooled over her overnight oats with honey-cinnamon apples. The recipe was ridiculously simple, just five ingredients—but her followers had gone wild for it.

“Would you mind signing this for me?” the man asked, holding out Sophie’s recipe card. “I’ve made your three-ingredient chocolate mousse four times this month alone.”

“It’s good to treat yourself from time to time,” Sophie said, taking the proffered pen.

“Can you put ‘to Max’?” the man asked.

“Of course.” She signed with a flourish, adding her tagline: “To Max. Eat it simple!”

xox Sophie.”

“Could we get a quick selfie, too?” the man asked, looking a little awkward.

“Sure thing,” Sophie obliged, summoning her camera-ready smile as the man leaned in and snapped the photo.

“Thank you,” Max said as he glanced at Nero and then at Sophie before walking away.

“You’re very welcome.” Sophie waited until Max was out of earshot and then switched her attention back to Nero Thornberg. She was surprised to find him still waiting patiently, watching her with that same intense gaze.

“You were saying?” Sophie asked, curious despite herself.

“I was...” he looked a little dazed, as if he’d been lost in thought. He shook his head slightly. “Sorry, I was just thinking how natural you are with your fans. It’s impressive.”

Sophie felt her cheeks flush pink at the compliment. “It’s easy when people are nice. And they usually are.”

“I can imagine,” he said, his eyes crinkling at the corners when he smiled. “You have a way about you that’s...inviting.”

The word hung between them, charged with meaning that Sophie didn’t quite understand. Or maybe she simply wasn’t ready to acknowledge it.

However, she couldn’t ignore the basic, instinctive pull she felt toward Nero.

“The ring,” she said, changing the subject. “It was stunning. Truly beautiful work. I hope the bride-to-be likes it.”

“I don’t know if the proposal is happening now.” Nero glanced over his shoulder and said, “I think I ruined the surprise.”

“You don’t say,” Sophie said sarcastically. But then she felt bad as Nero’s obvious distress showed in his expression. His dark brows drew together, and his shoulders slumped slightly.

“I’m sure it’ll all work out for them,” Sophie whispered. Like it had for her, she thought ironically. Two days ago, her life had been perfect: a successful career, a loving boyfriend. Then she’d discovered Tito’s betrayal, and everything had crumbled.

“You’re kind to say so,” Nero said. “Most people wouldn’t be so understanding after being accidentally proposed to.” He looked around. “In such a public way. By a stranger.”

Sophie laughed, surprised by how genuine it felt. “Well, it’ll make a good story for my social media. ‘Weirdest expo experience ever.’”

“I hope I’m not just relegated to ‘weird experience’ status,” Nero said, as if it truly mattered to him. “Maybe I could make it up to you? Coffee, perhaps?”

Sophie felt herself warming to him despite her reservations. “I don’t know,” she hedged. “I’m pretty busy with the expo today.”

“After? We could meet in town...” he said.

Was there a slightly desperate undercurrent to his tone?

Goodness, what if he was trying to set her up for another social media-worthy stunt?

“I’d like the chance to show you I’m not usually this awkward.

Though I kind of am in crowds. And around beautiful women...”

The compliment sent up a warning flag. He was trying too hard. “Do you expect me to say yes because you’re flattering me?”

“No!” He held up his hands. “I was... It was just a...” Nero let out a long breath. “The truth is, I’m terrible at this. I craft jewelry that helps people express their deepest feelings, but I struggle to express my own.”

Something about his candor disarmed her. She’d been prepared for another smooth-talking charmer like Tito Alvarez, but Nero seemed...different.

Was she letting herself be fooled again? It was time to keep things simple and play it safe.

“I’m sorry, I’m busy,” Sophie said firmly. “It was...interesting meeting you, Mr. Thornberg.”

She turned away before he could respond, the treacherous voice in her head screaming at her that she was making the biggest mistake in her life.

But Sophie knew better. Men like Nero Thornberg—handsome, charming, talented—were exactly the kind she needed to avoid.

No matter how perfect their jewelry was or how sincere they seemed, she wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. Her brand was all about keeping things simple, after all. And nothing complicated a simple life faster than a broken heart.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

That did not go well, Nero's bear said. As if Nero could not see that for himself! But he refused to be beaten.

She did call us interesting, Nero replied, trying to take something positive from the conversation.

No, she said it was interesting to meet you, his bear corrected. And since no one has probably ever fallen at her feet and made a fake proposal...

You think that's what she meant by interesting?

Nero groaned inwardly. What was he supposed to do now?

He didn't want to come over all pushy and overbearing.

But the thought of the day ending like this, of never seeing her again, was too much to bear.

There had to be a way of putting this right.

Of making her see he was a good guy, someone she should take a chance on.

Yet there was something in her expression when he had dropped to one knee and presented her with the ring that said she was hurting.

A deep emotional hurt. And he had made it worse.

Nero backed away as Sophie was surrounded by a group of fans, all chatting away to her as if they were her best friends. She certainly had a way with people.

Okay, time to regroup, Nero's bear said. Time to find Finn and get all the information on her background that we can.

Nero took one last look at his mate and turned around, sensing his brother over by the wedding cake exhibitor.

I could just use the internet, Nero said as he wove through the crowd to Finn.

Yes, but the thing with the internet is it's filled with gossip. How are you supposed to know what is true and what is fake? his bear asked.

You have a point, Nero agreed. But I also don't think that Sophie had opened her heart to Finn and told him her life story.

"Nero," Finn said through a mouthful of wedding cake. "Try some. It's incredible, made with our very own Bear Creek mountain honey."

"I'm not hungry," Nero said, even though his stomach still felt hollow.

"Mauve, don't listen to him. Give him a taste," Finn said, waving his fork at Nero.

"Here, Nero, it's guaranteed to make you feel better," Mauve said, handing him a slice.

"Thanks," Nero said, as he looked at the incredible cakes on display.

"Did you make and decorate all these?" He nodded at the cakes, admiring the three-tiered masterpiece adorned with delicate sugar pine trees and a miniature Bear Creek

mountain range circling its base.

Beside it stood a more traditional white cake with cascading edible wildflowers in the colors of a mountain sunset.

Another displayed hand-painted scenes of the vineyard, complete with tiny sugar grape clusters.

“I did,” Mauve said. “I can create pretty much anything.”

Nero nodded. “They look amazing.” He took a bite and savored the taste. “And taste amazing, too.”

“Does that mean you’re going to order a cake from me when you marry Sophie Truro?” Mauve asked.

Nero nearly choked on his cake, much to Finn’s amusement. “Did you...?” Nero asked Finn.

Finn shook his head. “No, Mauve here has seen enough shifters and their mates together to recognize the signs.”

“Yeah, I mean, the drooling was a giveaway,” Mauve said.

“I did not drool,” Nero insisted.

“If you say so.” Mauve winked and then moved to talk to a prospective client.

“So, how is it going? I saw you talking to Sophie,” Finn asked.

“Not great,” Nero said. “I wondered if you might help.”

“Hey, I got you two together, didn’t I? What more do you want from me?” Finn laughed, but his expression softened when he saw Nero’s face. “Okay, okay. What’s the problem?”

“She thinks I’m some kind of social media prankster who deliberately set her up. And when I tried to explain, she shut me down.” Nero stabbed at his cake with the fork. “There’s something else, too. When I was talking to her, I sensed...pain. Recent pain.”

Finn’s face grew serious. “That makes sense, actually.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m not exactly up on all the social media gossip, but Pete mentioned something about her.

Apparently, she was dating someone. It was serious by all accounts...

well, by all rumors... Anyway, Pete heard that Sophie thought that things were getting really serious.

Like engagement serious, but then...” Finn trailed off.

“Then what?” Nero pressed, his bear suddenly alert.

“I don’t know, but a couple of days ago, something happened.” Finn raised his eyebrows.

Nero felt sick. “And I went and fake-proposed to her? In public?”

“You didn’t know,” Finn said, clapping him on the shoulder. “And technically, you

fell at her feet. The proposal part was all in people's imaginations."

"Not helping," Nero growled. He set the plate down, no longer interested in the cake despite its deliciousness. "No wonder she looked at me like I was the worst person alive."

"If it helps, Pete said she's really as nice as she seems online. No diva behavior, genuinely kind to everyone. Just...guarded now."

"I need to fix this," Nero said, determination hardening in his chest. "But how? She won't even talk to me."

"Maybe give her some space?" Finn suggested. "Let her cool down, then try again."

Nero's bear growled in disagreement. She's our mate. We can't just walk away.

"I can't just leave things like this," Nero said aloud. "But I don't want to crowd her, either."

Finn studied him for a moment. "You know, she's doing a cooking demonstration in about twenty minutes. Main stage. Something about 'simple but elegant wedding appetizers.' Could be a chance to see her in her element, at least."

"That's...actually helpful," Nero admitted.

"I have my moments," Finn grinned. "Now, finish your cake. Mauve will be offended if you don't."

Nero obediently took another bite, but his mind was already working on a plan. He needed to show Sophie he wasn't some random prankster or social media opportunist. He needed to prove he was genuine.

Then you just need to be yourself, his bear said. Because if there is one thing we are, it's genuine. Genuinely Sophie's mate. Genuinely in love with her. Genuinely going to tear out the throat of anyone who hurts her.

"So what happened with Pete?" Nero asked, suddenly remembering the original purpose of his visit. "With the ring and everything?"

Finn shrugged and popped another bite of cake into his mouth. "Well, he loves the ring."

"But?" Nero pressed, hearing the unspoken hesitation in his brother's voice.

"You kind of upstaged him," Finn replied, wincing slightly. "The whole falling-at-a-woman's-feet thing stole his thunder a bit."

"I am so sorry," Nero said, genuine remorse flooding through him. Not only had he embarrassed Sophie, but he'd ruined another couple's special moment as well.

"I know, and he knows you didn't mean it." Finn leaned in closer and lowered his voice. "I explained the whole mate thing to him, and he thought it was funny, so no hard feelings."

"Does he want me to take the ring back, or alter it?" Nero asked, feeling worse by the second. The ring had been custom-designed specifically for Pete's intended.

"No," Finn shook his head. "Diedre doesn't know the ring was meant for her. So he'll find another time to propose."

"Good," Nero said as he finished his cake, relief washing over him. At least he hadn't completely ruined someone else's happiness.

“And they’re mates, so it’s not as if she’s going to turn him down,” Finn pointed out.

“Yeah, I’ll be glad when Sophie knows,” Nero replied with a sigh. “It sure would make things a whole lot easier. And less stressful.”

“Just promise me.” Finn put his hand on Nero’s shoulder, his expression suddenly serious. “That you will not reveal all on the stage during her demo.”

Nero laughed and shook his head. “I promise.”

After thanking Mauve for the cake, Nero headed for another cup of coffee. The sweet treat had helped, but he was still feeling the effects of having skipped breakfast and lunch. What he really wanted was a decent meal, something nutritious.

Preferably with our mate sitting across the table from us, his bear said longingly.

I don’t think that is happening anytime soon, Nero replied. Since she said no to coffee, I don’t think she is going to say yes to dinner.

He made himself a coffee and then headed toward the main stage, where Sophie was about to begin her demonstration. Finding a spot near the back of the gathering crowd, he watched as she confidently stepped onto the stage.

Sophie moved with confidence and grace, explaining each step of her recipes with clear, concise instructions that made everything seem achievable.

Her hands worked quickly but precisely, chopping herbs with practiced ease, whisking ingredients together with a flick of her wrist. The aromas wafting from the stage made Nero’s stomach growl audibly.

She sure can cook, he thought admiringly.

She would make an ideal mate, his bear said, since you are all about forgetting to eat.

Nero couldn't argue with that. He had a tendency to get lost in his work. Hours passed before he realized he hadn't eaten. Having someone who understood food, who could create such mouthwatering dishes with apparent ease, was yet another sign they were meant to be together.

As Sophie finished her demonstration, Finn stepped onto the stage to thank her. She smiled graciously and offered him a taste of one of her creations. Finn accepted eagerly, and Nero felt a sharp stab of jealousy as his brother savored the bite.

"These dishes are wonderful!" Finn announced to the applauding crowd, who began to disperse after the presentation ended.

Catching Nero's eye, Finn beckoned him over. Nero shook his head firmly, not wanting to intrude on Sophie again.

Go, his bear urged. This is our chance.

With a resigned sigh, Nero headed to the edge of the stage.

"Nero!" Finn called out, feigning surprise. "You must come try this."

Sophie jerked her head up from where she was clearing the dirty bowls, her eyes widening slightly when she spotted him.

"Do you mind?" Finn asked her. "He hasn't eaten, and he gets grouchy."

Sophie looked a little amused as Nero shook his head and rolled his eyes at his brother's transparent matchmaking.

“Sure?” she said, her response sounding more like a question than an answer. Then she furrowed her brow. “Wait. Thornberg, you two are brothers?”

Nero nodded and said, “Yes, we are.”

Sophie’s expression clouded with confusion as she looked between them. “So when you said your brother texted you the wrong stall number...”

“I meant him,” Nero confirmed, gesturing toward Finn, who had the decency to look sheepish.

“It was an honest mistake,” Finn insisted, though the twinkle in his eye suggested otherwise.

“Right,” Sophie said slowly, clearly not entirely convinced. She hesitated, then picked up a small plate with one of her appetizers. “Here. You should try this if you’re hungry.”

Nero accepted the plate, their fingers brushing momentarily. The contact sent a jolt of awareness through him that he struggled to hide. “Thank you.”

He locked eyes with Sophie. Had she felt it, too? That shock of recognition.

That knowing that this was the person you were meant to be with for the rest of your life.

But what he saw there said something else. As her eyes darkened and narrowed, he saw suspicion. And the way she looked at him said that he was the last person she was meant to spend the rest of her life with.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

Were they in this together? When Nero introduced himself, she hadn't made the connection between him and the guy who had helped organize the wedding expo.

But now she had made the connection. Now she knew Nero was Finn Thornberg's brother... That would sure give Nero a motive to make the kind of scene that would go viral on social media. It would certainly give the wedding expo the kind of exposure money could not buy.

She'd been set up. Used, again.

"I should get this all cleared away," Sophie said, needing to compose herself, needing time to think. Had the recent events with Tito made her read more into this, to see something that wasn't there?

"I'll give you a hand," Nero said. He hadn't even touched the food she'd given him.

"No, please, eat. It would be a shame to let it go to waste." She gave a tight smile.

"Oh," Nero looked down at the food.

"It's good," Finn said, "Really good." Then he looked across the room. "Oh, I'm needed over there." With that, he gave Nero a quick look. "Your food is delicious, Sophie."

"Thanks," she replied, still not sure if they had set her up. "Eat," she said to Nero. Not just because he looked as if he needed to eat, but because she wanted him to try her dishes. She wanted him to like her recipes.

Goodness, why did it matter to her if this particular man liked her food? But it did matter.

Her eyes lingered on him as he took a bite of her prosciutto-wrapped fig with honey drizzle.

Nero gave her a small smile and then took a mouthful.

His eyes widened as he savored the flavors, and she found herself smiling, happy that he liked it.

As she watched him, there seemed to be an openness to him.

When she'd spoken to him earlier, she'd found him earnest. She'd believed him in her gut.

"You like it?" Sophie asked, wanting to hear him speak.

"It's one of the best things I have ever tasted. Pair it with a Thornberg Rosé and it would be heaven."

"You know your wines," Sophie said.

"My parents own a vineyard," Nero said.

"Really?" she asked, and then she made the connection. Wow, she was slow today. That marriage proposal sure had knocked the sense out of her. "Thornberg Vineyard," she said. "Of course, it's here in Bear Creek."

"It is," Nero said. "It's in the mountains. I grew up there."

“What’s it like?” Sophie found herself asking, genuinely curious despite her reservations.

“Beautiful,” Nero’s face lit up with pride.

“Rows of vines stretching across the mountainside, catching the light at sunset. The main house is this old hacienda-style building my great-grandfather built. And the air...” he closed his eyes briefly, “...you can smell the earth and the grapes and the pine trees all at once.”

“It sounds wonderful,” Sophie admitted, momentarily forgetting her suspicions.

“You should come see it,” Nero said, his expression hopeful. “I could show you around. Maybe you could even do a tasting?”

Sophie hesitated. The invitation was tempting...professionally, it would be interesting to see a local vineyard, and personally...well, there was something about Nero that drew her in despite her better judgment.

Her phone beeped in her pocket. She pulled it out, seeing a notification that she’d been tagged in a post. When she opened it, her stomach dropped.

There it was, Nero on one knee before her, ring box in hand, her shocked expression captured perfectly.

The video already had hundreds of comments and shares.

She groaned inside as color flooded her face.

“No,” she said, “Thank you. But I am only in town for a couple of days.”

“Is everything okay?” Nero asked, noticing her sudden change in demeanor.

Sophie turned her phone toward him. “It seems our little moment has gone viral.”

Nero winced as he watched the video. “Sophie, I’m so sorry. This isn’t what I wanted.”

“Isn’t it?” The words came out sharper than she intended. “Your brother runs this expo, you show up with a ring...it all seems a bit convenient for a ‘mistake,’ doesn’t it?”

“That’s not...”

“I’ve had enough of being made a fool of,” Sophie cut him off, gathering her demonstration materials with quick, efficient movements. “First Tito, now this.”

“Tito, is he the one...?” Nero asked, his brow furrowing.

Sophie paused, realizing she’d said too much. “No one important. Just another man who thought it would be fun to play with my feelings.”

“I’m not playing with your feelings,” Nero said, his voice low and intense. “Sophie, look at me.”

Against her better judgment, she did. Those dark eyes held such sincerity that for a moment, she almost believed him.

“I know we just met,” he continued, “but I would never deliberately hurt you. What happened was an accident, a strange, unlikely accident—but I’m glad it happened because it meant I got to meet you.”

Sophie felt her resolve wavering. There was something about the way he looked at her, something that made her want to trust him despite everything.

“I need to finish packing up,” she said finally, neither accepting nor rejecting his explanation. “I have another session later.”

Nero nodded, respecting her need for space. “Can I at least help you carry these to the kitchen?”

Sophie hesitated, then nodded. “All right.”

As they walked side by side to the kitchen backstage, Sophie couldn’t help but notice how people watched them, whispering behind their hands. The video was spreading fast.

“Ignore them,” Nero said quietly, as if reading her thoughts. “People will find something else to talk about soon enough.”

“Easy for you to say,” Sophie muttered. “You’re not the one whose professional reputation is at stake.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve worked hard to build my brand as someone relatable and drama-free,” Sophie explained. “Eat it Simple with Sophie isn’t just a catchy slogan—it’s how I live my life. Or try to, anyway.”

They reached her stall, and Nero carefully set down the containers he’d been carrying.

“For what it’s worth,” he said, “I think your fans will understand. And if they’re true

fans, they'll care more about your amazing recipes than some viral video."

Sophie couldn't help the small smile that tugged at her lips. "You really liked the appetizer that much?"

"It was incredible," Nero confirmed. "And I'm not just saying that."

Their eyes met again, and Sophie felt that same inexplicable pull toward him. It was maddening how her body seemed to ignore all the warning signals her brain was sending.

"I should go," Nero said reluctantly. "But Sophie? I meant what I said about the vineyard. The invitation stands whenever you're ready."

As he walked away, Sophie found herself watching him go, wondering if she was making a mistake. But then her phone beeped again with another notification. More comments, more shares, more people talking about the proposal .

She sighed heavily. No, she'd made the right choice. The last thing she needed was more complications in her life. Eat it Simple with Sophie. That was the plan, and she was sticking to it.

Even if a small part of her wished things could be different.

She turned on the faucet and filled the sink with hot water, then added a generous amount of dish soap, wishing she could wash away her worries.

And in a way, she did.

Sophie plunged her hands into the water, letting the heat seep into her skin. She began methodically washing each item, taking her time with the mixing bowls and

whisks that had been used in her demonstration. The repetitive motion was meditative, allowing her thoughts to settle.

There was something deeply satisfying about this simple task. No cameras, no fans, no handsome men with dark eyes making her question her judgment. Just warm water, soap, and dirty dishes waiting to be transformed.

This was what she needed: normalcy. Routine. The very essence of what had made her brand successful.

As she rinsed a measuring cup, she found herself humming softly. The tension in her shoulders began to ease. By the time she reached for a towel to dry the first batch of clean utensils, she felt more centered than she had all day.

Sophie arranged the clean items in neat stacks on the counter, organizing them for her next demonstration.

She would be making her signature rose-petal panna cotta with fresh berries—simple but elegant.

Perfect for a wedding dessert that wouldn't overwhelm after a heavy meal but would still feel special.

The thought brought a genuine smile to her face. This was why she did what she did. She created moments of joy through food. To show people that creating something beautiful didn't have to be complicated or intimidating.

Her phone pinged in her pocket, but she didn't reach for it immediately. Instead, she finished drying the last spoon, placing it carefully with its companions. Only then did she dry her hands and check the notification.

Another tag. Another comment about the proposal . Someone had even created a meme with her shocked face and the caption “When things get extra spicy!”

Sophie stared at it for a moment, then, surprisingly, found herself chuckling. It was actually kind of funny, seen from a distance. And really, was it so terrible? No one was being cruel. People were just entertained by an unexpected moment.

She smoothed a hand over her hair and took a deep breath. This would pass. Tomorrow, there would be another viral video, another meme, another moment capturing the internet’s fleeting attention.

Maybe she could even use this somehow. An “Eat It Simple, Even When Life Gets Complicated” campaign? A special series on comfort foods for emotional moments? The possibilities were endless.

As for Tito...well, that wound was still fresh, but standing here in this quiet kitchen, Sophie realized something. His betrayal had hurt not because he was irreplaceable, but because she had trusted him. Maybe that capacity for trust wasn’t gone, just temporarily bruised.

Her heart would heal. She would heal. And when she did, perhaps she would be ready to trust again.

As she headed back toward the expo floor, Sophie felt lighter. She had two more hours to get through, one more demonstration, and then she could return to her hotel room for some much-needed solitude.

And if a certain dark-eyed jeweler happened to cross her path again? Well, she would handle that with the same grace she handled everything else. One step at a time. Keep it simple.

The door to the main hall loomed ahead. Sophie squared her shoulders and pushed through. What didn't kill you made you stronger. Wasn't that how the saying went?

Soon she'd be the strongest person in the world!

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

Well, that could have gone better, Nero's bear said as they stood at the edge of the main room, watching the people mill around.

And it could have gone worse, Nero replied. He'd sensed that Sophie had wanted to say yes to the vineyard visit, but something held her back. The same something that gave her a haunted look when he'd proposed to her.

Fake proposed, his bear corrected, but they both knew there was nothing fake about the way he felt about her.

So what were they to do?

Nero looked up as Sophie came back into the main room, her gaze fixed on the stall where they had first met. However, she was soon approached by a couple who chatted animatedly with her.

Nero smiled as he watched Sophie's face light up. She obviously enjoyed talking to her fans, and there were plenty of them. He suspected that more than a few visitors to the wedding expo were here to meet Sophie and had no interest in the other wedding vendors.

"Penny for them." Finn came to join him.

Nero smiled sadly. "My thoughts are worth more than a penny," he whispered. "But that's all they are. Just thoughts."

Across the room, Finn glanced toward Sophie's stall. She was now surrounded by

people, laughing and chatting as she answered questions. “She’s certainly the draw I hoped she’d be,” he said, his tone tinged with admiration.

“Why did you invite her?” Nero asked, his curiosity finally surfacing.

“Oh, that was Cassia’s idea,” Finn replied, turning back to him. “When Julius asked me to find a celebrity to give the expo some star talent, Cassia suggested Sophie. She follows her on Instagram, you know?”

“I did not know,” Nero said, raising an eyebrow.

Finn grinned. “So you have Cassia to thank for meeting your mate, too.”

“I will thank her next time I see her,” Nero said.

“So,” Finn prompted gently, “what’s the plan?”

Nero blinked, still dazed by everything that had happened. “I don’t know.”

Finn arched a brow. “You’d better think of something quickly. Sophie’s only here for a couple of days. Unless you plan on chasing her halfway across the country, you’ve got until tomorrow to convince her to stay.”

“Tomorrow,” Nero echoed. A cold knot formed in his stomach. That didn’t give him much time.

Not much time at all , his bear agreed.

So think , the bear growled.

I’m open to ideas , Nero shot back silently.

Just then, an elderly man stepped up beside them, interrupting the quiet panic stirring inside Nero. “Nero, I was hoping I might catch you here.”

“Norman, hi.” Nero straightened, caught off guard. “I didn’t expect to see you at the wedding expo.”

Norman had been married to his mate, Hilda, for nearly fifty years. The two were still as in love as they had been the day they met. Solid. Steady. The kind of love Nero had quietly hoped for his entire life.

Maybe he’s a fan of Sophie’s, his bear suggested dryly.

“I came to see you,” Norman said, reaching into the pocket of his coat. “Pete told me about the ring you were making for him.”

“Ah.” Nero’s gut twisted with guilt.

I hope Pete didn’t send Norman to scold us for screwing things up, Nero’s bear remarked.

“I’ve got a favor to ask.” He pulled out a small velvet pouch and gently placed it in Nero’s palm. “I know you’re busy, but I need this repaired. It’s kind of urgent.”

Nero opened the pouch and carefully removed a delicate emerald bracelet. He turned it over in his hands, inspecting the fine craftsmanship. Two of the emeralds were missing, and the clasp had snapped cleanly in half.

“It’s exquisite,” Nero murmured, running his thumb along the gold filigree. “Artisan work.”

“Hilda thought she’d lost it,” Norman said, his voice catching with emotion. “She

was heartbroken. But thankfully, I managed to find it again...though as you can see, it didn't escape damage."

"It means a lot to her?" Nero asked gently.

Norman nodded, his eyes growing misty. "My wedding gift to her. The emeralds reminded me of her eyes...I gave it to her on our honeymoon. She's mortified over losing it, and she'd be so upset if she knew it was damaged.

Our anniversary is in a few of days, and I'd like to surprise her by giving it back. Good as new."

"I see," Nero said, peering more closely at the emerald settings. "It's doable. I'll need to see if I've got stones to match to replace the missing ones. If not, I'll have to source some, which might take some time. But the clasp is easily fixed."

"I don't care how much it costs," Norman said, his voice suddenly tight with urgency. "Just tell me what you need. I want her to have it back."

"It's not the cost," Nero reassured him, carefully wrapping the bracelet again.

"It's finding a match for the emeralds..

." He looked over Norman's shoulder to Sophie.

He could understand how much this meant to Norman.

The bracelet wasn't just jewelry; it was a symbol of their enduring love.

"And they'll need to be vintage cut to maintain the integrity of the piece," Nero explained, turning the bracelet to examine it from all angles.

“The setting is delicate work, but I can have it ready for your anniversary.”

Don’t make a promise you cannot keep, his bear warned him.

“That would mean the world to me,” Norman said, relief washing over his weathered face. “Hilda was heartbroken when she found she’d lost it. It took a few days, but my bear sniffed it out. We found it wedged down a storm drain. I didn’t think I’d be able to get it out, but thankfully I did.”

Nero smiled, feeling a connection to the elderly bear shifter. This was why he loved his work—preserving treasured pieces that carried decades of memories and love.

“I’ll get it back to you as soon as I can,” Nero said, carefully placing the bracelet in his pocket. “I’m sure I have some odd pieces of jewelry that I can use to match them perfectly.”

Norman broke into a relieved smile. “Thank you, son. Hilda will be over the moon if I can give it back to her on our anniversary.”

“I understand completely,” Nero said, his gaze drifting back to Sophie across the room.

Norman followed his line of sight, his eyes twinkling with recognition. “Ah, I see you’ve found your mate at last.”

Nero startled. “How did you...”

“After fifty years with Hilda, I know that look anywhere.” Norman chuckled softly. “The way you keep glancing at her, like she’s the sun and you can’t help but turn toward her light.”

Nero felt warmth creeping up his neck. “That obvious, huh?”

“Only to those who’ve experienced it themselves.” Norman patted his shoulder.

“It’s just things haven’t exactly gone smoothly,” Nero admitted.

“Ah, but it’s meant to be,” Norman said. “So, you’ll figure out how to smooth things out.” Norman nodded to Finn and walked away, leaving Nero to ponder his words.

“He’s right, you know,” Finn said after a moment. “You’re good at fixing broken things. It’s what you do.”

Nero ran a hand through his hair. “But people aren’t jewelry, Finn. You can’t just replace missing pieces and solder them back together.”

“No, but you can show them they’re worth the effort.” Finn squeezed his brother’s shoulder. “Look, I’ve got to check on the other vendors. But I have faith in you. You’ll work something out.”

Great, now we have two deadlines, Nero said.

As Finn walked away, Nero’s bear rumbled with determination. Then we’d better come up with a plan.

Yes, but what? Nero wondered, watching as Sophie laughed at something one of her fans said. Her smile transformed her face, lighting up her eyes in a way that made his heart stutter.

Sophie’s brand was all about simplicity. Keeping things uncomplicated and authentic. Maybe that’s exactly what he needed to offer her. Not grand gestures or elaborate schemes, but something genuine. Something real.

Something from the heart.

A piece of jewelry, his bear suggested. Designed from the heart.

“For the woman who holds our heart,” Nero murmured in agreement.

Nero glanced once more at Sophie across the crowded room, her hands animatedly describing something to an enraptured audience. The pull toward her was almost physical, like gravity itself was drawing him into her orbit.

But Norman and Hilda’s love story deserved his attention, too. Perhaps there was wisdom in retreat for now. He needed to regroup and create a plan worthy of his mate. He couldn’t rush this and risk pushing her further away.

Sometimes the path forward means taking a step back first, his bear said.

Yes, we’re not retreating, and we are certainly not surrendering, Nero agreed.

Decision made, Nero turned toward the exit. Each step away from Sophie felt wrong, but he forced himself to continue. The weight of Norman’s bracelet in his pocket kept him focused.

As he reached the doorway, the fine hairs on his neck stood up. Sophie was watching him. He could feel her gaze like a physical touch.

He didn’t turn. Couldn’t risk it, even though every instinct screamed at him to look back, to meet her eyes one last time. However, Nero knew better. One glance would be his undoing.

Somehow, he got himself out of the hotel and into the parking lot.

The sunlight was blinding as it glinted off windshields as he made his steady way to his car.

Each step felt heavier than the last, like walking through mountain snow in the dead of winter.

His bear felt it too and growled in protest.

We're doing the right thing, Nero assured his other half, though the words rang hollow even to his own ears.

Sliding into the driver's seat, Nero placed both hands on the steering wheel and took a steadying breath. The leather was warm beneath his palms, heated by the afternoon sun streaming through the windshield. He started the engine, its familiar purr doing little to comfort him.

The passenger seat beside him remained conspicuously empty. His mate should be here, by his side.

One day, his bear promised with unexpected gentleness. One day soon.

Nero nodded, throat tight as he drove out of the parking lot and away from the woman who had turned his world upside down in the span of a single afternoon.

But he held onto the thought that this was the beginning. Not the end.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

He'd gone.

Sophie had watched him go. Felt him go.

It wasn't just that Nero had walked away. It was as if they were connected by an invisible thread.

She swallowed hard. He hadn't even said goodbye.

Was she imagining things? Projecting feelings that weren't shared? Maybe it had been one-sided all along. Her side.

Was that it? She'd latched onto him to try to soothe her pain and then imagined he'd felt something, too. But the look in his eyes... Had she imagined the intensity?

Before she could sink further into the ache of longing blooming in her chest, a young couple approached her stall, all glowing excitement and starry-eyed questions about their wedding menu.

Sophie forced a smile and talked them through flavor pairings and edible petals, offered tips on stabilizing lavender cream on a warm day, and pretended the ache in her chest wasn't growing stronger by the second.

They asked for a selfie. She obliged, camera-ready, her grin flawless—even though her heart quivered like the panna cotta she was about to demonstrate.

But as she leaned in, the thought blindsided her: I wish I were the one planning a

wedding.

Not just any wedding, hers .

And not with Tito.

With Nero .

The realization jolted her, sharp and impossible to ignore.

If she were still in love with Tito, wouldn't he be the one waiting at the end of that aisle in her mind's eye?

But when she pictured that moment now, the archway wasn't draped in showy roses, it was woven with wildflowers and wisteria.

And it was Nero standing there, waiting for her.

The shift in her thoughts had happened so quietly that she hadn't even noticed.

Tito belonged to her old life. Nero... Nero felt like something entirely different. A spark of possibility.

And that terrified her more than she wanted to admit.

He'd turned everything upside down. Her plans. Her peace. Her heart.

Still, Sophie made it through the rest of the afternoon.

She smiled, she nodded, and when it came time for her demo, she delivered every line with polished ease.

She hit her cues, plated her rose-petal panna cotta with practiced grace, and gave the local press a perfect soundbite: “Love is the sweetest ingredient of all.”

But inside?

She felt like a fraud.

Keep it simple, she’d always told herself. That had been her mantra. The thought that guided her.

But nothing about this felt simple anymore.

Not Nero.

Not her heart.

Not even dessert.

“Sophie.”

She turned to find Finn Thornberg approaching with a charming smile, a bottle of wine, and a bouquet of late-summer flowers.

“From Thornberg Vineyard,” he said.

“You didn’t have to,” Sophie replied, though truthfully, she couldn’t think of anything better than a hot bath and a generous glass of wine.

“I did,” Finn said. “Honestly, I don’t think I expected just how many people would turn up because of you. You’re a star.”

“Oh, I doubt it was because of me,” Sophie said modestly, though it had been busy. And she’d met more fans than she expected.

“You shouldn’t sell yourself short,” Finn said warmly. “Take the credit. You’ve earned it.”

She dropped her gaze, her fingers tightening slightly around the neck of the wine bottle.

“Thank you. Really. I appreciate the invitation. This whole trip... It’s been exactly what I needed,” she said, then bit back the words she wasn’t ready to share.

“There’s something about the mountains, the forests. ..they’re inspiring.”

“They are,” Finn said with a quiet chuckle. “They’ve inspired my family for generations. Hence the vineyard.”

Sophie turned the bottle in her hands, admiring the label—elegant peaks silhouetted against a dusky sky, the lettering etched in gold. The vintage promised notes of blackberry, oak, and “the essence of mountain air after rainfall.” It was romantic. Evocative. Almost magical.

“Would you like to visit the vineyard?” Finn asked.

Sophie’s guard snapped up. Had Nero put him up to this?

“I don’t think I’ll have time,” she said lightly, keeping her tone friendly.

“Pity, my brother’s mate...partner.” He hesitated and then went on. “Cassia is the one who suggested I ask you to come to the expo, and I know she would love to meet you,” Finn replied.

“Oh.” She smiled wistfully. In truth, she would like to see the vineyard.

But it was better to keep her distance. “Another time,” she replied.

“I need to leave tomorrow.” That was not exactly true.

Now, things with Tito had ended. She didn’t need to be anywhere as long as she fulfilled her contract to create the remaining recipes for his book.

But the more distance between her and Nero, the better.

“Well,” Finn said with a hint of disappointment, “it’s an open invitation. Whenever you’re ready.”

Sophie clutched the wine bottle a little tighter, feeling its comforting weight in her hands. “Thank you,” she said sincerely. “And thank you for this. I’ll enjoy it tonight.”

“It was good to meet you.” As Finn walked away, Sophie once again found herself wondering if she was making a mistake. The thought of visiting the Thornberg Vineyard stirred something within her.

How would it feel to have that sense of connection? To the land, to the mountains...to a man. She longed to set down roots, make a family... Maybe that was why she’d clung so tightly to Tito for so long. She’d mistaken the hope of belonging for love.

That was why she had to step back now. To stop herself from repeating the same mistake.

And that was what she was in danger of doing. She was trying to mend her broken heart, her broken dreams, by moving on to the next man. Specifically to Nero, who

seemed to offer her everything her heart desired.

Listening to him talk about the vineyard and his family's roots had tapped into her longing.

But before she could move on, she needed to give herself time to heal. Time to process what had happened.

With a sigh, Sophie gathered her things. The expo was winding down, vendors beginning to pack up their displays. Her last demonstration, a lavender honey panna cotta, had gone surprisingly well despite her distracted state, and several couples even requested the recipe for their weddings.

Back in her hotel room, Sophie kicked off her shoes and placed the wine bottle on the small desk by the window.

The bouquet Finn had given her—wildflowers in shades of blue and purple—went into the bathroom glass for now.

She'd ask reception for a vase later, but for now she wanted a nice soak in the tub.

Sophie went to the bathroom and ran the water, pouring in a generous amount of the complimentary bubble bath. Steam rose in fragrant clouds as she uncorked the wine and poured herself a generous glass.

She paused to inhale the wine's aroma, then took a slow sip. The taste barely registered before an image of Nero filled her mind. In her fantasy, he was stripped bare to the waist, the sun caressing his honey-toned skin, as he worked between rows of lush vines.

"This is ridiculous," she told herself firmly, taking another sip of wine. "You barely

know him.”

Yet something about him had gotten under her skin in a way no one else ever had. Not even Tito, whom she’d dated for nearly a year. How was that possible?

Sophie slipped into the bath, letting the hot water envelop her tired body. She tried to push them aside, but the day’s events circled back over and over... Nero falling at her feet, the ring box, the viral video, his gaze that seemed to see straight through her.

This would not do. Tomorrow, she would leave Bear Creek behind. And somehow pick up the threads of her life.

The warm water lapped at her chin as reality crashed back in. Tomorrow meant returning to the mess waiting for her back home. Tito’s cookbook deadline was looming, and she was still contractually obligated to develop and test his not-so-simple recipes. A bitter irony not lost on her.

Sophie took another long sip of the Thornberg wine. She could already picture Tito’s smug face when she returned, pretending nothing had happened between them. As if finding him with Jules hadn’t shattered everything.

Jules. The thought of her former PA made Sophie’s stomach clench. The woman she’d trusted with everything, her schedule, her home access code, her professional secrets. All the while, Jules had been sleeping with Tito behind her back.

How long had it been going on? Months? The entire time Sophie had been secretly dating Tito?

Sophie closed her eyes as pieces started falling into place.

All those late-night “emergency meetings” Tito had insisted on.

The way he'd been so adamant about keeping their relationship private, claiming it was "better for both their brands."

And Jules had been there through it all, helping arrange their secret dates, managing Sophie's calendar to create those private moments. Had she been laughing the entire time? Planning her own rendezvous with Tito the moment Sophie was out of sight?

"God," Sophie whispered, sliding deeper into the water until it covered her face completely. The muffled silence beneath the surface was a momentary escape from the humiliation burning through her.

When her lungs began to protest, she resurfaced with a gasp, pushing wet hair from her eyes. Water sloshed over the tub's edge as she sat up suddenly, struck by a realization.

She didn't have to go back yet.

Sophie reached for her wine glass, mind racing.

There was nothing physically tying her to her apartment right now.

She could work remotely—develop recipes anywhere with a decent kitchen.

Her agent had spent months trying to persuade her to focus on her own cookbook rather than ghostwriting for others.

"I could stay," she murmured, the idea taking shape. "Right here in Bear Creek."

She could rent a place for a few weeks. Somewhere quiet, with a good kitchen where she could develop recipes both for Tito's book and her own.

Her own book. The thought sent a thrill through her that had nothing to do with the wine.

All day, fans approached her, telling her how her recipes had changed their lives and given them confidence in the kitchen.

They weren't following her because of Tito's celebrity; they were following her for her approach to food.

A quick glance at her phone told her it was too late to call her agent now. But tomorrow she would run the idea past him. If he okayed it, she would find somewhere with a kitchen and cook to her heart's content. Cook to forget. Cook to mend her broken heart.

Sophie set her wine glass on the edge of the tub and sank deeper into the bubbles, feeling the first real sense of direction she'd had since walking in on Tito and Jules.

The thought of staying in Bear Creek, surrounded by mountains instead of memories, felt right in a way she couldn't quite explain.

She would need to find a place to stay—somewhere with more than just this cramped hotel kitchenette. A rental cabin, perhaps? Something rustic but functional, where she could spread out her ingredients and work without interruption.

Though there was one interruption she wouldn't mind.

And his name was Nero Thornberg.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

Nero Thornberg had been up all night working on the emerald bracelet for Norman and sketching designs for a gift for Sophie.

Our mate, his bear said happily.

Our mate, Nero echoed, though he wouldn't be happy until he convinced her to stay in Bear Creek.

He studied the bracelet, admiring the way the gold clasp now lay perfectly aligned, the delicate filigree work restored to its original splendor.

He'd spent hours meticulously matching the two missing emeralds, digging through his collection of vintage stones until he found ones with the same cut and that deep, verdant glow.

The new gems caught the light like their older companions, scattering tiny green sparks across his workbench.

A few more hours, and it would be as good as new. But first, he needed coffee.

And food, his bear reminded him.

And food, Nero agreed, considering his options.

There was little in his cupboards to tempt him, and so he stepped out of his workshop and into his car, aiming for the bakery that made the best cinnamon bear claws.

He drove with the top down, despite the early morning chill.

When he reached the fork in the road, he hesitated.

The route to Bear Bluff and the Catherine Hotel tempted him, the call of his mate like a siren song.

But he resisted that temptation, and instead, he turned toward Bear Creek.

He wasn't ready to face Sophie again. Not yet.

Especially since you're still in yesterday's clothes and need a shower, his bear said dryly.

Nero glanced down at his rumpled shirt and waistcoat. Fair point. He'd grab a bite and head home. If he started on Sophie's gift now, he might finish it in time to give it to her as a sort of apology for the accidental proposal, for everything.

He wasn't sure if it was enough to make her stay, but he hoped it might be enough to make her see he was a good guy.

Not much of a plan, his bear muttered.

I know, I'm still working out the details, Nero replied as he pulled up outside the bakery. These things cannot be rushed.

Much like one of your creations, his bear said.

Exactly. Nero climbed out of the car and stretched his arms above his head, working out the kinks in his back. He'd been hunched over his workbench for so long it felt as if he was bent out of shape.

You are, his bear said with some amusement.

But before he gave a snappy retort, Nero stilled.

He could sense her .

Sophie. She was heading this way, heading along the road from Bear Bluff to Bear Creek.

Panic fluttered in his chest. What should he do? Just stand there?

Trust in fate, his bear said. If we're going to meet again by chance, there has to be a reason for it.

You mean like embarrassing myself again? Nero asked.

Get back in the car, his bear instructed.

Why? Nero said, but he was already sliding back into the driver's seat.

Now, get out. Pretend you're just arriving, his bear suggested.

Nero followed the advice, trying to look casual as Sophie's car came into view. She slowed. Did a double-take and pulled over.

He smiled, or tried to. It probably looked more like a grimace.

"Nero?" she called, rolling down her window. "I thought that was you."

"Sophie," he managed. His voice was steadier than he expected. "Good morning."

She studied him, taking in the creased shirt and weary eyes. “You look like you’ve been up all night.”

“I have,” he admitted, running a hand through his hair. “Working on a project.”

“Must be important,” she said, her tone softening.

“I was just heading in for breakfast,” he said. “You?”

“Oh...I was going to grab something to eat and then look for a place to stay...” Her voice trailed off as she folded her arms across her body.

“A place to stay?” Nero could hardly believe it. “I thought you were leaving today.”

Why would you remind her? his bear grumbled.

“I was,” Sophie said as she got out of her car. “But I think I might stick around for a couple of days. I’ve got recipes to work on, and the mountains are...inspiring.”

Her hair was loose around her shoulders, and the soft summer dress she wore made something in Nero’s chest ache.

“That’s great news,” he said.

It’s amazing news, his bear added, barely able to contain his excitement.

“Yes.” She looked up at him from under her lashes.

“Come on, let’s grab breakfast. Then we can check out a few places.”

“Oh, I don’t...” she began.

“I meant—just online. We can sit in the park, look through some listings,” Nero said. Damn, had he screwed up again?

“Oh. Yes, that would be great. I don’t know the area at all.”

They crossed the street together, but he stepped ahead and held the bakery door open for her.

“Thanks,” she said with a shy smile.

“Nero,” Sally greeted from behind the counter. “The usual?”

“Yes, please,” he replied sheepishly. “I always forget to buy groceries.”

“I see,” Sophie said with a teasing glint as she gave her own order.

“I think we’re probably opposites,” Nero admitted as they waited for their orders to be filled.

“How so?” Sophie asked.

“You probably spend most of your day in the kitchen, and I spend most of my day not in mine.” He winced. That came out wrong. “I mean, I’m always in the workshop. I don’t cook much.”

“But we’re both creating things in our own way,” she said.

“I suppose we are,” Nero agreed. He glanced past her and frowned. A man outside was peering in through the bakery window. When he spotted Sophie, he raised his phone and snapped a picture. “Do you know him?”

“Who?” Sophie swung around and then covered her face. “He’s a journalist.”

Nero’s stomach dropped. “Do you think he’s here about yesterday?”

We can never apologize enough for that fake proposal, his bear moaned.

“No... I mean, I don’t know,” she began, just as Sally returned with their orders.

“Do you want me to deal with him?” Nero asked, bristling at the idea that this journalist might be causing his mate harm.

“No, it’s fine,” Sophie said, but as they stepped outside, the man moved toward them.

“Care to quote on the rumors that you and Tito were about to get engaged and he dumped you instead?”

Sophie went still, her face ghost-pale. Nero didn’t hesitate. He slid his arm around her and guided her to the car.

“No comment,” he snapped at the reporter, helping Sophie into the passenger seat. The man continued clicking.

“Sophie, did you come to Bear Creek to escape the scandal?” the journalist called out, moving closer to the car.

Nero felt the growl rumbling in his chest. His bear wanted out. Wanted to make sure the journalist got the message. Sophie was under his protection now and forever.

He swallowed it down. That was not a side of him he wanted his mate to see.

“I think you should leave,” Nero said in a low, dangerous voice. “Now.”

The journalist hesitated, then backed off, though he kept the phone raised.

Nero circled the car, not taking his eyes off the guy as he got in and drove away. The paper bags containing their breakfast sat between them, momentarily forgotten.

“Are you okay?” he asked quietly as he pulled away from the curb.

She nodded, but her hands trembled. “I’m sorry about that.”

“You don’t need to be,” Nero said. “It’s not your fault.”

She stared out the window, then whispered, “It’s Tito. My ex. He must be feeding stories to the press.”

“Tito,” Nero repeated bitterly.

Finn mentioned him yesterday, his bear growled.

So, do you think it’s true, Sophie was expecting Tito to propose? Nero asked.

It sure looks that way, his bear said.

“My ex. And my boss,” Sophie added, her voice flat. “I develop recipes for his cookbooks. We were together. Until I found him in bed with my personal assistant two days ago.”

Nero’s bear growled deep inside him, furious that someone had hurt their mate.

Nero’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. “I’m sorry,” he said, the words rough. “That’s...unforgivable.”

“The worst part? I still have to finish his cookbook,” Sophie said, her voice firmer now. “That’s why I need a quiet place. To work. To think.”

Guilt pricked at Nero’s chest. If Tito hadn’t been a jerk, Sophie might never have come here. They might never have met.

But what a cost for a twist of fate.

“I don’t know why I’m telling you this,” she blurted. “We barely know each other.”

“I’m a good listener,” he replied gently.

He turned down the road to his house, the trees growing thicker around them. When they rounded the bend and his cabin came into view, Sophie sat straighter.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“My place,” Nero said as he parked in front of the house and turned off the engine. “It’s private. And the kitchen’s pretty great, well well-equipped, even if it might be a little dated... It gets the job done.”

“Are you suggesting what I think you’re suggesting?” Sophie half-turned to face him.

“Listen, why don’t we go inside and eat breakfast?” He reached for the bags. “No pressure.”

She hesitated. “It would be a pity to let those cinnamon bear claws go to waste.” Sophie cracked a smile.

“Wait until you taste them.” Nero’s stomach gave an appreciative rumble as he got out of the car with the bags in his hand.

She stepped out of the car, scanning the quiet surroundings as she came around the car to join him. “That’s your workshop?”

He nodded. “Where the magic happens.”

“I’d love to see it,” Sophie said as they headed toward the house.

“And I would love to show it to you.” He climbed the porch steps and opened the front door. “After we’ve eaten.”

“Lead the way.”

“Okay,” Nero said, leading her to the kitchen.

He was suddenly a little nervous. To him, his kitchen was well-equipped, but he was no chef.

You don’t say, his bear chuckled.

As Sophie scanned the kitchen—stainless steel appliances, granite counters, a wide island built for creativity—a smile spread across her face. “This is...incredible. And you don’t cook?”

“You like it?” Nero asked, mirroring her smile.

“Yes, I do,” Sophie said, running her fingers over the countertops.

“You know... If you are looking for somewhere quiet to stay,” he began, “this place has a guest suite. Separate entrance. Full privacy. And obviously...” He gestured to the kitchen. “You could have full use of the kitchen while I’m working.”

Sophie froze. “You’re offering to let me stay here?”

“If you want. No pressure.” He set the bags down on the counter, trying to sound casual.

She studied him. “That’s very generous. But we barely know each other.”

“True,” Nero said with a quiet smile. “But sometimes you just have to trust your instincts.”

And fate, his bear said. Don’t forget fate.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

Was she really considering this? She must be crazy. But the kitchen was everything she needed, and the view...

She wandered to the window, gazing out across the mountainside. The morning sun painted the forest in shades of emerald and gold, while mist clung to the distant peaks like a lover reluctant to leave.

“Listen, why not just stay for the day?” Nero said, his voice cutting through her thoughts. “If you choose to find somewhere else after that, I understand. But at least that reporter will have given up and crawled back under whatever rock he came from.”

And he made sense. Complete sense. Or was she just fooling herself? Because she wanted to stay—not just for the view or the kitchen that would look perfect in her Instagram stories, but for reasons she wasn’t ready to admit.

“For the day,” she said cautiously. She didn’t want to commit to more. After all, she barely knew Nero. And she didn’t have her car. He’d driven her here. What if this were some elaborate setup? What if the journalist had been fake, just like yesterday’s proposal?

“Okay, let’s get some coffee on,” Nero said brightly, clapping his hands. “You sit and eat before your breakfast gets cold.”

He busied himself in the kitchen while Sophie pulled out a chair and sat down.

After the events of the morning, she was ready for breakfast. She opened the bag and

took out the still-warm bagel, biting into it with a satisfied sigh.

Goodness, the filling was perfect. As she ate, she watched Nero move around the kitchen with quiet precision.

Even in something as simple as making coffee, there was craftsmanship in his movements.

He must give the same care he gave to his jewelry.

He set two mugs down on the table. The rich aroma wafted up, momentarily distracting her from her worries. He sat down and opened his bag from the bakery, inhaling the smell. Sophie smothered a smile, but he caught her eye.

“Hey, just because I can’t cook doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate good food,” he said with a grin.

She chuckled, the last of her unease slipping away. She might’ve made a bad call with Tito, but her instincts told her Nero was different—open, guileless, maybe even a little innocent.

They ate in comfortable silence before Nero asked, “So, what do you think of Bear Creek so far?” He nodded toward the window. “Aside from the nosy journalists.”

“It’s beautiful,” she admitted. “So different from the city. There’s a...peacefulness here.”

Nero nodded. “My family’s been here for generations. Something about these mountains gets in your blood.”

“I can see why,” Sophie said, sipping her coffee. “It’s inspiring.”

“Speaking of inspiration,” Nero asked, “do you have ideas for the recipes you’ll be working on?”

She shrugged. “Not specifically. I might sit on the porch and let inspiration strike.”

“Is that how you normally work?”

“Sometimes,” she said. “But I find inspiration can come from anywhere. It can be a smell, a memory, or the way light falls on fresh produce. Sometimes I plan meticulously. Other times, it’s pure improvisation.

The fundamental rule is not to try to force it.

” She tilted her head. “How about you? What’s your process? ”

Nero’s eyes lit up. “I talk to whoever’s commissioning the piece and I try to understand not just what they want, but why. What story are they telling? Then I take all that and design a piece that’s specifically for them.”

“That’s incredible,” Sophie said. She had to admire his process. When she created a recipe, it was for the widest appeal. But for Nero, it was far more personal, far more intimate.

He took a sip of coffee. “But I also enjoy fixing old pieces. There’s something deeply satisfying about taking something broken and making it whole again. Giving it new life.”

A flutter stirred in Sophie’s chest. The way he spoke—with reverence and care—made something shift inside her. Could this man...fix her? Heal the part of her that still hurt?

It was terrifying and thrilling.

“I’d love to see your process sometime,” she heard herself say.

Nero’s smile lit the room. “I’d like that,” he said, eyes locking with hers. “Very much.”

She looked at him for a moment longer, then returned to her breakfast, trying to remind herself why she was here. Not to drool over Nero Thornberg.

But he sure was drool worthy...

“You’re welcome to use anything in the cupboards or fridge,” Nero said, digging into his own breakfast. “There’s not much, but the basics are there. Plus, there’s a kitchen garden out back. And I keep bees—if you need fresh honey.”

“Oh?” Sophie’s mind immediately began planning how she could use honey in her recipes. And not just desserts. “I might take you up on that. I’ll probably brainstorm today, then start testing tomorrow.” Was she already planning to come back? Perhaps even stay in the guest suite.

“The honey is special,” Nero said with quiet pride. “Mountain wildflower. I inherited the hives with the house. I enjoy watching them work. They forage on lavender, clover, and all kinds of alpine flowers. Especially the heather when it’s in bloom.”

“That sounds incredible,” Sophie said, her professional instincts kicking in. “I’ve been working on some desserts that could really benefit from something complex and floral.”

“Take whatever you need,” Nero offered.

She pulled out her phone. “Mountain honey panna cotta...a honey glaze for lemon cake,” she murmured, typing furiously. “Sorry,” she said, glancing up to see Nero watching her with amusement. “When inspiration hits...”

“Don’t apologize,” he said. “I do the same thing with jewelry designs. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night to sketch something before I forget it.”

“The creative process doesn’t care about sleep,” Sophie agreed.

“It really doesn’t,” Nero said, finishing his bear claw. “Speaking of which, I should probably clean up and head to the workshop. I have to finish up a restoration project.”

“What are you working on?” Sophie asked.

“An emerald bracelet,” he said. “I just need to secure the settings and polish everything. If you’d like, I can show you when it’s finished.”

“I’d like that,” she said, surprised by how much she meant it. She wanted to learn everything she could about him.

Nero stood and gathered their mugs. “Make yourself at home. The guest suite is upstairs, the first door on the right. And feel free to explore the kitchen garden. It’s just through that back door and down the stone path.”

After he left to shower, Sophie wandered to the kitchen window. The garden was bathed in the morning sun. Tomato vines clung to trellises. Herbs bloomed in tidy rows. Berry bushes sagged under ripening fruit.

This place was a recipe developer’s dream. The thought of working here, surrounded by fresh ingredients and mountain inspiration, made her heart race with excitement. It had nothing to do with the handsome jeweler upstairs, she told herself firmly. This

was purely a professional interest.

But as she stepped outside into the garden, breathing in the mingled scents of basil, thyme, and sun-warmed earth, Sophie couldn't quite ignore the flutter in her stomach when she heard the shower running above.

She forced her thoughts away from images of water cascading over Nero's broad shoulders and focused instead on the vibrant world around her.

She kneeled beside a patch of flowering herbs, brushing her fingers over the delicate purple blossoms. Bees hummed contentedly among the plants, gathering nectar for the honey Nero had mentioned.

"Mountain wildflower honey," she murmured. "Perfect for a signature dish."

As she explored further, ideas began flowing faster than she could process them. By the time she returned to the kitchen, her notes app was filled with potential recipes, each inspired by something she'd discovered in the garden.

Perhaps staying here for a few days wouldn't be such a bad idea after all. Professionally speaking, of course.

But when Nero reappeared in the kitchen doorway, hair damp from his shower, all professional thoughts left her head. How could she ever focus on food when he was around?

"Did you find your inspiration?" he asked as he crossed the kitchen.

It's standing right in front of me , she thought as her fingers twitched, longing to run through his damp hair and draw him into a kiss.

“Yes, thanks,” she croaked, clearing her throat.

He gave a bemused smile. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

He poured two fresh cups and handed one to her. “I’m going to go…” He gestured toward the door, but she got the feeling he didn’t want to leave.

And she didn’t want him to, either.

This was dangerous. So very dangerous.

Keep it simple, Sophie. Wasn’t that what she had always told herself?

But looking back, her relationship with Tito had been complicated from the outset.

All that skulking around so that people did not know the truth.

He’d claimed it was to protect their privacy, to keep their relationship special and intimate.

“Let’s keep this between us for now,” Tito had whispered, kissing her neck in that way that made her knees weak. “The media will turn it into a circus.”

And she’d believed him. For months, she’d sneaked around, canceled plans with friends, and manufactured excuses about why she couldn’t bring a plus-one to events. All the while, he was sleeping with Jules behind her back.

The realization hit her like a physical blow. Nero was watching her, concern etched across his features, and suddenly she couldn’t breathe. The kitchen felt too small, the

air too thick.

“I need to work on my recipes,” she said and then turned around and bolted for the door, needing to put some distance between them. She needed to keep herself safe.

But safe from what? From falling in love?

Because with Nero...that might be the simplest thing of all.

“Sophie?” His voice behind her was soft. Concerned.

She turned. He stood in the doorway, giving her space, but his worry was clear.

“I’m sorry,” she said, embarrassed by her sudden flight. “I just...needed some air.”

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No,” she assured him quickly. “It wasn’t you. I was thinking about Tito and...everything.”

Nero nodded, understanding softening his expression. “Would you like me to leave you alone for a while?”

The offer was so considerate, so respectful of her boundaries, that Sophie felt something inside her crack open.

“Actually, I think I’d like to see your workshop. It’ll help take my mind off...things,” she said, surprising herself. “If the offer still stands.”

His face brightened immediately. “Of course. It’s just across the way.” He gestured toward the larger building she’d noticed earlier.

As they walked together, the mountain air cleared her head. Nero kept an easy distance—close enough that she could feel his presence, but never too close.

If she had to describe Nero in food terms?

He was comfort food. The kind you craved when the world felt uncertain.

Reliable. Trustworthy.

Simple in the best possible way.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

How he wished he could chase her sorrow away.

How I wish I could tear a strip off this Tito person! His bear gnashed his teeth, hating to see their mate upset.

Violence is never the answer, Nero reminded his bear.

Don't be too sure, his bear muttered.

But Nero certainly did not want to dwell on violence now, not when he was about to show his mate his workshop.

Because showing her his workshop and sharing his work with her would reveal a part of himself to his mate.

It would give her a glimpse of the man he truly was, the man beneath the waistcoats and awkward smiles.

"Come on," Nero said, leading Sophie toward the workshop. He balanced the coffee cups carefully as he reached for his keys, anticipation fluttering in his chest.

The heavy wooden door swung open with a familiar creak. Nero stepped inside and flicked the light switch. Warm amber light bathed the space, revealing a room that looked like it had been plucked from another century.

Sophie gasped audibly as she followed him in.

Wooden workbenches, polished by years of use, stood in orderly rows.

The walls were lined with apothecary-style drawers, each labeled in elegant script—"Silver Findings," "Gold Filigree," "Emerald Cuts." Antique tools hung from pegs, while modern precision instruments were carefully arranged on leather mats.

"Oh my goodness," Sophie breathed, slowly turning a full circle. Her eyes widened as she took in every detail from the brass scales to the jeweler's loupe hanging from a velvet cord, and the small forge in the corner. "This is incredible. I had no idea."

Nero set their coffees down on a side table and watched her as she ran her fingers reverently over the worn edge of his main workbench.

"You like it?" he asked.

Sophie turned to him and nodded. "This is wonderful. I never expected it to be so..."

Nero arched a questioning eyebrow. "Old-fashioned?" he supplied, used to that reaction from visitors.

"No," she said, tugging her brows together as if searching for the right words. "So you."

Nero felt heat creep up his neck at her words.

Is that a compliment? his bear asked with a rumble.

I'm honestly not sure, Nero admitted.

Sophie continued her exploration, pausing over a collection of sketches spread across a long wooden counter. Her gaze caught on one drawing. "What's this?" she asked,

leaning closer. “‘From My Heart to Yours’?” She read the words he’d scrawled in the margin.

Nero stepped forward quickly and gathered up the drawings before she could look too closely.

“Just something I’m working on,” he said, feeling suddenly vulnerable as he stowed them in a drawer.

If she saw it now, would she understand?

Or would it scare her away? He cleared his throat. “Here is the bracelet.”

He reached for Norman’s piece, laying it gently on a velvet cloth. The restored bracelet gleamed under the light, the emeralds throwing soft green sparks.

“It’s beautiful,” Sophie murmured, leaning closer.

“These are the emeralds I replaced.”

“They look identical to the others.” Sophie leaned in to take a closer look, her hair brushing his hand, and the temptation to stroke her cheek was overwhelming.

“Close,” Nero replied.

She looked up at him. “You’re a perfectionist.”

“Guilty as charged,” he said with a sigh.

“It’s nothing to be guilty of,” Sophie assured him. “You take pride in your work, and I am sure that’s why people come to you. You are authentic.”

“Authentic,” Nero repeated the word.

I thought the only authentic things in this workshop were the precious metals and the jewels, and our love for our mate, his bear said happily.

“Yes, that’s what people like on social media, people who are authentic, who are not afraid of being their true selves.” Sophie nodded toward the emerald bracelet. “So, what’s the story behind this piece?”

“Oh,” Nero said, flustered at her nearness. “This was a wedding gift from Norman to Hilda. They are about to celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary in a couple of days.”

Sophie shook her head. “Fifty years...can you imagine loving someone for so long?”

“I can,” Nero said quietly, his eyes meeting hers.

“You were saying,” she murmured.

“Oh, yes.” He looked down at the bracelet because if he looked at Sophie any longer, he would definitely kiss her.

“Hilda lost the bracelet. She was heartbroken, but Norman managed to find it...down a storm drain.” He skipped the part where it was actually Norman’s bear who sniffed out the bracelet, even though it sure enhanced the story.

“A storm drain.”

“Yes,” Nero went on. “But it had been damaged. The clasp was broken, and these two emeralds were missing.”

“So he asked you to repair it?” Sophie asked.

“Yes, he came to see me yesterday at the wedding expo,” Nero explained.

“Really?” Sophie asked. “Is that why you left so suddenly?”

She noticed we left, his bear said happily.

“Yes. The deadline’s tight, but I worked through the night to get it done. It means so much to Norman and Hilda,” Nero said.

“You are quite the romantic, aren’t you?” Sophie said and then cleared her throat as she straightened up. “So, how did you learn to do this?” she asked, gesturing to the workshop around them.

Nero relaxed into the familiar territory of discussing his craft.

“My grandfather’s best friend, Paulo, taught me the basics when I was just a boy.

I would sit right here,” he patted the worn stool beside his main workbench, “watching him transform raw metal and stones into something magical. I knew back then that this is what I wanted to do.”

“Not the vineyard?” Sophie asked.

“No, I never had the skill for tending the vines or for blending the wine.” He shrugged. “My brothers all found their own paths, but this... This is mine. This was always where I belonged.”

“Teach me,” she said.

“Okay.” He pulled out a small piece of silver wire and his pliers. “Something simple,” he said, his hands moving with practiced ease as he began to shape the metal. “A basic ring setting.”

Sophie moved closer, watching intently as his fingers worked the silver. The wire curved and twisted under his guidance, taking shape with seemingly effortless precision.

“You make it look so easy,” she murmured.

“Years of practice,” Nero said, acutely aware of her proximity. Her warmth seemed to radiate toward him, and he wanted to hold her in his arms and make love to her here in his workshop.

“It’s not unlike cooking in some ways,” she said, and he swallowed down his desire. This was not the right time.

“In what way?” he asked, his voice catching in his throat.

“The attention to detail, the balance of elements, knowing when something needs more time and when it’s perfect as is.”

Nero considered her answer. “I’ve never thought of it that way, but you’re right. Both require patience and respect for the materials.”

“And both bring people joy,” Sophie added softly.

Their eyes met across the small piece of silver, and Nero felt his heart skip. The workshop around them seemed to fade away, leaving only this moment, this connection.

“They do,” he agreed, his voice barely above a whisper.

Sophie’s cheeks flushed pink, and she stepped back slightly, breaking the spell. “I should let you get back to your work,” she said, though she made no move toward the door.

“You’re not bothering me,” Nero said quickly. “I mean, if you’d like to stay while I finish the bracelet...”

“I’d like that,” she admitted.

“Would you like to try?” he asked suddenly, holding out the polishing cloth.

Sophie blinked in surprise. “Me? I wouldn’t know what to do.”

“I’ll show you,” Nero said, moving to stand beside her. “It’s simple, really. Just gentle, circular motions.”

He guided her hand, his fingers warm against hers, his skin tingling as they polished the bracelet together. The emeralds seemed to glow brighter under their shared touch, as if responding to the energy flowing between them.

“See?” Nero said, his voice low near her ear. “You’re a natural.”

Sophie turned her head slightly, their faces now inches apart. “I have a good teacher,” she murmured.

For a breathless moment, Nero thought she might lean in closer. His bear stirred with anticipation, urging him forward.

But then Sophie stepped back, clearing her throat. “Our coffee will get cold.”

“Of course.” Nero placed the cloth down on the bench and fetched the coffees.

“Thanks,” Sophie said, not meeting his gaze as she accepted the cup and took a sip.

“Will you show me more of your work?”

“What do you want to see?” Nero asked, relaxing a little as he looked around.

“Do you have a favorite piece?”

Nero’s gaze flickered involuntarily to the drawer where he’d hastily stashed his sketches of the heart-shaped pendant he’d been working on through the night. The piece was meant for her, inspired by their first meeting. His heart crafted into metal and gems.

But showing it now would reveal too much of his soul, too soon.

“This,” he said instead, raising a finger and moving toward one of the antique drawers across the room.

He pulled it open with practiced ease and carefully extracted a bundle wrapped in soft, faded cloth.

Unwrapping it with reverent hands, he revealed a diamond and ruby necklace of extraordinary craftsmanship, though clearly damaged.

The gold was tarnished and worn in places, with several empty settings where diamonds and rubies had once glittered.

“I found it behind some shelves a couple of months ago,” Nero explained, holding it where the light caught the remaining stones. “It must have belonged to Paulo, but I don’t recall ever seeing it before.”

“It’s beautiful,” Sophie breathed, reaching out to touch the damaged necklace with gentle fingers. “Are you going to repair it?”

“I hope to,” Nero said, watching her face as she examined the piece. “But the rubies are hard to match—they’re of a particular hue. See? Deep, almost blood red.”

“Surely someone must have missed a piece like this,” she said, her fingers lingering on the damaged gold.

“I think that’s what intrigues me the most about it,” Nero admitted, dragging his focus back to the necklace. “I want to find out where it came from, who it belongs to.” He glanced down at the ground and gave a soft chuckle.

“What?” Sophie asked, looking up at him with curiosity in her eyes.

“Do you know that’s what I like best about my work?”

She tilted her head, intrigued.

“The stories,” Nero said, gesturing to the drawers and tools. “Everything here has a story.”

“That’s what I love about recipes,” Sophie said with a grin. “The way they become part of someone’s memory. Part of their life.”

“You give people those stories,” Nero said, watching her. “They cook your food, and it becomes...more. A birthday memory. A first date. A comfort meal after a hard day.”

She looked away, a little shy. As if she weren’t used to receiving praise.

“Hey,” he said, lifting her chin with gentle fingers. “Be proud. You give people something real.”

Their eyes held for a moment until she pulled away. “I should get back to those recipes. They won’t cook themselves.”

“Of course.” He carefully wrapped the necklace again. “And I need to finish Norman’s bracelet.”

Sophie hesitated, then smiled. “That bracelet has a beautiful story. Fifty years of love. That’s rare.”

If only she knew, his bear sighed.

She will, Nero replied silently. Soon.

“Come with me,” he said aloud.

“Come with you?”

“To deliver the bracelet. Norman’s giving it to Hilda tomorrow, for their anniversary. So, I’ll finish it up and then take it back to them this afternoon.”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

“You wouldn’t be,” Nero assured her. “He’d love to meet you. And watching the joy the bracelet will bring—well, it’s the best part of the job.”

Her lips curved into a smile. “Like when someone tastes your food for the first time and their eyes light up.”

“Exactly,” Nero said. “We both make joy.”

Sophie checked the time. “But my recipes, I have so much to do...”

“The kitchen’s not going anywhere,” he said with a grin. “And we’ll be back within the hour. You might even find inspiration along the way.”

She studied him, as if trying to read more than he said aloud. Then she nodded. “Okay. I’m ready when you are.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

Following Nero to his car, she felt a pang of guilt.

She should be working on her recipes, even though it was Sunday.

Her throat tightened. Sundays had often been spent with Tito.

It was the one day neither of them worked, making it easier to meet.

Sometimes in public, where he'd introduce her as his recipe tester.

Never once had he shared that she'd been his recipe creator for years.

Yes, that was another secret Tito kept close. He could cook, sure, but when it came to creativity, to trying new flavors or setting trends, he had nothing. His fame had been built on the backs of others. Of her.

Not that she believed using others' work was inherently wrong.

Plenty of chefs didn't invent their own dishes, just like not every singer wrote their own songs.

But the difference was, those chefs gave credit where it was due.

And those songwriters earned royalties. Tito had always negotiated hard on Sophie's fees.

He was not a generous man. Not with money, and not with his love.

“Are you sure you want to come?” Nero asked as they reached the car. “I don’t want you to feel obliged. If you would rather use the kitchen...”

“No,” she replied quickly, aware she must have zoned out. “I want to come. And time away from my notes will give my ideas time to marinate.”

Nero cracked a grin. “I’ve never thought of it like that, but I know what you mean. Sometimes getting out of the workshop, being in nature, that’s when the ideas come. There’s so much inspiration out here.” He nodded toward the trees.

“Exactly,” she said as she slid into his bright red convertible. “It’s not exactly built for these mountain roads, is it?”

Nero patted the polished dashboard and said, “It’s worth getting stranded up here a few times a year just to have the pleasure of driving with the top down and the wind in your hair.”

“You make a good point,” Sophie agreed. There was something freeing about the feel of the wind in your hair. Even if it did nothing for her appearance. She’d have to detangle the knots later.

He started the car and drove away, top down. Sophie brushed her hair from her face, resisting the urge to whoop with joy. The ride was invigorating. The scenery, awe-inspiring. And the man beside her? Equally so. He stirred something inside her she hadn’t felt in far too long.

They drove on. Sophie stared up at the distant peaks, breathed in the scent of pine and earth, and marveled at the colors flashing past. No wonder Nero was inspired. She could feel it. And she wanted to taste it—to distill it all into the perfect selection of recipes.

“Do you smell that?” she asked, leaning forward as they rounded a bend. “Pine, and something sweet.”

“Wildflowers,” Nero answered, eyes on the road. “The bees love them. Makes the honey special.”

Sophie closed her eyes, letting the scent soak into her senses. “Pine-infused honey glaze,” she murmured. “Over a dark chocolate tart with fresh berries.”

Nero glanced at her, amusement in his eyes. “Creating already?”

“I can’t help it,” she admitted. “It’s how my mind works. Scents become flavors, feelings become textures.”

“Like how this drive feels like the first bite of something unexpectedly delicious?” he asked.

Sophie turned to look at him, surprised by his insight. “Yes, exactly like that.”

Their eyes met briefly before Nero returned his attention to the road. But in that fleeting moment, something passed between them, a recognition, a connection that went deeper than their brief acquaintance should allow.

The car slowed as they approached a small cabin nestled among towering pines. It was the perfect setting. Quiet, secluded.

The kind of place where two people could learn everything there ever was to know about another person. And love them unconditionally.

Sophie smiled at the sentiment. What would it be like, she wondered, to build a life with someone who would still look at you with the same love after fifty years that

they had on your wedding day?

She couldn't imagine that with Tito. Even before discovering his betrayal, she'd sensed an expiration date. It was obvious now that he had never been the forever kind of love she was looking for.

But as she watched Nero carefully tuck the velvet box into his jacket pocket, his movements precise and respectful of the treasure within, Sophie found herself wondering what kind of man he was. The forever kind? Or just another Tito, wrapped in a more appealing package?

As they reached the door, Sophie hesitated. Everything about Nero, from his quiet confidence, his passion for his craft, and the way his eyes crinkled when he smiled, told her he was genuine. Yet a small voice inside whispered caution. Tito had seemed real, too, at first.

She hated that he'd left her like this, unable to trust her own heart. That he'd made her build walls around her heart. They might be for protection, but they were also suffocating.

The door opened before she could spiral further. An elderly man with gray hair and striking pale blue eyes greeted them, surprise and warmth in his gaze.

"Nero, I wasn't expecting you so soon," he said.

"I worked through the night to match the emeralds and repair the clasp," Nero replied. "So, I thought I'd drop off the bracelet, so you'd have it in time. I didn't want you to stress over not being able to return it to Hilda."

Norman's face lit up. "You must have read my mind. I was worried you might not be able to match the emeralds before the special day."

“Take a look.” Nero opened the box with quiet pride.

Norman gasped. “It looks like new.”

“I polished all the stones, cleaned the gold, and checked over all the fixings,” Nero replied, his voice filled with well-deserved pride.

“It’s just like the day I gave it to Hilda on our wedding day.” Norman smiled as he accepted the box, his eyes distant, as if he were reliving the moment once more. “The emeralds matched her eyes, you see.”

“Norman, who is it?” a woman’s voice called from inside the cabin.

Norman quickly snapped the box shut and pressed his finger to his lips in a conspiratorial gesture. “It’s young Nero Thornberg and his...” His gaze flicked to Sophie, then back to Nero. “Friend,” he finished, though Sophie had a feeling that wasn’t the word he’d intended to use.

If she had to guess, he was going to say “mate.” It was a curious word she’d heard more than once since arriving in Bear Creek, always spoken with more weight than its dictionary definition carried.

“Come in...” An elderly woman appeared behind Norman and then froze when she saw Sophie, her face lighting up with recognition.

“Eat it Simple with Sophie! Why didn’t you say!

” Hilda beckoned enthusiastically. “Come in, come in. I’ve just pulled a batch of your lemon-thyme shortbread cookies from the oven. I’d love you to try them.”

“Oh, we don’t want to intrude,” Sophie said, glancing at Nero.

“Are you kidding me?” Hilda asked, her tone brooking no argument. “Come in.”

They followed the elderly couple inside, and Sophie found herself mesmerized by the way Hilda and Norman moved together. It was as if they anticipated each other’s movements, communicating with shared looks and subtle gestures. It was as if they had learned the silent language of love.

The cabin was warm and cozy. Snug would be a good word to describe it, filled with handcrafted furniture and shelves of books. Photos spanning generations adorned the walls, telling the story of a life well-lived together.

When they sat down at the kitchen table, Norman poured tea while Hilda arranged the shortbread cookies on a hand-painted plate. They sat close, their arms brushing, Norman’s hand resting on Hilda’s.

“So, what brings you to town?” Hilda asked.

“The wedding expo,” Sophie explained as the couple exchanged a glance she couldn’t quite read.

“You two went along for wedding ideas?” Hilda asked, her eyes twinkling as she looked between Sophie and Nero.

“Oh, no, we are not a couple,” Sophie said quickly, feeling heat rise to her cheeks.

But sitting here with Nero, in the presence of these two lovebirds who had clearly found something rare and precious in each other, she couldn’t help but wish they were. The realization startled her, and she picked up her teacup and raised it to her lips to hide her confusion.

“We just met yesterday,” Nero added. But something in his voice made Sophie

glance at him. There was a wistfulness there, a longing that mirrored her own.

“Yesterday?” Norman chuckled, exchanging another of those meaningful looks with his wife. “Some of the best things happen in an instant.”

“Like lightning,” Hilda agreed, squeezing her husband’s hand. “I knew the moment I saw Norman that he was special.”

“You ran the other way,” Norman teased.

“Well, you were covered in mud and looked like a wild man,” Hilda retorted, her eyes dancing with mirth. “But I came back, didn’t I?”

Sophie watched them, heart aching. This was what love should look like after fifty years. Deep and wide. And still sparkling like the most perfectly polished gem.

“Try one,” Hilda urged, pushing the plate of cookies toward Sophie. “I followed your recipe exactly, but I’m not sure I got the balance of lemon and thyme quite right.”

Sophie took a cookie, touched that this woman had made her recipe. The shortbread was buttery and crumbly, the flavors perfectly balanced. “It’s perfect,” she said honestly. “You’ve got a natural touch.”

“High praise from the master herself,” Norman said, taking a cookie for himself. “Hilda watches all your videos. Says you remind her of herself when she was younger, making something extraordinary out of simple ingredients.”

“That’s very kind,” Sophie murmured, deeply touched by their kind words.

“It’s the truth,” Hilda said. “Now, tell me the secret of your five-minute chocolate mug cake. I’ve tried it three times, and it keeps turning out too dry.”

Sophie leaned forward, grateful for the familiar territory of cooking advice. “The secret is in the milk measurement. Most people use too little because they’re afraid it won’t set properly. But you need that extra moisture to keep it from becoming rubbery.”

“I knew it!” Hilda exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “I kept second-guessing myself and adding less each time.”

“Trust your instincts,” Sophie said with a smile. “They’re usually right.”

And not just where cooking was concerned, she thought as she risked a sideways glance at Nero.

Their eyes met across the table, and Sophie felt that same jolt of recognition she’d experienced the day before.

Her instincts were telling her something about this man, something her rational mind wasn’t ready to accept.

“Speaking of instincts,” Norman said, his pale blue eyes twinkling as he looked between them, “sometimes the heart knows things the head hasn’t figured out yet.”

Sophie felt her cheeks warm again. Were they that obvious?

“Norman,” Hilda chided gently, though she was smiling. “Why don’t you go and pick some gooseberries from the garden for Sophie to use in one of her recipes?”

“Oh, you don’t have to go to any trouble,” Sophie insisted.

“It’s no trouble,” Hilda assured her. “It’s my way of saying thank you for your recipes.”

“I’ll come and give you a hand,” Nero finished his tea and set the cup down on the table.

When Nero and Norman had left the kitchen, Hilda leaned forward with a conspiratorial smile.

“He’s a good one, you know,” she said softly. “The Thornbergs are all good people, but Nero, he’s special. The kind who sees the beauty in broken things.”

Sophie didn’t know how to respond. Part of her wanted to explain that there was nothing between her and Nero, but another part—a growing part—hoped that wasn’t entirely true.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

Well, that went well, Nero's bear said as they left Norman and Hilda's cabin and headed back to his car.

It did, didn't it? Nero was having to force himself not to smile like a fool. But it was hard. When they were inside that warm, cluttered kitchen, talking to Norman and Hilda, he'd felt like part of a couple for the first time.

And he was sure Sophie had felt it, too. That she was starting to trust him. To trust in the connection they shared. Because he knew she felt it, too.

As they reached his car and Sophie climbed inside, he noticed a shift in her expression. Something quiet fell over her.

"Are you okay?" Nero asked.

Sophie nodded. "I'm fine."

"Really?" he pressed, gently. "You know you can tell me anything."

She turned to him, her eyes bright with tears. "It was lovely to see what Norman and Hilda have. But it also made me...sad."

"Why?" Nero asked.

"Because love like that doesn't happen for everybody," Sophie said.

"No, it doesn't," Nero admitted, "but that doesn't mean it won't happen for you."

Sophie took a shuddering breath. “I don’t know...”

“Why not?” he asked, keeping his voice low.

This is a big deal, Nero’s bear rumbled inside him.

Nero resisted the urge to reach out and touch her and offer her the comfort he desperately, instinctively, wanted to give his mate. But he was afraid one wrong move might break the fragile bond they were building.

But she is our mate, his bear said. We’re supposed to be the ones who comfort her and make everything all right.

She is our mate, Nero agreed. But she’s also human, with her own feelings and choices to make. We can’t rush this.

His bear grumbled in protest, but he knew it was the truth. They needed to be cautious. Sophie had been hurt, deeply, and pushing too hard would only drive her away.

“I’ve seen what can happen when love goes wrong,” Sophie finally said, her voice barely above a whisper. “My parents divorced when I was twelve. My sister’s been married three times. And then there was Tito...” She trailed off, her gaze drifting to the treetops.

“Not all relationships are meant to last forever,” Nero said carefully. “But that doesn’t mean none of them do.”

Sophie turned to him with a weary smile. “I wish I had your optimism.”

Just tell her already, his bear urged. Tell her she’s our mate.

Not here, Nero said. Not yet.

He finally reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder, light as a feather. That spark of recognition passed instantly between them and when her eyes widened, he knew she felt it, too.

“Don’t let Tito win,” he said, his voice low and steady, though every instinct in him screamed to kiss her. Kiss away all her fears and doubts and show her there was such a thing as true love, everlasting love.

Sophie looked up, her gaze locked on his. “I wish it was that easy. But it wasn’t just Tito. Jules wasn’t just my PA. I thought she was my friend.”

Tell her it was fate’s way of making sure we meet, his bear said.

Oh no, Nero replied. I’m not saying fate tore her life apart just so she could meet me.

When you put it like that... The bear sulked to the back of his mind with a huff.

Nero took a breath, his hand still on her shoulder. “You said that you create recipes for Tito.”

“I do.” She nodded.

“But you’re a star on your own right now,” Nero said.

“On social media,” Sophie replied, her tone modest.

“There you go, selling yourself short again,” he said, not unkindly.

Her lips pressed together. He feared he’d said too much.

“I’m not very good at this,” he added quickly. “But maybe...maybe this is the moment you needed.”

“Being humiliated by my boyfriend and my PA is what I needed?” she asked, heat flaring in her voice.

“To step out of their shadow. To claim your own light,” Nero said. “If you’d stayed with him, he would’ve kept you small. I’ve seen how people react to you. You have something special. And I think you’re meant for more than Tito ever allowed.”

She looked down, swallowing hard. “You might be right.”

“I am right,” he said with quiet conviction. “And I want you to know you’re not alone.”

She sniffed and brushed her hand across her eyes. “I think it’s time you took me back to my car.”

“You’re leaving.” He took a step back as if he’d been slapped. How could he have blown it?

“I have to,” she said.

No, she doesn’t, his bear roared.

“I don’t...” Nero began, but she cut him off.

“I mean, I have to go and grab my stuff from the hotel, and I need to do a grocery shop because your cupboards are bare. I mean, I’m good at creating recipes, but not from thin air.”

Nero blinked. “You mean you are staying?”

“If the offer still stands,” she said, a shy smile playing on her lips.

“The offer absolutely stands. For as long as you need.”

As he started the car, he tried not to show just how giddy he felt. This was progress. Delicate, fragile progress that he couldn’t risk shattering with too much enthusiasm.

“I should warn you,” Sophie said as they headed down the mountain. “I get up early. I talk to myself while I cook, and I take over kitchens completely.”

“That sounds perfect,” Nero said. “The kitchen’s been waiting for someone like you.”

And so have we, his bear huffed excitedly.

She gave him a sideways glance. “You really don’t mind?”

“Mind?” Nero laughed softly. “Sophie, having you breathe life into that kitchen would be...” He paused, searching for words that wouldn’t reveal too much too soon. “It would be an honor.”

They drove in comfortable silence for a while. Sophie let her hand drift into the breeze.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said,” she murmured. “About stepping out of Tito’s shadow.”

“And?” Nero prompted.

“And...I think you’re right. My agent’s been pushing me to write my own cookbook

for months. Maybe it's time I stopped ghost-writing and started creating something that's mine."

"That sounds perfect," Nero said, unable to keep the enthusiasm from his voice. "What would it be about?"

Sophie's face lit up as she said, "Simple, seasonal cooking using local ingredients. But not just recipes. I want to tell the stories behind them. The people. The traditions."

"Like a culinary journey," Nero suggested.

"Exactly!" Sophie turned toward him. "And Bear Creek would be the perfect place to start. The mountain honey, the local produce..."

"The vineyard," Nero added with a smile. "My parents would love to have you visit."

"I'd like that," Sophie said.

As he parked behind her car outside the bakery, Nero felt a surge of protectiveness. What if that reporter was still lurking around? "Would you like me to come with you to the hotel? Help with your bags?"

"I won't be long," Sophie promised as she slid out of the car. "I just need to pack my things and check out."

Nero watched her unlock her car and get inside, his bear practically purring with contentment.

She's staying, his bear said triumphantly.

Nero waited until she drove away, his eyes following her car until it disappeared around the bend. He remained in his parked car, pushing his senses outward, scanning the area for any sign of that persistent journalist or anyone else who might pose a threat to Sophie.

I don't sense anyone, his bear confirmed. But the urge to protect her was fierce. What about at the hotel? That reporter could be waiting for her there. We should follow her!

No, Nero replied firmly, gripping the steering wheel tighter. That would not be a good idea.

I disagree, his bear growled. Our mate could be in danger. We need to make sure she's safe.

No, Nero insisted. If we follow her, we could ruin everything we've built today. She'll think we're stalking her.

But what if someone else is stalking her? his bear countered. That journalist seemed determined to get his story.

Nero pondered this for a moment, torn between his instinct to protect and his rational mind, telling him to respect Sophie's independence.

Finally, he sighed and said, I think Sophie knows how to look after herself.

And when she gets to the hotel, she'll be safe.

Julius and the rest of the hotel staff will make sure of it .

But despite his own reassurances, Nero remained in his car, his senses still locked

onto the road she'd taken, straining to maintain that tenuous connection for as long as possible.

He could easily follow at a very safe distance, using his shifter senses to ensure no harm came to her without her ever knowing he was there.

The temptation was almost overwhelming.

“No,” he muttered to himself. “I need to take my own advice. I need to give Sophie the space she needs.”

With effort, he started the engine and turned toward The Lookout—his home. Their home, if she chose to stay.

For good, his bear murmured.

I think we can agree on that, Nero replied, allowing himself a small smile. We just have to figure out how to convince her to stay.

As he drove along the winding mountain road, he dreamed of a future with Sophie. A future filled with mornings waking up beside her, evenings watching the sunset from their porch, and eventually, a celebration of fifty years together—just like Norman and Hilda.

And for that, he thought, I'll need a ring.

Not just any ring—but one that told their story.

Gold, warm and rich, like her laughter. A honey-colored diamond, maybe, or a sapphire the shade of the mountain sky.

Or a ruby to match the ruby necklace, his bear suggested.

Now, that is a good idea. His fingers itched to begin.

“I’m getting ahead of myself,” he muttered.

No such thing, said his bear.

As The Lookout came into view, Nero felt a new sense of purpose. He needed to prepare not just the guest suite for Sophie’s arrival, but himself for the journey ahead. Winning her trust wouldn’t be easy after what she’d been through, but some things were worth the effort.

And Sophie was worth everything.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

Meeting Nero had been freeing in more ways than Sophie could count. His unwavering optimism had started to rub off on her, gently chipping away at the cynicism left behind by betrayal.

Which was helpful, considering his fake proposal was still blowing up on social media.

To make things worse—or possibly better—the journalist who had approached her that morning had now posted a photo of her and Nero leaving the bakery.

It was slightly blurry, but her face was visible.

His arm was just behind hers, protective without touching.

Strangers on the internet were running wild with theories.

Sophie scrolled through her phone, torn between amusement and dismay. #FakeProposal was trending. Her notifications were a chaotic mix of speculation, support, and far too many opinions from people who didn't know her.

At least the focus had shifted. The journalist's new narrative speculated about her and Nero rather than dredging up gossip about her and Tito. That alone felt like a win.

With a sigh, she slipped her phone into her bag and focused on her grocery list. After checking out of the hotel, she'd stopped at Bear Creek's compact but surprisingly well-stocked grocery store. If she was going to stay at The Lookout and use Nero's kitchen, she wanted the right ingredients.

She moved through the aisles methodically, gathering fresh produce, fragrant herbs, and a few specialty items that sparked her curiosity.

Her mind buzzed with ideas—wild mushroom risotto with pine-infused cream, berry tarts glazed in mountain honey, herb-crusted trout with lemon and thyme. Recipes that belonged here.

As she placed her items on the checkout counter, she found herself smiling. For the first time in days, she felt excited about cooking again. Not just going through the motions to fulfill her contract with Tito, but genuinely inspired to create recipes people would love.

Speaking of love, she needed to come up with a recipe for the plump gooseberries Hilda and Norman had gifted her. It had to be something special, just like the couple themselves.

After paying, Sophie wheeled her cart to her car and began loading the grocery bags into the trunk. She glanced around the parking lot, half-expecting to see the journalist lurking between vehicles, phone camera ready. But there was no sign of him.

Still, as she drove out of town toward The Lookout, Sophie kept checking her rearview mirror. Just to be safe, she took a few extra turns on her drive up the mountain, circling back once or twice to be sure she wasn't followed.

“You’re being paranoid,” she muttered, even as her eyes darted to the rearview mirror again. But the truth was, the last thing she wanted was for someone to discover she was staying at Nero’s place.

Not because it would fuel speculation about their relationship, but because this place—this quiet space Nero had offered—felt fragile and precious. She wanted to protect it.

And then there was Nero himself. Her fingers gripped the wheel a little tighter.

She still hadn't shaken the sensation of his hand on her shoulder.

The charged energy that passed between them was like static, sending tingling sensations racing across her skin.

It lingered on her skin and in her thoughts.

"What is happening to me?" she whispered. She'd known the man for barely twenty-four hours, yet somehow, she felt more connected to him than she had to Tito after a year of dating. It defied logic.

Love at first sight? The thought seemed ridiculous, yet she couldn't dismiss it entirely. There had been something—a recognition, a pull—from the moment he'd fallen at her feet with that ring box.

Sophie shook her head, forcing herself to be practical. She was on the rebound, that was all. Her heart was bruised from Tito's betrayal, and Nero was kind and attentive and understood her. Of course, she was attracted to him. That didn't mean they were somehow mystically connected.

The road narrowed as she climbed, the forest thickening around her.

She let the natural beauty ground her thoughts.

What mattered was her work. She had recipes to finish for Tito's cookbook.

Not because he deserved them, but because she kept her promises.

She certainly wouldn't give him the satisfaction of claiming she'd breached their

contract.

No. She would finish the job—and then she'd be free.

And after that? Maybe Nero was right. Maybe this was her chance to step into the light.

A cookbook with heart. Recipes and stories woven together. She could start right here in Bear Creek, with Norman and Hilda's fifty-year love story. Nero's honey, the Thornberg wine.

By the time The Lookout came into view, she was overflowing with excitement. She parked beside Nero's car and waited a moment, half-expecting him to emerge from the house to greet her. When he didn't appear, a wave of disappointment washed over her.

"Don't be silly," she chided herself. "He's probably busy in his workshop."

Still, she couldn't help wondering if she'd misread everything. Maybe Nero was just being kind, offering shelter to a woman clearly in distress. Maybe all those meaningful looks and charged moments existed only in her imagination.

Well, if that was the case, she would simply be a gracious guest. She would use his kitchen, complete her work, and thank him the best way she knew how—with food.

Sophie unloaded the groceries from the car and carried them to the kitchen, setting the bags on the counter. She began unpacking methodically, organizing ingredients by recipe and placing perishables in the refrigerator. Her suitcase could wait. Right now, she needed the comfort of cooking.

She tied on an apron, washed her hands, and scanned the kitchen layout. It was

beautifully equipped, slightly old-fashioned, but all the more charming for it.

She set to work on a simple but memorable meal: wild mushroom risotto, roasted vegetables, a fresh herb salad, and berry tarts for dessert.

As she chopped onions, a familiar calm settled over her. This was where she belonged—here, in a kitchen, creating something from scratch. Whatever was happening with Nero could wait. Here, she was in control.

The kitchen door swung open.

She turned to see Nero—hair tousled, a smear of polish on his forearm. He froze in the doorway, eyes wide.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, rubbing a hand through his hair. “I lost track of time in the workshop.”

Sophie’s heart skipped at the sight of him. “It’s fine. I thought I’d make dinner as a thank you for letting me stay.”

“It smells amazing,” he said, stepping closer. His gaze skimmed the ingredients. “What’s on the menu?”

“Wild mushroom risotto with roasted vegetables.” She turned back to the cutting board. “Hope you’re hungry.”

“Starving,” he said, rolling up his sleeves. “Can I help?”

She hesitated. Normally, she declined offers of help—her kitchen was her domain. But something about the way he asked—earnest and unassuming—softened her.

“Sure,” she said, handing him a knife. “Dice the peppers while I finish the onions?”

He nodded, washed his hands, and joined her. They moved in sync, adjusting without speaking. She handed him a bowl before he could ask. He passed her a spoon just as she needed it. When he reached for the oil, she pointed without turning her head.

Their movements were effortless.

Like Norman and Hilda, she thought suddenly. That easy rhythm of two people who just fit.

“What?” Nero asked, catching her glance.

“Nothing,” she said, smiling as a blush rose to her cheeks. “This is nice.”

“It is,” he agreed, and the warmth in his voice made something unfurl inside her.

She wasn’t ready to name it yet. But it was real.

As they cooked, she found herself sharing more—her cookbook idea, her dreams for something meaningful. He listened, then offered to connect her with local farmers and families.

“Bear Creek is full of stories,” he said simply. “You just have to know where to look.”

Sophie blinked. “You’d help me with that?”

“Of course.”

Because it’s you, his voice seemed to say.

And for once, she didn't question it.

They ate as the sun set, their silhouettes framed by golden light and floating dust motes. The food was perfect. The wine, exquisite. The moment—unexpectedly intimate.

And as Sophie looked across the table at Nero, she realized something that made her chest ache in the best possible way.

This didn't feel temporary.

It felt like the beginning of something real.

Something like this.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

Nero had not slept so soundly for a long, long time. Usually, his nights were spent in his workshop, where he was consumed by his work. Even when he collapsed into bed, his mind still spun with designs that glittered like a million tiny stars.

But not last night.

After dinner with his mate, he'd fallen asleep almost instantly and slept like a log.

Now it was morning. His senses reached for Sophie before his eyes even opened. She was still here. Still asleep. He lay back against the pillows and simply...wallowed in her presence.

His bear chuckled. I don't think wallowing is something you want to share with our mate.

I'm allowed to wallow, Nero retorted.

You can wallow and I will bask, his bear said.

Basking is good, too, Nero agreed.

But then everything was good this morning, because she had stayed. Nero smiled into his pillow. Despite the fake proposal fiasco, the snooping journalist, and the ache of her recent heartbreak, Sophie had chosen to stay at The Lookout. At least for now.

Our mate is here, under our roof, his bear added helpfully. Now would be a good time to tell her the truth.

Nero sighed, letting his arms flop out to either side of the mattress. We've been through this. I can't just blurt out, "Good morning, by the way, I'm a bear shifter and you're my destined mate," over scrambled eggs.

Why not? his bear countered. It would save time. And the longer you wait, the harder it will be to explain why you didn't tell her sooner.

She's just getting over a betrayal, Nero replied, sitting up and raking a hand through his hair. The last thing she needs is another man hiding things from her.

He padded barefoot to the window and pulled back the curtain. Sunlight spilled across the mountainside, turning the pines to gold and the mist to threads of light. It was a perfect day.

She made risotto for us last night, his bear reminded him unnecessarily. The best meal we've had in this house, maybe ever.

"I know," Nero murmured aloud, his smile widening at the memory.

Sophie had moved through his kitchen with the confidence of someone born to create.

Her hands had worked magic with simple ingredients, transforming them into something extraordinary.

And the way she'd explained each step, her eyes lighting up with passion for her craft, he could have watched her forever.

We could watch her forever, his bear said. If you'd just tell her the truth.

Nero shook his head and moved to his closet. As he dressed, Nero found himself listening for sounds of movement from the guest room. Was she still asleep? Did she

regret her decision to stay? Had the guest bed been comfortable enough?

Relax, his bear grumbled. You're overthinking again.

Right, Nero muttered, buttoning his shirt. Breakfast. I'll make her breakfast.

The idea clicked instantly. Sophie had cooked for him; now he'd return the gesture. He wasn't exactly a culinary genius, but he could manage scrambled eggs and coffee. And berries. Yes, fresh berries from the garden.

Nero made his way downstairs, each wooden step creaking familiarly beneath his feet.

The morning light streamed through the windows, casting long shadows across the living room floor.

He paused for a moment, struck by how familiar and yet how different the house felt with Sophie in it. Warmer somehow. More alive.

She's brought us to life, his bear said.

Because meeting Sophie has made our life complete, Nero replied.

Only if she accepts us and the mating bond, his bear reminded him.

But after yesterday, that no longer concerned Nero. It's all going to work out just fine.

Well, aren't you the chipper one this morning, his bear said.

How can I not be when our mate is here? Nero replied as he entered the kitchen and

set about preparing coffee, measuring the grounds with the same precision he applied to his jewelry work. The rich, earthy aroma filled the air as the machine gurgled to life.

That smell will wake her, his bear predicted with approval.

Then I'd better get breakfast going. Nero opened the refrigerator, surveying its contents with a critical eye.

Thanks to Sophie's grocery shopping yesterday, the usually barren shelves now boasted a colorful array of fruits, vegetables, and dairy products.

He pulled out a carton of eggs and a block of cheese.

"Scrambled eggs," he decided aloud. "I can manage that."

It's practically the only thing you can cook, his bear pointed out.

Which is why I'll get it right, Nero countered, reaching for a bowl.

He cracked the eggs into a bowl, adding a splash of milk and a pinch of salt before whisking them together.

As he stirred, he pictured Sophie in the kitchen last night—her sleeves pushed up, her smile easy, her hands skilled.

Watching her had stirred something deeper than attraction.

She'd made the house feel like a...home.

"Berries," Nero said suddenly, remembering the raspberry bushes at the edge of his

garden. “Fresh berries would make it special.”

A breakfast fit for a king, his bear agreed. Or a mate.

Nero set aside the egg mixture. He grabbed a bowl and stepped outside. The air was cool and clean, laced with pine and wildflowers. Birds chirped lazily overhead. The raspberries glistened with dew.

He picked slowly, carefully selecting only the ripest fruit.

He could see her in this garden. Talking to the herbs. Digging her hands into the soil. Laughing at his crooked tomato stakes. This place could thrive under her care. So could he.

It could be real, his bear whispered. If you’re honest.

Soon, Nero told his bear for what seemed like the hundredth time. When she’s ready.

His bear huffed but didn’t argue further.

Back inside, he rinsed the berries and arranged them in a ceramic dish, a simple one his mother had given him years ago.

He turned back to the eggs, melted butter in the pan, and gently folded the mixture as it cooked.

At the perfect moment, he stirred in the cheese and removed the pan from the heat.

Just as he plated the food, he heard the soft creak of the stairs.

His pulse leaped.

And then—there she was.

Sophie stood in the kitchen doorway, framed in the morning light. Her hair tumbled around her shoulders in soft waves. She wore a summer dress that skimmed her curves, her feet bare on the floorboards. No makeup. No armor. Just her.

And Nero forgot how to breathe.

“Morning,” she said, voice still husky from sleep.

“Morning,” he echoed, the word catching somewhere in his chest.

She’s real , he said to his bear in wonder.

Duh, his bear replied. Do you think you spent yesterday with a hallucination?

Sophie smiled, a small, tentative curve of her lips that made Nero’s heart stutter in his chest. “Is that coffee I smell?”

“And scrambled eggs,” Nero said, forcing himself into motion. “And berries. From the garden.”

She stepped closer, glancing at the table he’d set with cloth napkins and mismatched ceramic mugs. “You didn’t have to cook for me.”

“I wanted to.” He pulled out a chair for her. “After the amazing dinner you made last night, it seemed only fair.”

“That was my thank you for letting me stay.”

“Well, this is my thank you for...staying,” he countered as he scanned the table to

check he hadn't forgotten anything.

It looks just fine, his bear assured him.

"It looks wonderful."

"I should warn you," he said as he poured the coffee, "this is the extent of my cooking talents."

"Then I'm impressed," Sophie said with a small laugh. "I can't even remember the last time someone cooked for me."

"You'd better taste them before you go handing out praise."

She took a bite. "These are perfect. And the berries look perfectly ripe."

Our mate simply looks perfect, his bear swooned.

She plucked one from the bowl, popped it into her mouth, and sighed with pleasure. "Sweet with just the right amount of tartness. Your garden's amazing."

"I just try to keep things alive," he said. "I'm not much of a gardener. Unlike my brothers."

"Now who's selling themselves short?" she teased, reaching for another berry. "These taste like summer itself."

He studied her in the morning light, his heart oddly full. She belonged here. At this table. In this kitchen. In his life.

She belongs here, his bear said with conviction. With us. For always.

Nero sipped his coffee, trying not to stare. “So, what’s on the agenda for today?”

“I have a few recipes I’d like to try,” Sophie said. “Maybe you could taste them for lunch?”

“I’d be honored,” Nero said as he ate his eggs. “I’m heading over to the vineyard this afternoon, if you’d like to come along.”

Sophie’s eyes lit up at the mention of the vineyard. “I would love to see it. If you’re sure your family wouldn’t mind visitors?”

“They’d be delighted,” Nero assured her.

More than she could ever know, his bear said.

“I’d love to feature them in my cookbook. I’m sure they have some wonderful stories to tell.” She looked up at him from under her lashes. “About the vineyard and raising a family. You must have gotten up to mischief when you were younger.”

More than she could ever know, his bear chuckled.

“Oh, they sure have a few embarrassing stories they could tell about their sons,” Nero said, color infusing his cheeks. “And we could have a wine tasting.”

Nice subject change, his bear muttered.

Sophie laughed. “A wine tasting sounds perfect. And I’d love to see where the grapes are grown—for research, of course.”

“Maybe you could incorporate some into a dish?”

“Really?”

“My mom makes all kinds of things with grape pomace—tarts, cookies, even bread,” Nero said.

“I have a lot to learn,” Sophie said.

More than she could ever know, his bear said.

Nero rolled his eyes. Is that all you have to say today?

And Sophie has so much to teach us, his bear murmured.

Yeah, she does, Nero agreed. And not just about food. But about love.

Oh, I think that is a lesson we have already learned, his bear said as he settled down for a morning nap.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

Sophie held her breath as Nero lifted the fork to his mouth.

The bite held the perfect balance of the wild mushrooms she'd foraged that morning from the edge of his property, sautéed with herbs from his garden and a drizzle of his mountain honey.

She'd spent hours creating recipes that captured the essence of Bear Creek, dishes that told the story of this place that had unexpectedly begun to feel like home.

But would he taste what she was trying to convey? Would he understand the language she spoke best? The language of food, of memories made? The language of her heart?

"What do you think?" she asked, unable to mask the slight tremble in her voice as Nero chewed thoughtfully. His dark eyes closed momentarily, and Sophie studied the strong line of his jaw, the way his expression softened with every chew.

Why was she so nervous? It wasn't as though she hadn't had people taste her food before.

Her recipes had appeared in glossy magazines, been praised by critics, and devoured by patrons in Tito's restaurant.

But this was different. Nero's opinion mattered more.

Maybe because this food wasn't about trends or technique.

It was personal. It was inspired not just by Bear Creek, but by him .

The realization startled her. Had Nero really become her muse so quickly? Yet there was no denying it. His dependable presence, his quiet encouragement, and his steadfast support had found its way into her cooking. And her heart.

Unlike Tito, who only valued her as an asset to his brand, Nero valued her simply for who she was.

He'd asked thoughtful questions about her inspirations, watched her cook with genuine interest, and offered his kitchen without conditions or expectations.

There were no strings attached to his kindness, no hidden agendas.

Just a sincere desire to see her succeed on her own terms.

How could she not lose her heart to such a man?

And now, as he swallowed that first bite, Sophie realized she was holding her breath, not for professional validation, but for something far more intimate.

"It's incredible," Nero said finally, his voice low with what sounded like awe. "The way the earthiness of the mushrooms plays against the sweetness of the honey... It's like you've captured the forest on a plate."

Relief flooded through her, warm and sweet as the honey she'd drizzled over the dish. "Really? You're not just saying that?"

"Sophie," Nero said, his gaze holding hers with an intensity that made heat infuse her very being. "I wouldn't lie about something this important."

She believed him. And that was the strange part. After Tito, after finding him in bed with Jules, she'd sworn she'd never trust so easily again. Yet here she was, three days

after meeting Nero, believing him as if they'd known each other forever.

"I was worried I used too much seasoning," she admitted, fiddling with her apron strings.

"No, I think there's just enough," Nero assured her, already reaching for another forkful. "The balance is perfect."

Sophie relaxed into her chair, watching him eat with real pleasure.

She'd made four dishes—two savory, two sweet—each one a love letter to Bear Creek.

The mushrooms were the forest floor. Then, a trout fillet poached and paired with pine and lemon thyme, echoing the mountain streams. For dessert, a wild berry tart with a honeycomb tuile and, finally, pine nut brittle laced with dark chocolate.

"You have to try this next," she said, nudging the trout toward him.

Nero cut into the fish and took a bite. His eyebrows lifted in surprise after the first bite. "The pine flavor is subtle but clear. How did you manage that?"

"I steeped the needles in warm butter, then strained them before making the sauce," she explained, pleased he'd noticed. Most people wouldn't have. "I wanted the taste of the forest to be subtle but not overpowering."

He nodded appreciatively. "It's brilliant. I've never tasted anything like it."

They moved on to the berry tart, and Nero took a moment to inhale the scent before tasting.

“This honey,” he murmured, “lavender, clover...and something citrusy?”

Sophie’s smile widened. “You’re good. Not many people would be able to decipher the flavors.”

“I grew up at the vineyard, remember?” Nero said with a modest shrug. “Wine tasting isn’t so different from honey tasting. It’s about paying attention to the subtle notes, and how they work together.”

“I’m impressed,” Sophie said.

“Not as impressed as I am,” Nero told her. “Okay, what’s next?”

As she reached the brittle, Sophie caught herself watching the way he licked a smear of chocolate from his fingers, slow and precise, like everything he did. Nero didn’t rush. He took his time as if everything he did had a purpose.

He lived in the present. Enjoyed the moment. Something she sure could learn from him.

“Oh, goodness, this is so good. You have a gift,” he said between bites. “The flavors are layered but never crowded. Just enough. Never too much.”

Sophie’s shoulders eased. It had been so long since she’d cooked like this, for the joy of it.

With Tito, every dish had been filtered through the lens of his brand. He’d hover in the kitchen, commenting on lighting or plating before she’d even finished a dish.

Nero asked nothing of her but authenticity. He didn’t interrupt. He didn’t critique. He had simply left her to create, trusting that something beautiful would emerge. And it

had.

The way he paid attention, without agenda or ego, made her feel more seen than a thousand five-star reviews ever had.

Tito had tasted to critique. Nero tasted to understand. And enjoy.

“I may have made a bit too much,” she admitted, eyeing the remaining portions. “Habit from developing recipes for group tastings.”

“That’s not a problem,” Nero said, eyes lighting up. “We could take the leftovers to the vineyard. Cassia, my brother’s girlfriend, runs the restaurant there, and she’d love to try your food. My parents would, too.”

Sophie blinked. “Oh. That sounds...wonderful.”

“There’s just one risk,” he said with a wink. “If Kris and Philip get to it first, there might not be anything left. Philip’s especially dangerous after a long day in the vines.”

Sophie laughed, surprised by how natural it felt. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You should, although they would eat practically anything if they were hungry,” Nero said as he rose and began gathering the containers.

Sophie stood to help, still feeling the quiet thrum of nerves beneath her excitement. Was this too soon? Too much? She was still trying to rebuild her life, still patching together who she was without Tito. Getting close to Nero and to his family could complicate everything.

But as she watched him gently transfer the remaining tart to a container, his

movements precise and unhurried, she couldn't deny the pull he had on her. He wasn't a rebound.

No, he was the first person in a long time who made her feel safe without making her feel small. He didn't try to rescue her or fix her, he simply stood beside her. Listened. Shared. Respected.

And somehow, that felt more dangerous than anything.

They packed the dishes at an easy rhythm, falling into step as if they'd done this dozens of times. Sophie found containers in his neatly organized kitchen—"My mother's influence," Nero admitted with a sheepish smile—and lined each one with fresh herbs to protect the presentation.

"I'm looking forward to seeing the vineyard," she said, snapping the final lid into place. "I've been thinking about how food and wine tell the story of a place. I'd love to include a chapter about that in the cookbook."

"It's the perfect setting," Nero replied, eyes bright with enthusiasm. "Every bottle we make holds something of this land, its minerals, its air, its memory."

The way he spoke made something stir deep inside her. His passion felt familiar. Like her own.

She hesitated. "Are you sure your family won't mind? Me coming along, I mean?"

"They'll be thrilled," he said with easy certainty. "Especially when they taste what you've made." Then, he added, "You don't need to worry. My family isn't complicated. What you see is what you get with the Thornbergs."

Now that was quite a claim. But she was ready to believe him. To trust him. And

maybe even to love him.

“Okay,” she said softly, almost to herself. “Let’s go to the vineyard.”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

“Ready?” Nero asked, glancing at Sophie as she handed him the last Tupperware that contained her berry tarts. He carefully placed it inside the wicker picnic basket alongside the three other fabulous creations she’d made this morning.

She nodded, her fingers fidgeting briefly with the edge of her cardigan before smoothing it down. She looked radiant and a little nervous.

She has no reason to be nervous, Nero’s bear said. Everyone is going to love her .

She doesn’t know that, Nero replied. She’s worried she’s intruding on our family.

But she is family, his bear replied .

She doesn’t know that, either, Nero replied as he picked up the basket and opened the door.

Sophie hesitated, casting a glance around the kitchen as if checking she had not forgotten anything, before she followed.

Side by side, they walked to the driveway where his red convertible waited.

Nero opened the passenger door for her, and as she slipped into the seat, he inhaled her scent, committing it to memory.

Then he closed the door and placed the picnic basket on the back seat.

“Are you going to roll the top down?” Sophie asked, glancing over her shoulder at the

basket.

Nero chuckled, securing the hamper in the back. “It’s not going to fall out. I’m a careful driver.”

He caught the flicker of amusement in her expression and grinned. Her earlier nerves seemed to have evaporated. He loved seeing her like this, happier, lighter. Her walls still rose when she was uncertain, but when they dropped, even for a moment, she practically glowed.

I know the feeling, his bear said, happy to be in the presence of their mate. Although they both knew he would be much, much happier when he got to meet her in the flesh.

As he drove away from The Lookout, Nero felt the familiar thrum of his engine under his hands. But it was nothing compared to the thrum of the blood in his veins. Being this close to Sophie made his pulse quicken in a way he’d never experienced before.

She tilted her face toward the breeze and let out a contented sigh.

“Does that mean you are glad we have the top down?” Nero asked.

“When the weather is this beautiful, yes,” she said. “It makes me feel more connected to the world around me.”

Nero glanced at her and grinned. “That’s exactly what I love about this car.”

We are so similar in lots of ways, his bear said.

We are, Nero agreed. She fits here. With us.

She does, Nero agreed. And I think she knows it.

Yes. She feels it. Deep in her soul, she feels it , his bear said, ready to do somersaults.

The road wound upward, revealing green slopes and glimpses of the valley below. Sophie's gaze roamed the landscape, her lips parted in quiet awe.

Wait until she meets me, his bear said. Then she'll be in awe.

Well, awe would be a lot better than fear, Nero agreed. But he didn't want to think of the future right now. He wanted to enjoy the present with his mate.

Sophie broke the comfortable silence. "Tell me about the vineyard."

Nero thought for a moment. "The land has been in our family for generations. The Thornbergs were some of the first families to settle here. They were part of the founding of Bear Creek."

"Wow, you can trace your ancestors back that far?" Sophie asked.

He kept one hand on the wheel as he gestured toward the hills. "We're part of these very mountains."

"And the vineyard?" Sophie asked.

"The valley has its own microclimate," Nero explained. "So what started as an experiment for making homemade wine kind of grew as the vines thrived. Over the generations, my family perfected the art of winemaking, until it's what you see today."

As if on cue, they crested the final hill, and the vineyard came into view. Lines of

lush green vines, with the hacienda proudly at the center, whitewashed and glowing beneath its terra-cotta roof.

“Oh,” Sophie breathed, her voice full of wonder.

Nero slowed the car. “Yeah.” He would never tire of this first glimpse of the vineyard.

“It’s incredible,” Sophie said.

And so are you, his bear added.

Nero pressed his foot down on the gas and soon they arrived at the vineyard, and he parked the car in his usual spot next to the house.

In an instant, he was out of the car and came around to open her door.

As he held it open, he caught the shift in her expression.

A brief flutter of nerves, she tried to mask with a smile.

His bear rumbled. Tell her there’s nothing to be afraid of.

But Nero simply offered Sophie his hand. As she took it, that same sense of connection passed between them, and she smiled up at him, looking more confident. As if a silent message had passed between them. One that said, it’s okay, I’m here by your side. And always will be.

“Shall we go in?” Nero asked, leaning to grab the picnic basket from the back seat.

“I’d love to.”

Inside, the house was cool and welcoming. He led her through the familiar hallway and into the kitchen, where he could sense his parents. Of course, his dad would have sensed them coming, but when Nero and Sophie entered the kitchen, they were trying their best to act casual.

Leanne was arranging flowers in a vase while his father peered over a wine journal.

It's upside down, his bear said.

I know. Nero smothered a smile as he set the hamper on the table.

"Mom, Dad, this is Sophie. Sophie, my parents, Leanne and Hugo Thornberg."

"Hello, Sophie," Leanne said, coming to greet them. "I've heard all about you from Cassia. She wanted to come and meet you at the wedding expo, but we had a fully booked restaurant."

Sophie glanced at Nero. "Nero told me Cassia is the reason Finn asked me to attend. I'd love to meet her and thank her."

"She'd love that. She's up at the restaurant now with Kris picking out wine for the next menu," Leanne said.

"I know she's happy to have played her part." Hugo winked at Nero as he set down the wine journal and stood up. "Welcome to the..."

"Vineyard," Leanne said, shooting Hugo a warning look.

He was going to say family, wasn't he? Nero's bear said.

I think so, Nero replied. But luckily, their mom had stepped in and averted disaster.

Would it be a disaster? Nero's bear asked.

I'd rather not find out, Nero said.

"As you know from Cassia, Sophie creates wonderful recipes." Nero opened the hamper and began unpacking the containers. "Sophie made these this morning. And we thought you might like to try them."

"Oh, yes!" Leanne said, her attention flicking from the food to Sophie and back again. "We'd love to!"

"Why don't we take everything up to the restaurant?" Nero suggested, pausing as he unpacked the last container. "Cassia and Kris are there picking out wines for the next menu. They should definitely try these dishes, too."

"That's a great idea," Hugo said, already eyeing the berry tart with undisguised interest.

Sophie's smile brightened. "I'd love that. It would be wonderful to meet Cassia and thank her personally."

"Perfect," Leanne said, already gathering the containers Nero had unpacked. "Let's repack and head up there. It would be a wonderful surprise for Cassia."

They quickly repacked Sophie's culinary creations, and soon the four of them were walking through the vineyard toward the restaurant. Nero found himself watching Sophie more than where he was walking. It was as if she were the most fascinating thing he had ever seen.

She is , his bear said. But watch where you are going. You don't want to make a fool of yourself and fall at her feet again.

“These vine leaves are beautiful.” Sophie reached out to run her fingertips over the leaf. “I’d love to use them in a recipe. Maybe stuffed with a wild rice mixture and herbs?”

She’s already connected with our land, his bear rumbled happily.

I know, Nero replied silently. It feels right, doesn’t it?

“That sounds delicious,” Leanne said, coming to stand next to her. “I actually use the pomace—the grape skins and seeds after pressing—to bake a special sourdough bread. The vineyard finds its way into almost everything we create here.”

“Really?” Sophie’s face lit up. “I’d love to learn that technique.”

“I’d be happy to show you,” Leanne replied, and Nero saw the easy, genuine connection forming between them.

Perfect, his bear purred. Mom already loves her.

She does, Nero agreed. Everyone will.

As they rounded the final curve in the path, the restaurant came into view. The newly renovated building still maintained its rustic charm, its wide windows overlooking the sun-dappled slopes where the vines stretched toward the forest. It was the most picturesque part of the vineyard.

“It’s breathtaking,” Sophie whispered. “The building complements its surroundings. And the windows, the view is incredible.”

“With Cassia’s innovative menu planning coupled with Kris’s unique insight and experience of the Thornberg’s wines enhance the dining experience,” Hugo said, then

cracked a grin. “At least that’s what it says on the website.”

“Dad,” Nero teased.

“Oh, you know I am dead proud of what’s been achieved here, but I’m proud of what each of my sons has achieved,” Hugo added.

“You should be proud,” Sophie told him.

“And you should be proud of what you have achieved,” Leanne said as she joined them to admire the building.

“Come on.” Hugo pushed open the door and held it while the others entered. “Let’s open some wine and enjoy an impromptu picnic.”

As they entered, Cassia looked up from where she and Kris were examining wine bottles at the bar. Her face lit up the moment she spotted them.

“Sophie! Sophie Truro,” she exclaimed, hurrying over with open arms. “I’m so glad to finally meet you! I was worried you would leave town before I got the chance.”

Nero watched as the surprise on Sophie’s face melted into a smile, and she returned the hug. “It’s good to meet you,” Sophie said. “I hear you are the one who suggested Finn contact me about the wedding expo.”

“I am.” Cassia looked over Sophie’s shoulder and locked eyes with Nero.

“Thank you,” he mouthed, and Cassia gave a small nod.

Kris approached more slowly, offering a firm handshake and a kind smile. “Nice to meet you, Sophie. I’ve heard great things.”

“We brought something special,” Nero said, unpacking the containers on the long wooden table near the windows. “Sophie made these dishes this morning, and we thought you might enjoy tasting them.”

“Oh my goodness, yes!” Cassia clapped her hands with delight.

Soon, everyone was seated around the table, passing the containers and serving themselves generous portions. The conversation quieted as the first bites were taken, replaced by the kind of appreciative murmurs Nero had grown up associating with a truly exceptional meal.

“This mushroom dish is extraordinary,” Kris said, reaching for more. “The honey brings out the earthiness perfectly.”

“And this trout.” Cassia let her eyes flutter closed, savoring the flavors. “I can taste the pine. It’s subtle but so distinctive.”

Nero’s parents were equally enthusiastic. His father was particularly taken with the berry tart. “The balance of tartness and sweetness is masterful,” Hugo declared, dabbing the corner of his mouth with a linen napkin.

Nero watched Sophie as her cheeks flushed pink and her smile widened with each compliment. His chest ached with admiration.

She deserves every bit of this recognition, his bear said.

She does, Nero agreed. And so much more.

Then Cassia leaned forward, her gaze fixed on Sophie. “I have a proposition for you,” she said. “Would you consider creating a guest menu for the restaurant? These flavors, this connection to the land, it’s exactly what we aim to celebrate here.”

Sophie's eyes widened. "A guest menu? I...I don't know..."

Nero caught the flicker of uncertainty on her face, the way her fingers worried at the edge of her napkin. He reached across the table, covering her hand with his.

"You'd be perfect," he said. "You could use the vine leaves and the pomace. You could tell the story of the vineyard in a way no one else could."

"He's right," Kris added. "I'd love to collaborate on the wine pairings. Your dishes deserve something truly special."

She's hesitating, his bear murmured. She needs more reassurance.

"Sophie," Leanne said, her voice soft with sincerity, "what you've created today isn't just delicious. It's inspired. You've captured the essence of the mountains and forests in just a few bites."

"The pine in that trout sauce," Hugo added, "reminds me of early mornings after a storm, when the whole mountain smells clean and new. That's not just cooking, that's art."

Nero watched as something shifted in Sophie's expression. Her nerves hadn't vanished completely, but they were giving way to something braver. She looked around the table, saw the encouragement written on every face, and finally turned to him.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"I think it's time everyone got to experience what I already know," Nero said. "That you're extraordinary."

She took a deep breath. “I’d love to,” she said, her voice gaining strength. “A guest menu inspired by the vineyard would be an honor to create.”

“Wonderful!” Cassia clapped her hands.

“I don’t know how long I’m staying,” Sophie said.

Forever, Nero’s bear roared.

There was a hushed silence around the table, but then Cassia said, “We could feature it this weekend, maybe even pair it with a tasting event.”

“This weekend?” Sophie said breathlessly.

“Yes.” Cassia nodded. “You said you came up with these dishes in the last couple of days. So I have faith that you can design the dishes, and we can source the local ingredients in time. We only have a small number of covers for any one sitting, but this one is more intimate because it’s a celebration of Norman and Hilda’s fiftieth anniversary. ”

“It is?” Sophie asked.

“I believe that’s just sealed the deal,” Nero said, catching Sophie’s eye.

“I believe it has,” Sophie agreed.

“Then let’s have a toast,” Cassia said, raising her glass. “To Sophie.”

“To Sophie,” they all chorused.

And in that moment, Nero knew tonight would be the night he would reveal all.

Yes! His bear roared.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

What a wonderful day!

As they drove back to The Lookout, Sophie could not remember the last time she'd felt this happy.

She glanced sideways at Nero in the driver's seat and smiled.

The afternoon with his family had been nothing short of magical.

The way they'd welcomed her, the vineyard tour, and Cassia's excitement about Sophie creating a guest menu.

It all felt like the beginning of something extraordinary.

"You're quiet," she said, studying his profile as the winding road climbed toward the house.

Nero's hands flexed on the steering wheel. "Just thinking."

"Good thoughts, I hope?"

"The best," he replied, glancing at her with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

They pulled up to The Lookout just as the evening sun cast golden light across the land. Sophie stepped out and stretched, only to find Nero standing by the hood of the car, his expression unreadable.

“Is everything all right?” she asked, noting the tension in his shoulders.

He hesitated, then took a breath. “Can I show you something?”

The sudden request caught her off guard. “Now?”

“Please,” he said, his voice unusually solemn. “It’s important.”

Sophie studied his face. Whatever this was, it mattered to him. So how could she refuse him?

“All right.”

Nero led her around the side of the house, past the kitchen garden where they’d gathered herbs that morning...

Was it really only that morning? So much had happened since then. It was as if there had been a seismic shift inside her.

And if she had to thank anyone for that shift, it was Nero.

Yet, as they reached the edge of the forest, a sense of unease crept up her spine. Surely, whatever he had to show her would not spoil the day.

He wouldn’t do that to her. Would he?

When Nero stopped in a small clearing beneath the towering trees, she was not so sure. Whatever he wanted to show her was serious.

“Is everything all right?” Sophie asked again. “You’re worrying me.”

“Everything is fine,” he replied. “Better than fine, but there is something I need to tell you...show you.” He took a steadying breath. “About me. About who I really am.”

Sophie wanted to run. The serious tone made her heart lurch. She’d been here before—too many times. Secrets, confessions, hidden truths. But this was Nero. He’d never lied to her, never played games. And she trusted him more than anyone she’d ever known.

“Show me,” she answered, her voice steadier than she felt.

Nero stepped back and gave her one last searching look before the air around Nero seemed to shimmer, like heat rising from sunbaked asphalt. It popped and crackled as if the air was suddenly filled with static electricity.

And then he was gone.

She stepped forward, her arm arcing through the air. “What?”

But then the hairs on her arm stood on end, and her hand touched something solid, furry.

“A bear!” Sophie’s legs gave way beneath her, and she sank to the forest floor, her breath coming in short gasps.

Before her stood the biggest bear she’d ever seen. But she wasn’t afraid. How could she be when she leaned forward and looked into the bear’s eyes?

“You’re...” she whispered, unable to complete the thought.

The air shimmered again, and within seconds, Nero stood before her once more, completely himself except for the anxious expression on his face.

“A bear shifter,” he finished for her.

Sophie stared at him, her mind struggling to reconcile what she’d just witnessed with everything she knew about the world. “That’s not possible,” she said weakly.

“I understand this is a shock,” Nero said, keeping his distance. “But it’s the truth. Bear Creek was founded by shifter families centuries ago to escape persecution.”

“I don’t understand,” Sophie said numbly.

“I’m a shifter,” Nero said. “Still human, but I can take on another form. A bear. We’re like two halves of a whole.”

Sophie pressed her hands against the cool earth beneath her, trying to ground herself in something solid and real. “Why are you showing me this?”

Nero took a cautious step toward her, stopping when she tensed. “Because you deserve to know the truth. Because I don’t want there to be secrets between us. Because...” He hesitated, then continued more softly, “Because you’re my mate, Sophie.”

“Your mate?” she repeated, the word feeling strange on her tongue. But hadn’t she heard that word used before?

Yes, Nero had described it when he first told her about Cassia...

“Shifters have mates. That one person they’re destined to be with,” Nero explained. “I knew before I even saw you at the wedding expo. That’s why I was so flustered, why I dropped to my knees with the ring box. It was that instant shock of recognition when I saw you.”

Sophie's mind flashed back to that electric current she'd felt when their hands touched, the immediate connection that had defied explanation. "That's why I felt..."

"A connection," Nero finished for her. "Yes. But being mates doesn't mean you don't have a choice, Sophie. I would never pressure you or rush you. I just couldn't keep hiding this from you, not when you're staying in my home, not when we're growing closer."

Sophie leaned against the tree, needing its support as she processed everything.

Shifters. Mates. Destinies. It was overwhelming, impossible...

and yet, somehow, and yet, strangely, it made sense.

The way she'd trusted him instantly. The way he'd welcomed her into his home.

The way his family had embraced her as if she were one of their own.

She should be terrified, or in denial, or running as fast as she could back to the city.

Instead, she found herself taking a step toward Nero, then another, until she stood directly in front of him. Slowly, deliberately, she reached out and placed her hand against his chest, feeling his heartbeat—strong, steady, human, yet also something more.

"Thank you," she whispered. "For trusting me."

"Thank you for staying." His hand covered hers. "I know this is overwhelming. If you want to leave Bear Creek, I'll understand. I'll help you pack your things and drive you wherever you want to go."

The sorrow in his eyes cut her deep. This man, this bear shifter, was willing to let her go if that was what she needed, despite whatever powerful connection he felt toward her.

“I don’t want to leave,” she said, surprising herself with the certainty in her voice.

Relief washed over Nero’s features. “You’re staying?”

“I’m staying,” Sophie confirmed. “I don’t understand any of this yet, and I’m not making any promises about...us. But I’m not running away, either.”

Nero let out a long breath. “That’s more than I dared hope for.”

After everything with Tito, this was the most honest anyone had ever been with her.

She looked up. “Can I ask something?”

“Anything.”

“Can you do that again?”

His brow furrowed. “Shift?”

She nodded. “I want to see.”

“Sure.” He looked a little bemused and maybe confused as he stepped away from her. Once more, the air cracked and popped, and then he was gone.

She held her breath, but then an instant later, the bear appeared. Nero’s bear.

“You’re beautiful,” she murmured.

She stroked his shoulders, ran her hands along his face, feeling the muscles shift beneath his coat. It was intimate, wild, and utterly Nero. When she scratched behind his ears, his eyes half-closed in pleasure.

“I can see you in there,” she whispered. “It’s still you.”

On impulse, she leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to his forehead. The bear went very still, as if holding his breath. Sophie pulled back slightly, her hands still buried in his fur, and their eyes met in silent communication.

The air shimmered again, and suddenly she was holding Nero’s face between her palms, his human skin warm beneath her touch. The transformation had happened so quickly that she found herself still leaning in, mere inches from his face.

“Sophie,” he said, voice rough.

Without hesitation, she slid her arms around his neck and pressed her body against his.

Nero looked down at her, a question in his eyes—one last chance, to be sure. Sophie answered by rising on her tiptoes and capturing his mouth in a kiss that left no room for doubt.

She was his as surely as he was hers.

A groan rumbled through Nero’s chest as his arms encircled her waist, pulling her even closer. His hands roamed her body, tracing the curve of her spine, the flare of her hips, as if committing every inch to memory.

The kiss deepened, her hunger for him deepening. Sophie felt lightheaded with desire, her body responding to his touch with an intensity that startled her. This was

nothing like the calculated passion she'd experienced with Tito.

This was primal, elemental, a recognition on the most basic level.

"I want you," she whispered against his lips, the words escaping before she could consider them.

His eyes darkened. "Are you sure?"

In answer, Sophie took his hand and led him to a patch of soft grass bathed in the golden light of sunset.

With her eyes locked on his, she reached for the thin straps of her summer dress and slowly slid them off her shoulders.

The fabric whispered down her body, pooling at her feet in a puddle of floral cotton.

Nero's gaze traveled over her, reverent and hungry all at once. "You're exquisite," he murmured, stepping closer.

His hands skimmed her sides, then moved to cup her breasts through the delicate lace of her bra. Sophie arched into his touch, a soft sound escaping her throat. With gentle fingers, he traced the edge of the lace, then pulled one cup down, exposing her breast to the cool evening air.

"Beautiful," he whispered, before lowering his head to capture her nipple between his lips.

Sophie gasped, her hands threading through his hair as heat surged through her body. His tongue teased the sensitive peak while his hand cupped her other breast, and he rubbed his thumb over her nipple. Every sensation seemed amplified, her body

hypersensitive to his touch.

Gently, Nero guided her down onto the soft grass, his body following hers. He took his time removing the rest of her clothing, his touch reverent as he explored every newly revealed inch of skin. When she lay completely naked before him, he paused to drink in the sight.

“You are the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

Sophie reached for him, tugging at his shirt. “Your turn.”

He smiled and obliged, quickly stripping off his clothing until he was as naked as she was. Sophie’s breath caught at the sight of him, all lean muscle and golden skin, powerful and undeniably aroused.

Nero lowered himself beside her, his hands resuming their exploration of her body.

He kissed her deeply, then began a slow journey downward—lips trailing across her jaw, her throat, the valley between her breasts.

Each kiss was deliberate, worshipful, as if he were mapping territory he intended to claim forever.

And she wanted to be claimed. To be his for eternity.

When he reached her stomach, his hands gently parted her thighs. Sophie trembled with anticipation, her body already aching for him.

The first touch of his mouth against her most intimate place drew a cry from her lips.

He was gentle at first, learning her body's responses, then increasingly bold as he discovered what made her gasp and arch beneath him.

His hands steadied her hips as he worked, his tongue and lips bringing her to heights of pleasure she'd never experienced.

"Nero," she moaned, her fingers tangled in his hair, her inner walls tightening as her orgasm raced toward her.

He responded by intensifying his efforts, one hand sliding up to caress her breast while his mouth continued its exquisite torment. The dual sensation was overwhelming, and Sophie felt herself spiraling upward, every muscle tensing as pleasure built to an impossible peak.

When it broke, she cried out his name, her body shuddering with waves of ecstasy that seemed to go on forever. Nero did not relent. Not until she lay breathless and spent beneath him.

Before she could recover, he was moving up her body, his expression a mixture of tenderness and barely restrained desire. Sophie reached for him, needing him closer, needing to feel him inside her.

"I need you," she whispered, wrapping her legs around his hips.

Nero positioned himself at her entrance, his eyes locked on hers. "You're my mate," he said softly. "My everything."

Then he thrust inside her, filling her completely, and Sophie gasped at the perfect rightness of it.

It was as if they were those first primal people to settle these mountains. Making love

under the stars as they built a home, a sanctuary, together.

His hands were everywhere, stroking her face, caressing her breasts, gripping her hips to pull her closer with each thrust.

Sophie matched his movements, her hands exploring the strong planes of his back, the powerful muscles of his shoulders. She felt claimed and cherished all at once, her body thrumming with pleasure that built again with every movement.

“Sophie,” Nero groaned, his rhythm faltering as his control slipped.

She wanted him to let go. To feel his essence inside her as her own release approached once more.

His movements became more urgent, more primal, and Sophie’s inner muscles clenched around him as her second orgasm took her. She dug her nails into his back as she cried out his name.

With a final powerful thrust, Nero followed her over the edge, his body shuddering as he filled her with his seed.

The sensation of his release triggered another wave of pleasure through Sophie’s body, leaving them both gasping and clinging to each other in the aftermath.

She rested her head against his chest and listened to the steady beat of his heart.

“Are you okay?” he asked finally, raising himself slightly to look into her eyes.

Sophie smiled, feeling a profound peace settle over her. “More than okay.”

Nero carefully rolled to his side, bringing her with him so they remained connected.

His hand stroked her hair back from her face. His expression was one of wonder and intense devotion.

“I never thought,” he began, then shook his head. “I hoped, but I never truly believed you would accept me. All of me. So completely.”

Sophie touched his face, tracing the strong line of his jaw. “I think I’ve been yours since the moment you fell at my feet with that ring box,” she admitted. “I just didn’t understand it until now.”

A smile spread across Nero’s face, lighting his eyes with joy. “My clumsy proposal turned out to be the best accident of my life.”

“It wasn’t an accident,” Sophie said with sudden certainty. “It was fate.”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

Nero lay with his eyes closed, listening to the sound of his mate's breathing. His mate. A smile spread across his face. She is incredible , his bear said happily, relieved that Sophie had accepted. He still dreamed of the feel of her fingers through his bear's fur. Of her lips on his forehead.

"Are you staring at me?" Sophie asked, raising her head from the pillow and looking at him.

"I might be," he said, and half-turned, kissing her lips.

She nestled closer to him. "This feels like a dream," she murmured.

He cupped her face in his hand. "I know."

Sophie inched her head back. "It was real. You turned into a bear, didn't you?"

Nero was tempted to say no . She had imagined the whole thing, but his bear gave a warning growl. "I did," he assured her.

Sophie lay back on the pillow and covered her face with her arm. "I should be more shocked."

"I'm glad you are not," Nero said.

"And did I really agree to design a menu for the vineyard restaurant?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Yes, you did."

She groaned and rolled away from him. “I need to get started on the recipes. I’ll need to gather up the ingredients I need and start testing the recipes. There isn’t much time.”

Nero sat up in bed. “I have an idea. There’s a farmers’ market in Bear Bluff today. Why don’t we head over there?”

She looked at him. “Can you spare the time? I feel I am monopolizing you.”

“Monopolize away,” he said, kissing her shoulder and threading an arm around her body to cup her breast in his hand. He tweaked her nipple, rolling it between his thumb and finger.

“That is not helping,” she said, as she bit down on her bottom lip.

“Do you want me to stop?” he murmured as he slid across the bed and kissed the tip of her other nipple before flicking his tongue over the sensitive bud.

“No,” she gasped and pushed Nero onto his back before straddling him, her thighs cradling his hips as she positioned herself above him. Her hair fell in a curtain around her face, catching the early morning light that filtered through the windows.

“Let me,” she whispered, taking control as she curled her hand around his hardness.

Nero gazed up at her, mesmerized by the sight of her naked body poised above his. She was magnificent. All soft curves and warm skin flushed with desire. His hands moved to her waist, steadying her as she slowly lowered herself onto him.

They both gasped as their bodies joined. Sophie’s eyes fluttered closed, her lips parting slightly as she took him in completely. For a moment, she remained still, adjusting to the sensation of fullness.

“You feel perfect,” Nero murmured, his voice thick with emotion.

Sophie began to move, a slow, deliberate rhythm that made Nero’s breath catch.

Her hands rested on his chest as she rose and fell above him, her body undulating like waves against a shore.

He watched her face transform with pleasure, memorizing every expression, every soft sound that escaped her lips.

He reached out and cupped her breasts, his thumbs grazing across her nipples. Sophie arched into his touch, a soft moan escaping her. Nero lifted himself slightly, capturing one peaked nipple between his lips, suckling gently as she continued to rock against him.

“Nero,” she breathed, her movements becoming more urgent.

One hand trailed down her stomach, finding the sensitive bundle of nerves where their bodies joined. His thumb circled with gentle pressure, drawing small, deliberate patterns that made Sophie’s rhythm falter. Her thighs trembled against his sides, her breathing quickening.

Sophie’s hips circled in an instinctive dance, seeking more contact, more friction. Nero matched her movements, thrusting upward as she pressed down, creating a perfect counterpoint of pleasure.

“Look at me,” Nero whispered, his free hand cupping her cheek.

Sophie’s eyes opened, dark with passion, meeting his gaze. The connection between them deepened, transcending the physical joining of their bodies. In that moment, it was as if their souls touched, as if he could feel the bond like a physical thing.

His thumb continued its gentle circles as he thrust more firmly, feeling her body tighten around him. Sophie's movements became erratic, her breathing shallow and quick. Her fingers dug into his shoulders as she chased her release.

Then she cried out, her body arching as pleasure crashed over her.

Nero held her steady through the waves of her climax, his hands strong and sure on her hips.

The sight of her abandoned to ecstasy was his undoing.

With a low growl, he thrust upward one final time, his own release pulsing deep within her.

She collapsed onto his chest, her body still trembling with aftershocks. Nero wrapped his arms around her, holding her close as their heartbeats gradually slowed. He pressed soft kisses to her temple, her cheek, the corner of her mouth, overwhelmed by tenderness.

"I never knew it could be like this," Sophie murmured against his skin, her voice filled with wonder.

"Neither did I," Nero admitted, stroking her back in long, soothing motions. "This is what it means to find your mate."

They lay entwined, reluctant to separate, until the sunlight grew stronger and the day's demands could no longer be ignored. Finally, Sophie stirred, propping herself up on his chest to look at him.

"The farmers' market," she said with a smile. "We should get going if we want the best selection."

Nero laughed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Always thinking about food.”

“Not always,” she replied, pressing a kiss to his chest. “But I do have a menu to create, and time is of the essence.”

With obvious reluctance, they disentangled themselves and prepared for the day. As Sophie showered, Nero made coffee, his movements light with happiness. His bear rumbled contentedly within him, satisfied in a way he had never experienced before.

She accepted us, his bear reminded him. All of us.

Yes, she sure did, Nero agreed, a smile spreading across his face as he relived making love to his mate. Over and over.

An hour later, they were in Nero’s car, heading toward Bear Bluff. Sophie had her notebook open on her lap, jotting down ideas for the vineyard menu as they drove.

“I’m thinking of a five-course progression,” she said, tapping her pen against the page. “Starting with something light. Then building through the courses to reflect the wine making process, from the vines to the finished product.”

As she spoke, sketching her culinary vision with growing excitement, Nero found himself falling even deeper in love with this remarkable woman. She had faced the impossible—the revelation of his true nature—and instead of running away, had embraced it completely. Had embraced him completely.

Nero pulled into the farmers’ market parking lot, finding a spot beneath the shade of an old oak tree. The market buzzed with activity—colorful canopies stretching across the open field, shoppers milling between stalls laden with fresh produce, artisanal goods, and local crafts.

“Ready?” he asked, turning to Sophie, who was still scribbling notes in her journal.

She looked up, eyes bright with anticipation. “Absolutely. I have a list of everything I need for the test recipes.”

“Already?” he asked as they got out of the car.

“What can I say?” she asked as she pulled on her sunhat. “I have found inspiration since I came to Bear Creek.”

“You have?” he asked with a seductive smile.

“I have,” she said as Nero reached for her hand without thinking. She slid her fingers into his and leaned into him.

His bear gave a contented huff. Ours.

The scent of fresh bread and roasting coffee greeted them as they entered the market. Sophie was already scanning the stalls, her attention caught by plump fruits and baskets of freshly cut herbs.

“Sophie? Sophie Truro?” a woman’s voice called out from a nearby vegetable stand.

Sophie turned, her expression shifting to pleased recognition. “Hello there! How are you?”

The older woman beamed, wiping her hands on her apron. “I thought that was you! I’ve been following your recipes for ages. Those preserved lemons you showed how to make last winter changed my cooking completely.”

Nero watched as they chatted about zucchini gluts and potted mint. She sure was a

natural. And she was his.

“You’re more famous than you let on,” Nero murmured as they moved on to the next stall.

Sophie blushed. “Hardly famous. Just...recognized sometimes.”

But it happened again at the honey vendor, where the beekeeper not only knew who Sophie was, but pulled out his phone to show her a dish he’d made following one of her recipes. And again at the mushroom stall, where the forager asked for a selfie with “Eat it Simple Sophie.”

Nero hung back slightly, arms gradually filling with bags of produce as Sophie selected the perfect ingredients—heirloom tomatoes still warm from the sun, fragrant bundles of fresh herbs, wild mushrooms with earthy complexity.

He watched with quiet pride as she engaged with each vendor, asking knowledgeable questions about growing conditions and seasonality.

At the berry stand, a small crowd had gathered around Sophie as she explained different ways to preserve summer fruits. Her hands moved expressively as she spoke, her face animated with genuine enthusiasm. Several women had their phones out, recording her impromptu tutorial.

“She’s amazing, isn’t she?” the berry vendor said to Nero, nodding toward Sophie.

“She is,” Nero agreed proudly.

“You must be the fiancé,” the woman continued with a knowing smile. “From that proposal video.”

Nero started to correct her, then simply smiled. “I am.”

You sure need to get that ring finished and on Sophie’s finger, his bear told him.

I do, Nero said, wanting nothing more than to propose for real.

When Sophie finally extracted herself from her admirers, cheeks flushed with excitement, she returned to his side with a basket of perfect blackberries.

“Sorry about that,” she said. “I get carried away sometimes.”

“Don’t apologize,” Nero replied, shifting his load to accommodate the new purchase. “I love watching you in your element.”

As they continued through the market, a young woman approached hesitantly, smartphone clutched in her hand. “Excuse me... Eat it Simple with Sophie?”

Sophie smiled warmly. “I am.”

“Could I possibly get a selfie with you? Your videos helped me learn to cook when I moved out on my own.”

“Of course!” Sophie handed her latest purchases to Nero, who added them to his growing collection of bags and baskets.

He stepped back, watching as Sophie posed with the young woman, their heads together as they smiled for the camera. Then another fan approached, and another, each with a story about how Sophie’s recipes had made a difference in their lives.

When she finally turned to him, eyes bright with inspiration and arms reaching to relieve him of some bags, he shook his head.

“I’ve got them,” he assured her. “Find everything you need?”

“More than I expected,” she replied, her smile filled with gratitude that extended beyond the simple act of carrying bags. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

“Thank you for letting me be part of this,” he answered, the words carrying deeper meaning than just the morning’s shopping.

As they walked back toward the car, Sophie’s hand slipped into his free one, and Nero knew with absolute certainty that he would stand on the sidelines for her, watching her flourish, cheering her on from the wings—or hauling bags of produce, as needed—for the rest of their lives together.

And that, he thought, was the greatest privilege he could imagine.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

Sophie balanced the last bag of produce against her hip as she fumbled with the door handle, the scent of fresh herbs rising from her farmers' market haul.

Her cheeks were still flushed from the unexpected attention, but beneath that glow of recognition thrummed a deeper satisfaction.

For the first time in months, she felt like herself again.

Not hidden by Tito's shadow, not the woman from the viral proposal video, but Sophie Truro. Recipe developer. Creator. Artist in her own right.

"Let me get that," Nero said, appearing behind her with his arms full of bags. He somehow managed to reach around her to open the door without dropping a single blackberry or mushroom.

"Show-off," Sophie teased as she stepped into the cool interior of The Lookout.

"Years of practice carrying delicate materials," he replied with a smile that made her heart flutter. "Jewelry-making requires steady hands."

They moved to the kitchen, where Sophie began unpacking the fresh ingredients onto the counter. The colorful array looked like an artist's palette—deep purple eggplants, vibrant red tomatoes, emerald herbs, and golden squash blossoms.

"I still can't believe how many people recognized you at the market," Nero said, carefully setting a basket of blackberries on the counter.

A small smile played across her lips. “I’ve been sharing recipes online for years, but it still surprises me when people connect in person.” She lifted a bunch of thyme to her nose, inhaling deeply. “It meant a lot that they associated me with recipes that helped them. Not just... You know...”

“The fake proposal drama?” Nero offered gently, his expression softening. “That was always temporary. Your talent is what endures.”

His quiet confidence in her warmed Sophie more than any number of social media likes ever could. She picked up a particularly plump tomato, testing its weight in her palm. “I’m thinking of a tomato water consommé for the first course—something clear and pure that captures the essence of summer.”

“That sounds perfect,” Nero said, leaning against the counter. His dark eyes followed her movements with appreciation that had nothing to do with cooking and everything to do with the woman herself.

Sophie felt a blush creeping up her neck.

Even after last night, the intensity of his gaze still had the power to fluster her.

“I should start organizing these ingredients by recipe,” she said, reaching for a notepad.

“And I need to check what people are saying online about my guest menu. Cassia mentioned she’d posted about it on the vineyard’s social media.”

“Do you need anything before I head to the workshop? I have a...commission I need to finish.”

“I’m fine,” Sophie assured him as she shot him a quizzical smile. “Go create

something beautiful. I'll be here planning culinary magic."

Nero brushed a kiss against her temple, his touch lingering for a moment. "Find me if you need anything," he said before heading out of the house. She watched as he strode toward his workshop and sighed in utter contentment.

Life was good.

As Nero went inside the workshop, she sprang into action. She was used to deadlines, but never one this tight.

Sophie finished arranging the ingredients, grouping them by the courses she was planning.

Satisfaction settled over her as she surveyed her work.

Each component had been carefully selected for the story it would tell about Bear Creek and the Thornberg Vineyard.

Dishes she would use to weave the narrative of this place that had unexpectedly captured her heart.

With the kitchen organized to her liking, Sophie retreated to the guest suite. Though it hardly felt like a guest room anymore, not after last night. Her laptop sat on the small writing desk by the window, and she settled into the chair, pulling out her phone to check her social media.

Her notifications had exploded since that morning. The selfies from the farmers' market had been shared widely, and her follower count had jumped by several thousand. Sophie scrolled through comments, a pleased smile spreading across her face as she read the supportive comments.

“Loved meeting you today at Bear Bluff Farmers’ Market! Can’t wait to try your blackberry galette recipe!”

“Sophie, you look so happy in these photos! That mountain air must be good for you!”

“Is that the proposal guy with you? You two look cute together!”

Sophie felt a twinge of self-consciousness at that last one, but it wasn’t malicious—just curious fans connecting dots from the viral video to these new photos. She kept scrolling, making mental notes of recipe requests she might address in future posts.

Then her thumb froze mid-swipe. A notification from a name she’d hoped never to see again: Tito Alvarez.

Her heart stuttered, then began racing uncomfortably fast. With trembling fingers, she tapped the message.

“Enjoying your little mountain fling, Sophie? Cute photos all over Insta. Didn’t take you long to move on.

Wonder what your followers would think if they knew you abandoned our cookbook to play house with a small-town jeweler?

The ‘authentic rustic’ angle is a bit desperate, don’t you think?

You might want to consider how this affects your brand. ..and mine. Call me.”

Sophie stared at the screen, her vision blurring at the edges. The phone felt suddenly heavy in her hand, as if Tito’s toxic words had physical weight. She set it down on

the desk with deliberate care, then watched in detached fascination as her hands continued to shake.

“He’s watching me,” she whispered, her voice thin in the quiet room. “He’s been watching my social media. He knows about Nero.”

A cold sensation spread through her chest, constricting her lungs until each breath came in shallow gasps. Sophie pushed back from the desk and stood, needing to move, to dispel the creeping panic that threatened to overwhelm her.

“He’s going to ruin everything,” she muttered, pacing between the bed and the window. “He’ll tell everyone I broke the contract. He’ll say I stole recipes. He’ll contact the publisher and kill the cookbook deal.”

She ran her hands through her hair, tugging slightly as her mind spiraled through worst-case scenarios. Tito had connections, television producers, magazine editors, and restaurant owners. With a few well-placed whispers, he could dismantle the career she’d worked so hard to rebuild.

“He could turn my followers against me,” she said, her voice rising. “Make them think I used him for exposure. Sabotage the pop-up dinner...”

Her phone buzzed again. Sophie flinched as if it might bite her. She couldn’t bring herself to check if it was another message from him.

“This was supposed to be my fresh start,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around herself. “My chance to create something truly mine.”

A soft knock at the door nearly made her jump out of her skin.

“Sophie?” Nero asked with concern. “Is everything all right?”

She opened her mouth to answer, but no sound came. Her throat was tight, words trapped behind the rising tide of panic.

The door creaked open, and Nero appeared in the gap. His brow furrowed as he took in her tense posture, the wild look in her eyes, the tremble in her breath.

“May I come in?” he asked softly.

Sophie nodded mutely, stepping back as Nero entered the room, his gaze assessing the scene, from her phone abandoned on the desk, to her hands twisting the corner of her cardigan, to the glittering of unshed tears.

“I heard you talking,” he explained quietly, as if she were a wounded animal. “You sounded upset. Like something rattled you.”

Sophie tried to compose herself, smoothing her hands down the front of her dress in a futile attempt to appear collected. But the tremor in her fingers betrayed her, and her voice, when she finally found it, sounded thin and strained.

“It’s nothing. I just...” She broke off. Even she didn’t believe the lie.

Nero didn’t move. He stood a respectful distance away, giving her space while making it clear he wasn’t going anywhere.

“Something’s happened,” he said, his voice calm. “If you want to talk, I’m here.”

Sophie glanced at her phone, still face-up on the desk where Tito’s message glowed accusingly. With a resigned sigh, she picked it up and held it out to Nero.

“It’s Tito,” she said, her voice cracking slightly on his name. “He saw the photos from the farmers’ market.”

Nero took the phone, his jaw tightening as he read. But when he looked up at her, his gaze was calm and steady.

“He’s trying to intimidate you.”

“And it’s working,” she admitted. “You don’t understand what he’s capable of. One call, and my cookbook deal could vanish. A few rumors, and the dinner could fall apart. He knows people, and he knows how to manipulate a narrative.”

Her words poured out in a rush, her hands slicing the air with each fear.

Nero reached out and took her hands gently. “Look at me.”

She raised her eyes to his, finding nothing but calm certainty in his gaze.

“He can only hurt you if you let him. Your followers love you. They love your voice, your food, and your honesty. Not him.”

She hesitated. “People love a scandal. And Tito knows exactly how to create one.”

“Maybe. But you’re underestimating your own strength.” He picked up her phone and scrolled. “Look at what they’re actually saying. They trust you. They believe in you. In Eat it Simple with Sophie. They’re excited about your recipes, not the drama.”

Sophie leaned closer, reading the comments Nero highlighted. Words of warmth, trust, and appreciation.

The knot of panic in her chest began to loosen.

“But what if he tries to sabotage the dinner?” The Thornberg family had been so kind and supportive. The last thing she wanted was to cause them trouble. Or worse, taint

their business by being associated with her.

“Then we deal with it,” Nero said. “People love our wine. They love your food. But most importantly they love you.”

Her breathing slowed. “I’ve spent so long trying to please him,” she said quietly. “Even after the betrayal, I still worried about disappointing him professionally.”

“You don’t need his approval anymore. You never did.” He brushed a lock of hair from her cheek. “Would you like some tea?”

The simple offer that meant the world to her. “That sounds perfect.”

Just like the man himself.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

Nero's eyes opened to darkness, his internal clock rousing him well before dawn. For a moment, he lay still, listening to the hush of The Lookout. The space beside him was empty.

His bear stirred lazily. She's working already, he murmured.

Nero smiled in the dark, picturing Sophie bent over her recipe notes in the kitchen below. Of course, she was. Tonight was her night to shine.

He rose quietly, slipping into his robe, the polished wooden floors cool beneath his feet as he made his way downstairs, his shifter senses drawing him to the kitchen.

There she is, his bear murmured. Our mate.

Sophie sat at the kitchen table, her hair tied back in a messy bun, several strands escaping to frame her face.

She was already dressed in comfortable leggings and one of his sweaters, which hung loosely on her smaller frame.

Before her lay neat stacks of recipe cards, arranged in precise order, her fingers flicking between them with focused intent.

Her lips moved silently as she reviewed each card, occasionally making a small notation or rearranging the sequence.

She's magnificent, his bear said with quiet reverence.

Truly, Nero agreed, watching her work with the same attention he gave to the most intricate pieces in his workshop.

He stepped into the kitchen, careful not to startle her. “Good morning.”

Sophie looked up, her face lighting when she saw him. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“Not at all,” Nero replied, crossing to the counter where the antique brass kettle sat waiting. “I simply missed your warmth.”

He filled it with water, measuring precisely before placing it on the stove. From the cupboard, he retrieved the porcelain dripper and filters, lining them up with methodical care. The beans went into the grinder next, the soft whirring filling the early quiet.

Sophie watched, a smile tugging at her lips. “You approach coffee-making like it’s a science experiment.”

“Coffee is chemistry,” he replied seriously, although he could not keep the telltale glint from his eyes. “Precision yields consistent results.”

“Says the man who routinely forgets to eat breakfast,” she teased gently.

He inclined his head, conceding the point.

She knows us too well already, his bear rumbled.

When the kettle began to sing, Nero removed it from the heat, letting the water cool to the perfect temperature before beginning the careful pour-over process. The rich aroma of coffee soon filled the kitchen, mingling with the faint scent of the cinnamon rolls Sophie had prepared the night before.

He set two cups on the table and sat across from her. Her hands still hovered over the cards, tension tightening her shoulders.

“You’ve prepared beautifully,” he murmured, reaching across to cover her hand. “Tonight will be splendid.”

She exhaled slowly, the strain slipping from her posture. “I keep thinking I’ve forgotten something crucial.”

“Your attention to detail rivals my own,” Nero said, taking a sip of his coffee. “Which means you’ve undoubtedly thought of everything.”

In the short time they’d known each other, he’d witnessed Sophie transform from the wary, guarded woman he’d met at the wedding expo to the confident creator now seated before him. There was pride in his chest, deep and fierce.

Our mate is extraordinary, his bear hummed.

Sophie looked up at him. “Cassia sent me a text last night. They’re completely booked. Every seat.”

“I’m not surprised,” Nero said. “The moment she announced your guest menu night, the phone never stopped ringing. My brothers have been telling everyone.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “They have?”

“The Thornbergs are loyal,” he said. “And not shy about bragging.”

A hollow ache in his stomach reminded him he needed to eat if he was going to help Sophie get through this special day. He’d skipped more than one meal over the last couple of days after spending long hours in his workshop.

Sophie caught his glance toward the oven where the cinnamon rolls waited. “You need to eat something,” she said firmly, rising from her chair as if reading his mind.

“They do smell good,” Nero said. But then, so did everything Sophie made.

“You can’t support me through tonight’s dinner if you’re running on empty,” she said, sliding a roll onto a plate and placing it before him.

“What time do we need to be at the vineyard?” he asked, taking a bite of the perfectly spiced roll.

“Mid-morning,” Sophie said, reclaiming her seat and pulling her coffee closer. “The team will be there, but I want to walk through everything myself.”

He watched her take a sip, her lashes fluttering shut for a second as she savored the flavor. “And how do you feel?”

“Excited. Nervous. Grateful.” Her gaze met his. “In love.”

“I love you, too,” he murmured and rose to lean across the table and kiss her lips.

“I should go take a shower before we get distracted,” she said, her hand caressing his cheek.

“I could join you,” he murmured.

“You could,” she agreed. “But you are going to eat your roll and drink your coffee.”

She leaned away from him and picked up her coffee cup. “You are one dish that will keep hot.”

“You have no idea.” He chuckled as he watched her leave the kitchen. It took all his willpower not to go and join her, but he did not want to do anything that might jeopardize today.

An hour later, Nero parked the convertible next to Kris’s truck at the vineyard. “Ready?” he asked as he half-turned to look at her.

Sophie nodded, closing her notebook with deliberate care. “Yes. Although I’ll be happier once we’ve gone over everything.”

“Cassia will have attended to every detail,” Nero assured her, as he got out of the car. “Organization is her particular talent.”

Nero came around to open Sophie’s door, offering his hand. She accepted it, her grip steady despite the flicker of nerves in her eyes.

“Shall we?” he asked.

She squared her shoulders and nodded, clutching her notebook like a shield.

Together, they walked toward the barn, Nero adjusting his pace to match hers. When they reached the entrance, he pulled open the heavy wooden door, letting Sophie step through first.

Inside, the transformation was nearly complete.

Long tables draped in crisp ivory linens formed two parallel lines down the center of the space, each set with gleaming silverware and crystal glasses that caught the morning light streaming through the vast windows.

Overhead, wrought iron lanterns had been suspended from the exposed wooden beams, unlit now but promising a warm glow for the evening.

Through the windows, rows of ripening vines created a living backdrop for the scene.

Sophie stopped just inside the doorway, drawing in a slow breath. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

Nero’s hand found the small of her back, a gesture that had become second nature. “Cassia has a remarkable eye.”

As if summoned by her name, Cassia appeared from the kitchen’s direction, dressed in her usual linen dress and apron, clipboard tucked under one arm.

“Good morning!” she called as she came to join them. “Everything’s running to plan.”

“It’s exactly what I imagined,” Sophie said, her voice full of quiet awe. “Thank you.”

“Wait until you see it lit up with candles and the sunset behind the vines,” Cassia replied with a satisfied smile. “But first, I believe Marco is eager to see you in the kitchen. He’s been reviewing your recipes and checking the ingredients since dawn.”

She led them through the dining area, pausing occasionally to offer quiet guidance to servers arranging flowers or polishing glasses.

As they neared the kitchen, the swinging doors opened and released a wave of savory aroma and purposeful sound—chopping, clattering, the low hum of busy voices. The sounds of a busy kitchen.

“These recipes are brilliant in their simplicity,” a voice called out. Marco stood

behind the prep table, sleeves rolled to his elbows, a linen towel tossed over one shoulder. “We did a test run yesterday. The way you have combined simple ingredients is sublime.”

“You got the wild mushrooms,” she noted with obvious pleasure, examining a basket of fungi in varied shapes and earthy hues.

“Foraged just yesterday,” Marco confirmed. “And the pomace bread is already proofing, following your instructions to the letter.”

She’s in her element , his bear observed with satisfaction.

And I am in mine, Nero said as he watched her work.

“So we’re ready for this evening?” Sophie asked, surveying the kitchen with a critical eye.

“Yeah,” Marco assured her. “We’ve allocated stations according to your workflow notes, and everyone’s been briefed on the menu progression.”

Nero felt his chest tighten with relief at Marco’s competent response. The dinner would be a collaborative effort, not Sophie working alone in an unfamiliar kitchen. Cassia had ensured she would have the support needed to showcase her talents.

“You’ve done an incredible job,” Sophie said, touching her arm. “I couldn’t have done this without you.”

Cassia flushed with pleasure. “You made it easy, with your beautiful recipes. I just helped bring them to life.”

The kitchen doors swung open again, and Leanne appeared, carrying a crate of linens

and herb bundles. Hugo followed close behind with an armful of wine bottles.

“We brought the final touches,” Leanne said cheerfully. “And came to lend a hand, of course.”

“We couldn’t stay away,” Hugo added, casting a warm glance around the space. “It looks like a proper celebration in here.”

Sophie stepped forward to greet them both with a smile that reached her eyes. “Thank you so much. It means a lot to have you here.”

“We’re all proud of you,” Leanne said gently, setting down her crate. “You’re part of this family now.”

Just then, the side door creaked open once more, and Kris strolled in carrying the last case of wines, a folded list of pairings tucked under one arm. “Perfect timing,” he called. “Everything’s ready to go. I’ve labeled the bottles for each course.”

He set the case beside the others and gave Sophie an approving nod. “Your menu sings on its own, but these wines will make it a duet.”

Sophie exchanged a glance with Nero, the happiness in her expression mirrored in his. It wasn’t just a dinner anymore. It was a family effort. The Thornbergs pulling together, rooting for each other as they always did.

Cassia consulted her clipboard one last time and exhaled, visibly more relaxed. “We’re in good shape. The team knows their cues. Marco’s in command, and the place looks stunning.”

Nero checked his watch. “We should go and get ready. Cassia and Marco have everything under control.” He turned to Sophie with a small smile. “And I have

something to show you.”

Sophie arched a brow. “No more surprises, I hope?”

“I’m not sure I can top ‘by the way, I’m a bear shifter,’” Nero replied.

Sophie covered her mouth as she laughed. “No, I don’t think you can.”

Nero chuckled. “No transformations today, I promise.”

Leanne squeezed Sophie’s shoulder. “Go, we have everything under control here. Take a couple of hours to go get yourself ready.”

Sophie nodded as she glanced around the room one last time. “We’ll be back soon.”

“See you all later,” Nero said with a wave, gently guiding Sophie toward the exit.

“Are you going to give me a clue?” Sophie asked as they walked hand in hand back to the car.

“No,” Nero said, smiling softly. “But I think you’re going to like it.”

A flicker of doubt crept in. What if it didn’t mean as much to her as it did to him?

She will love it, his bear murmured. How could she not, when she sees it’s From Our Heart to Yours?

Yes. He was finally going to show her the piece he’d been working on since the moment they met.

He couldn’t wait.

Today is going to be an extraordinary day, his bear said.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

Sophie tugged at the zipper of her evening gown, the silky fabric slipping through her trembling fingers for the third time.

She caught her reflection in the bedroom mirror.

The elegant midnight blue dress Cassia had lent her contrasted beautifully with her skin, but the half-fastened back ruined the effect.

“Come on,” she muttered, twisting awkwardly to reach behind her shoulder blades.

Her borrowed dress shimmered subtly as she moved, the material clearly expensive and well-chosen. Cassia had insisted that she take it when Sophie admitted she hadn’t packed anything suitable for hosting a high-end pop-up dinner. It was perfect...

If only she could get the damn zipper up.

Sophie abandoned the struggle momentarily, taking in her full reflection. Her hair was styled in a careful updo, though it had taken three tries. Her cheeks were flushed with a mix of effort and nerves. Everything looked in place. Everything felt off.

“Good evening, and welcome to my special Bear Creek dinner,” she practiced aloud, squaring her shoulders. “Tonight’s menu draws inspiration from the natural beauty and bounty of these mountains, from the clear streams to the forest floor, culminating in the vineyard’s harvest.”

Her voice faltered on the last word. She sounded rehearsed, stilted. Tito would have called it “inauthentic.” The thought of him made her stomach tighten. Stop it.

She wouldn't give him one more ounce of her doubt. Not tonight.

This dinner wasn't about Tito. It was about moving forward, proving to herself, and maybe the world, that she had something real to say with her food.

Sophie took a sip of water, only to spill a drop on the bodice. "Perfect," she muttered, blotting quickly. She eyed her hair again, considering tugging out a few strands to soften the look. Was she overdoing it?

Her pulse quickened. There'd be food journalists, local influencers, and possible publishers. If she failed tonight...

Stop.

"This is your night," she told her reflection. "Not his. Yours."

She returned to the zipper, trying again. Still stuck.

A knock at the door made her jump. "Sophie?" came Nero's calm voice. "May I come in?"

"Yes," she called, suddenly very aware of her half-zipped state.

Nero stepped inside, looking effortlessly elegant in a three-piece charcoal suit. He paused, eyes widening as he took her in and swallowed hard. In an instant, she felt confident and desirable.

"You look beautiful." And she believed him.

"Thanks," Sophie replied, gesturing helplessly. "But I have a slight wardrobe malfunction."

“May I help?” he asked, already setting a small velvet box on the dresser.

“Please.”

She turned, revealing the zipper. His fingers brushed her back, sending a thrill of pleasure coursing through her. “A thread’s caught,” he said, gently working it free.

“There. Perfect.”

“Thank you. I was about to cut myself out of it.”

“Now that would be a tragedy,” he said lightly as he pressed his lips to her skin. “The color suits you.”

“It’s a beautiful dress.” Sophie smoothed her hands over the gown. “I’m very nervous.”

“I’d be concerned if you weren’t,” he said. “Important endeavors deserve respectful anxiety.”

She smiled despite herself. “Respectful anxiety. I like that.”

“You’ve prepared beautifully,” he went on. “Your menu is impeccable. Tonight, you will be brilliant.”

His belief in her, as steadfast and honest as always, soothed away her nerves.

“I’ve been practicing what to say, but everything sounds off.” Imposter syndrome was threatening to derail her. As it often did.

“You’re overthinking,” Nero said as he stroked the nape of her neck. “Your enthusiasm for the food will speak louder than any script. These are your fans. They

are already under your spell.”

She nodded, the last of her tension easing. “You’re right. I just need to be me.”

“Exactly. That is more than enough.” He glanced at the velvet box, his expression shifting. “I have something for you.”

“Is this what you wanted to show me?” In her nervousness, she’d almost forgotten that he had something he wanted to share with her.

“It is.” Nero reached for the velvet box on the dresser. “I finished this piece yesterday,” he said, as he held the box in his palm. “I wanted you to have it tonight, for your special evening.” He held her gaze as he offered it to her.

Sophie’s heart quickened as she accepted the box, its velvet surface soft against her fingertips. The box was the wrong size for an engagement ring. Wasn’t it?

“Open it,” Nero whispered.

She lifted the lid carefully. Inside, nestled against cream-colored silk, lay a necklace of exquisite craftsmanship. A perfectly formed heart of polished gold, its surface adorned with small rubies. As the fading light from the window reflected off the rubies, it was as if the heart was beating.

“Oh, Nero,” Sophie breathed as her finger hovered over the piece. She was almost afraid to touch something so beautiful.

“It’s called From Our Heart to Yours ,” he said softly.

“The plans I saw that first night you showed me your workshop.” Sophie looked up at him, her eyes wide.

“Yes.”

“You made this? For me?”

“I did.” His fingers brushed against hers as he carefully lifted the necklace from its velvet nest. “I finished setting the last stone just hours ago,” Nero continued. “I wanted it to be perfect for tonight.”

“It is perfect,” she whispered. “Just like you.”

“Sophie,” Nero said, his voice taking on a quiet intensity that held her enraptured. “This necklace is more than a gift. It’s my pledge to you.”

He moved closer. “From the moment I literally stumbled into your life at that wedding expo, my world was complete,” he said.

“I recognized the bond we share. But since then, I have seen your creativity, your strength, your honesty, and your integrity. With this necklace, I promise to support you always. To walk beside you through it all.”

“Nero...” She stepped forward, wrapping her arms around him. “Thank you. For everything.”

His arms tightened around her possessively, and she rested her head on his shoulder as she took a shuddering breath. For a long moment, they stood there, her soft curves pressed against his hard, toned body. Two people. Fated together for eternity.

How lucky she was. How loved she was.

When she pulled back, she wiped her eyes. “I’ll ruin my makeup.”

“You could never be anything less than beautiful. May I?” he asked, lifting the necklace again.

Sophie turned, gathering her hair. The cool heart touched her skin, warming almost instantly.

“There,” he murmured, his breath against her neck.

She crossed to the mirror. The pendant nestled perfectly at her throat, catching the light with every breath.

But what struck her most was the reflection staring back: no longer anxious, but calm and ready.

Nero stepped behind her, their eyes meeting in the mirror. He rested his hands lightly on her shoulders, and Sophie leaned back slightly, feeling the solid strength of him supporting her.

“Perfect,” he murmured.

Sophie turned in his arms, tilting her face up to his. “Kiss me,” she said, no longer caring if he smudged her makeup.

A small smile curved Nero’s lips as he leaned down, one hand rising to cup her cheek with exquisite gentleness. His lips touched hers in a kiss that was tender yet charged with emotion. A physical affirmation of the pledge he had just made.

Sophie kept her eyes closed for a moment, savoring the sensation. When she opened them, Nero was watching her with such open adoration that it nearly took her breath away again.

She straightened her shoulders, feeling a new confidence flow through her. "I'll wait for you downstairs," Nero said as he dropped a kiss on her shoulder.

"I won't be long." Sophie slipped her feet into the borrowed heels that matched her dress, took one final glance in the mirror, and nodded at her reflection, her eyes drawn to the ruby heart.

"From Our Heart to Yours," she muttered as she touched her fingers to it.

Dragging her gaze from the mirror, she gathered her small evening purse, checked its contents one last time, stepped into the hallway and made her way downstairs.

Nero stood near the front door with his back to her, but he seemed to sense her approach and turned to watch her.

Heat flared across her skin at the way his eyes devoured her body.

How easy it would be to reach for his hand and pull him into her arms. To abandon their planned evening at the restaurant and tumble into bed instead.

But that was not going to happen. Not now... But afterward...

"You look amazing," he murmured as he picked up her shawl and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"So do you," she replied, her fingers tracing the buttons of his waistcoat.

"We should get going," Nero said, though his eyes held a promise for later that made her pulse quicken. "Everyone will be waiting."

Sophie nodded, her hand instinctively touching the necklace at her throat. The weight

of it felt right, like it had always belonged there. Like she had always belonged here with him.

And she knew in that moment, no matter what, she always would.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

“We’re here,” he said unnecessarily, as he parked the car in its usual spot next to the hacienda. “I thought it might help calm your nerves if we walk through the vines. But if you would rather, I drove closer to the restaurant...”

“No,” Sophie said, covering his hand with hers as she half-turned to look at him. “A walk is exactly what I need.”

Nero offered his hand, and she took it without hesitation. He led her between two rows of vines that seemed to close in around them, giving them a few minutes of privacy.

“These vines have been here for generations,” Nero said softly, his thumb tracing circles on the back of her hand. “My grandfather planted some of these rows. Then my parents added more. Then my brother Philip worked on developing grapes with specific traits, specific flavors for his blends.”

Sophie ran her free hand along the rough bark of a vine. “There’s so much history here.”

“And now you’re adding your chapter to it,” he replied.

They walked unhurriedly, savoring the quiet moment before the evening’s festivities.

For Nero, the sensation was surreal, walking this familiar path he’d walked thousands of times, yet everything felt new with Sophie beside him.

Since he’d left to live at The Lookout, his visits to the vineyard centered around

family gatherings or wine tastings, but tonight, the focus would be on Sophie's culinary creations.

Sophie moved nearer, her dress swishing softly around her legs as she leaned against him. Nero slipped his arm around her shoulders, drawing her to his side.

"I'm not sure I could have done this without you," she whispered.

"Yes, you would," he replied, dropping a kiss on her head, breathing in the scent of her perfume mingled with the vineyard air.

She tilted her face up to his. "Then I should say, I'm glad I am not doing it without you."

"Me, too," he said lightly. "Since I have very much enjoyed being a recipe tester."

Sophie placed her hand on his chest, her eyes sparkling in the fading light. "They do say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach."

"You were already in my heart before I even tasted your food," Nero said, stopping for a moment. He drew her close, cupping her face in his hands. "You are going to be fabulous tonight."

"I am now that I have this." She closed her fingers around the ruby pendant at her throat.

He leaned down and kissed her lips, tenderly at first, then with growing passion as she responded. The kiss deepened. Their bodies pressed together among the vines that had witnessed generations of Thornberg love stories. Sophie's arms wound around his neck, pulling him closer still.

After a long moment, she stepped back, her cheeks flushed. “Come on, I have work to do.”

Hand in hand, they continued toward the restaurant. It was a beautiful evening, and the setting sun gave the converted barn a magical feel.

Tonight is going to be perfect, Nero’s bear said.

It sure is. Nero opened the door. Sophie stepped inside first, her hand still clutched tightly in his as her earlier sense of excitement faded into nervous anticipation.

Cassia appeared almost instantly, rushing toward them with wide eyes.

“Oh my goodness,” she began breathlessly. “You’ll never guess what’s happened.”

Nero bristled. His spine stiffened, and his bear surged to attention, instantly alert. The very idea of something ruining Sophie’s evening made his protective instincts flare.

Sophie’s grip tightened on his hand. “What’s wrong?” she asked, her voice thin with nerves.

“Oh! Nothing’s wrong,” Cassia said quickly, waving her hands.

Relief flickered across Sophie’s face. “Thank goodness.”

Cassia hesitated, then added, “It’s just... Tito Alvarez is here.”

Nero’s bear growled, fury rising at the name.

“He heard about your guest menu,” Cassia continued, “and came to support you.”

“Support me?” Sophie repeated, her voice sharpening with disbelief.

Cassia nodded. “He’s in the kitchen now, talking to Marco.”

He can get out of the kitchen and out of our lives, Nero’s bear snarled.

Nero’s fists clenched involuntarily before he forced them to relax.

Sophie turned to him, her face pale, the glow she’d worn earlier dimmed by dread. “I’ll go talk to him,” she said, her voice steady despite the tightness around her mouth.

But before she could take another step, the kitchen doors swung open.

Tito Alvarez strode into the dining area as if he owned it, his chef whites pristine and prominently emblazoned with his name across the chest in bold thread and a practiced smile that never touched his eyes.

“There’s my little recipe girl!” Tito announced, his voice pitched to carry throughout the restaurant. Several early-arriving diners turned in their seats, recognition dawning on their faces as they recognized the celebrity chef.

Sophie stiffened beside Nero, every inch of her posture turning guarded. “Tito. What are you doing here?”

Break his fingers so he can never cook again, Nero’s bear suggested darkly.

“Saving this little mountain dinner of yours, of course! When I heard about your...” he paused, eyes sweeping dismissively over the carefully arranged tables, “...quaint event, I knew I had to step in.” His gaze swept over Nero dismissively before returning to Sophie.

“I thought you might benefit from a little professional guidance.”

A low growl rumbled in Nero’s chest. His bear was pacing, agitated, just beneath the surface.

“I don’t need your guidance,” Sophie replied, her voice cool and calm. “This is my menu. My vision.”

Tito chuckled, the sound hollow and theatrical. “Oh, come now. We both know your strengths and limitations. I’ve already made a few suggestions for your menu. Nothing drastic, just giving it a bit of polish.” He turned to Cassia. “You do want this evening to be a success, don’t you?”

Cassia opened her mouth to answer and then hesitated. Sophie turned to look at her, and her confidence faltered. She looked beaten, as if she already knew how this would end.

“I do,” Cassia replied as she finally found her voice.

“There, you see?” Tito grinned smugly. “I’m sorry Sophie has embarrassed you and herself.”

“On the contrary,” Cassia said, her voice low with an edge of menace. “The only one embarrassing themselves is you.”

“Me?” Tito took a step back as if Cassia had dealt him a physical blow. Something Nero’s bear would very much like to do.

“Well, turning up unannounced and trying to use Sophie to further your own flagging career is a little embarrassing,” Nero said, realizing the way to hurt this man the most was through punching his ego, not his face.

“My flagging career?” Tito suddenly realized that the few early diners had their phones out, filming the drama he had brought with him to the Thornberg Vineyard.

“Yes.” Sophie squared her shoulders beneath her elegant dress. As she touched her fingers to *From Our Heart to Yours*, she stepped forward. “I own every recipe I developed in your kitchen. The rose-infused olive oil technique that won you the James Beard nomination? Mine.”

Tito’s expression darkened, but Sophie continued, her voice gaining strength with each word.

“The deconstructed citrus tart that food critics called ‘revolutionary’? I developed that during my culinary school internship three years before I ever met you.” Her gaze remained steady, unwavering.

“The slow-fermented hot sauce that’s now your best-selling product?

My father’s recipe, which I shared with you as a gift. A gift .”

A current of whispers ran through the assembled diners. More phones appeared, recording the confrontation. Nero recognized the shift in energy. Anyone who may have initially been captivated by Tito’s celebrity presence was now firmly on Sophie’s side.

Our magnificent mate, his bear said with unmistakable pride.

“You’re being emotional,” Tito attempted, his smile now strained at the edges. “This isn’t the place to air personal grievances. I’m simply offering to help elevate your...”

“My recipes don’t need elevating,” Sophie interrupted, her voice resonating with newfound authority. “They were good enough for you to claim as your own for years.

They're certainly good enough to stand on their own merit tonight."

A smattering of applause broke out among the diners. Someone at a nearby table called out, "We came for Sophie's food, not yours!"

Tito's face flushed, the practiced charm crumbling to reveal the anger beneath. "Don't be ridiculous," he snapped as he revealed his true self. "Your little social media following might be impressed by home-style cooking, but these people paid for a fine dining experience."

"Actually," Cassia interjected, "they specifically paid for Sophie Truro's interpretation of Bear Creek's local ingredients. It sold out in hours."

More applause erupted, louder this time, as more diners arrived at the restaurant to witness the scene.

Sophie stood her ground, her expression composed despite the high color in her cheeks. "These are my recipes tonight, Tito. My name. My event." Her voice carried effortlessly now, reaching every corner of the restaurant. "And everyone here knows it."

The dining room erupted in supportive applause. Nero saw several diners rise to their feet, adding enthusiastic whistles to the ovation. Even the kitchen staff had emerged to witness the confrontation, their applause particularly vigorous.

Tito stood frozen, his face contorted with humiliation as he scanned the room and found no allies. His gaze hardened as he turned back to Sophie. "You'll regret this," he hissed, low enough that only those closest could hear. "One mountain dinner won't salvage your career when I'm finished."

"I think the videos currently being uploaded to social media might suggest

otherwise,” Nero replied calmly, nodding toward the dozens of phones capturing the moment.

Tito’s composure cracked completely then. “How dare you!”

“No, how dare you?” Sophie retorted.

“I think you have most definitely overstayed your welcome,” Nero said, striding to the door and yanking it open. “Not that you were ever welcome here in the first place.”

“Or ever again,” Cassia called out as Tito stalked away. As he passed Nero, he muttered something under his breath that only Nero could hear—a threat that made Nero’s bear roar with protective fury.

Can I chase him off our land? Nero’s bear asked menacingly, claws itching to emerge.

No, Nero replied firmly. We need to be here for Sophie.

Tito stormed out, the door slamming behind him. A collective exhale seemed to pass through the restaurant, followed by excited murmurs as diners returned to their conversations, now with fresh gossip to dissect.

Nero turned to look at his mate, who stood rooted to the spot, the color draining from her face now that the confrontation was over.

“What have I done?” Sophie asked, her face suddenly pale. Her fingers trembled as they touched the ruby pendant at her throat, as if to draw strength from it.

“You stood up to a bully,” Cassia replied, stepping forward to squeeze Sophie’s arm

reassuringly. “And you showed the world who he really is.”

“I had no idea he was so...” Sophie’s voice trailed off, searching for the right word.

“Rude,” Nero said, moving to her side.

“Egotistical,” Cassia added.

“Mean,” Sophie finished quietly.

“I know we could stand here and insult him all night,” Cassia said, switching back to her role as restaurant manager rather than a staunch supporter of a friend in need.

“We have a dinner to prepare, and Sophie’s fans are waiting for her culinary magic.”

She ushered the staff back into the kitchen.

Sophie straightened, drawing strength from Cassia’s practical tone. Nero watched with pride as his mate visibly gathered herself, shoulders squaring beneath the elegant blue dress.

Nero wanted to scoop her into his arms and shield her from the world, but she didn’t need shielding. She needed space to breathe in her victory.

Or wallow in it, his bear teased.

Nero chuckled to himself. Or wallow.

“How are things going?” Leanne called as she and Hugo arrived through the side entrance, unaware of the drama that had just unfolded. “Is there anything you need us to do?”

“No,” Nero said, and went to Sophie and slid his arm around her shoulders. “Sophie, has it covered.”

He looked down at her, and her bottom lip trembled. For a moment, he thought she might crumble under the pressure. Then she sucked in a breath and said, “I do.”

Her gaze shifted past Nero, and her expression brightened. “Norman, Hilda, I’m so happy you are here.”

The older couple approached, hand in hand, dressed in their finest for their special night. Norman wore a well-pressed suit with a vintage pocket watch chain visible across his vest. Hilda was resplendent in an emerald-green dress that matched her bracelet.

“Happy anniversary,” Nero said as he went to meet them.

“Thank you, Nero,” Hilda said, giving him a hug. “And thank you for this.” Hilda held out her wrist and showed him the bracelet he’d repaired. The emeralds shone like plump ripe grapes on the vine.

“You are welcome,” Nero said with a smile.

“Happy anniversary,” Sophie said, joining them and presenting a beautiful bouquet of wildflowers and herbs tied with a silk ribbon.

“Thank you, Sophie,” Hilda said, leaning forward to smell the fragrant arrangement. “They are beautiful.” Her eyes twinkled as she looked up. “And so are you.”

Sophie blushed, touching the necklace at her throat. “Thank you. I hope you enjoy your special dinner tonight.”

“We’re looking forward to it,” Norman said, his arm around his wife’s waist. “Fifty years together, and we still love trying new things.”

“Me, too.” She turned to Nero, squeezing his hand. “I need to check on the kitchen. Will you make sure Norman and Hilda get seated?”

“Consider it done,” he replied, brushing a quick kiss against her temple.

As Sophie disappeared through the kitchen doors, Nero felt a surge of pride so intense it nearly overwhelmed him.

His bear rumbled with satisfaction. She stood her ground. She faced her fears. And she conquered them.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

Sophie smiled graciously as the last guests trickled out of the dining room, each pausing to thank her, compliment her, or snap a final photo of the evening. Her cheeks ached from smiling, and her heart was still racing, not from nerves, but from the lingering surge of adrenaline and joy.

As the restaurant doors finally closed behind the last guest, she let out a long breath. She'd done it. She'd finally stepped out of Tito's shadow and into the light.

"Congratulations." Cassia gave her a quick hug, then turned to marshal the kitchen staff, already deep in post-service clean-up.

"I just need a minute," Sophie murmured, mostly to herself, and slipped toward the open terrace, the pull of the quiet night stronger than anything else.

Sophie stepped onto the terrace, the cool night air a welcome relief after the heat of the kitchen and the warmth of congratulations that had followed her throughout the evening.

The dinner service had ended triumphantly, each course received with genuine appreciation that far exceeded her cautious hopes.

Nero followed close behind. Even after hours of hosting, his three-piece suit remained immaculate, not a crease out of place.

"It was perfect," he said quietly, coming to stand beside her at the stone balustrade. "Every dish, every presentation. You were magnificent."

Sophie smiled, her fingers instinctively finding the ruby necklace at her throat. A constant reminder of Nero's faith in her.

"I still can't quite believe it happened," she admitted, gazing out at the rows of grapevines stretching into the darkness. "Standing up to Tito, the way everyone rallied around me...it feels like a dream."

The memory of Tito's humiliation and hasty retreat had already begun to lose its sharp edges, softening into something that felt remarkably like closure. His power over her was gone, dissolved in the moment she'd found her voice and claimed her work as her own.

"Not a dream," Nero corrected gently. "Simply the truth asserting itself at last."

Sophie nodded, letting her gaze drift upward to where stars pierced the velvet darkness of the night sky.

Sophie nodded, letting her gaze drift upward to where stars pierced the velvet darkness of the night sky.

Behind them, in the restaurant, she could hear the distant sounds of staff clearing tables, occasional laughter, and conversation drifting through the open doors.

"Chef Marco said three different diners asked if this could become a regular event," Sophie said, still slightly awed by the reception her food had received. "And Cassia mentioned reservation inquiries for future pop-ups are already coming in."

Nero's hand found hers on the balustrade, his fingers warm and steady against her skin. "Talent always shines through."

She turned toward him, struck once again by how thoroughly he believed in her. Not

with blind faith, but with a clear-eyed appreciation of her abilities that had helped her reclaim belief in herself.

Sophie rubbed her thumb over the pendant absently, the cool gold grounding her. She hadn't just cooked tonight. She'd told a story. Shared a piece of herself with every plate.

For so long, she'd worried she couldn't do it without Tito's platform, without someone else's approval. Tonight had changed that. She'd seen it in the diners' faces, heard it in their applause.

She was no longer someone's plus-one in the kitchen. She was the main event.

"I couldn't have done it without you," she said softly. "Without this." Her fingers brushed the necklace again, the gesture now so familiar it had become almost unconscious.

"You would have found your way eventually," Nero replied. "Though I'm profoundly grateful our paths crossed when they did."

They stood in comfortable silence, shoulders nearly touching as they gazed out over the sleeping vineyard.

Sophie could feel the last remnants of tension draining from her body, replaced by a deep contentment that seemed to flow outward from her core.

For so long, she had defined herself through Tito's lens, measuring her worth against his approval.

Now, standing in the cool night air with the taste of her own success still fresh, that version of herself seemed like a stranger.

A gentle breeze stirred the vines below, carrying the scent of earth and ripening grapes. Sophie closed her eyes briefly, committing this moment to memory.

When she opened her eyes again, she noticed a subtle change in Nero's demeanor. He looked tense. His breathing was ragged.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, turning to face him fully.

"Yes," he said, though his voice carried an unusual note of...was it nervousness? That seemed impossible for Nero, who approached every situation with such calm certainty. "Everything is more than all right."

Something in his tone made Sophie's heart beat faster. She watched as Nero shifted slightly, his hand moving toward the pocket of his waistcoat. There was a barely perceptible tremor in his fingers that both surprised and intrigued her.

Sophie opened her mouth, uncertain what to say. Perhaps something about how surreal the night had been...

"Sophie," he began, then paused, seeming to collect himself. Then he went on. "These past few days have been the most extraordinary of my life."

"For me as well," she replied, her throat tightening as emotions threatened to overwhelm her.

Nero's hand emerged from his pocket, holding a small velvet box, midnight blue, against his palm.

Sophie's eyes widened as she recognized it...

similar to the one that had held her necklace, but smaller, more compact.

Her heart seemed to pause mid-beat, then resume at double speed as he dropped to one knee.

“I had planned this differently,” Nero admitted as he looked up at her. “A quiet evening at The Lookout, perhaps, or a walk through the forest clearing where I first revealed my true nature to you.”

Her lips parted in a soft breath. That memory, of the clearing, the way he had shifted before her, vulnerable and magnificent, was etched into her soul.

His hand trembled slightly as he opened the box, revealing a ring nestled against dark satin. Sophie gasped softly as lantern light caught the stone. A ruby that matched her necklace perfectly.

“But watching you tonight, your courage, your talent, your grace in triumph, I find I can wait no longer.” His eyes held hers, dark and sincere in the gentle light.

“Sophie Truro, you have accepted every part of me, human and bear alike. You have brought warmth and purpose to my life in ways I never imagined possible.”

Sophie fought to hold back her tears. Tears of joy. Tears of love.

“I know our beginning was unconventional,” he said, his lips curving into a small smile. “But I know with absolute certainty that you are my mate, my heart, my home.” He took a deep breath, his voice steady. “Sophie, may I ask you something important?”

She nodded, unable to form words past the emotion closing her throat.

“Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

The question hung in the air between them, simple and profound and perfect in its sincerity.

For a moment, she could only look at him, this extraordinary man who had appeared in her life at precisely the moment she needed him most. She thought of their chaotic first meeting—Nero stumbling at her feet with a ring box, a collision that had seemed like a mere accident but now felt like destiny.

She remembered his patient kindness when she'd arrived at The Lookout, broken and doubtful after Tito's betrayal.

The courage it had taken for him to reveal his true nature to her in the forest clearing, trusting her with a secret that defied all logic.

How far she had come since then. From a woman who had defined herself through another's eyes to someone who stood on her own strength. From someone who feared rejection to a woman who had found acceptance, not just from Nero, but from herself.

"Yes," she whispered, the word barely audible at first, then stronger as she repeated it. "Yes, I will."

"You will?" he asked, as if he could not believe his ears.

Sophie nodded, her own smile widening to match his. "I will."

Nero slipped the ring onto her finger with deliberate care, his eyes never leaving hers. "They were always meant to be worn together," Nero said softly, watching as she admired the ring. "I designed them as a set, though I hadn't dared hope you would accept both so soon."

"They're perfect together," she said, knowing he would understand she meant more

than just the jewelry.

Nero stepped closer, closing the small distance between them. He slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her close. “My mate,” he murmured. “My heart.”

“My love,” Sophie replied.

And what a perfect love they shared. It flowed like a river, from their heart to her and from her heart to theirs.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

The bookstore was packed, every corner lit with fairy lights and the warm glow of lanterns.

Copies of *Rooted in Flavor* filled the window display, each stacked beside a basket of herbs and hand-tied bundles of rosemary and thyme.

Inside, guests sipped wine from the Thornberg vineyard and sampled miniature bites of recipes from the book: lavender shortbread, wild mushroom tartlets, and citrus-honey cake.

Sophie stood near the back, beneath a garland of wildflowers strung between shelves, signing her final book of the evening. Her hand ached and her cheeks were sore from smiling, but she wouldn't have changed a thing. This night was everything she'd dreamed of—more, even.

Because this time, it was hers. Her name on the cover. Her story in every page.

"You did it," Nero said, slipping beside her once the final guest drifted toward the refreshment table. His arm brushed hers. "And no one tried to take credit for your recipes this time."

Sophie laughed softly and leaned into him. "No one dares. Not with my bear by my side."

Nero gave a quiet, amused growl, just for her ears, before slipping his arm around her waist. He was still in his crisp dark shirt and jacket from the reading, but his tie had vanished and his top button was undone—his version of completely relaxed.

“I meant every word in the acknowledgments,” she added, tilting her face toward him. “This book wouldn’t exist without you.”

“I only cleared the path,” he replied, eyes warm. “You walked it.”

They stood in companionable silence, watching the bustle of guests, the buzz of conversation and clink of glasses, the shelves filled with stories—now including Sophie’s.

“I have something to tell you,” she said after a moment, voice low.

Nero turned toward her immediately, sensing the shift. “What is it?”

Sophie reached into her coat pocket and drew out a small square card. It was a copy of the first page of her book—only this one had been altered. Beneath the original dedication was a new line, handwritten in gold ink: And to the little one already on their way...

Nero took the card. Read it twice. And then looked at her, expression shifting from puzzled to stunned wonder. “You mean...?”

She nodded, eyes glistening. “I found out last night. I wanted tonight to be perfect before I told you. But yes. We’re going to have a baby.”

For a long second, Nero said nothing. Then he reached for her, lifting her into his arms, spinning her once before grounding them both again with a deep, shuddering breath.

“I thought tonight couldn’t get any better,” he whispered into her hair.

“It just did,” she said, cupping his face. “We’re going to be a family.”

“You already are my family,” he said fiercely. “But now there’s more. You, me, and a new little cub.”

“Our little bear cub.” She kissed him softly, ignoring the bookstore crowd just beyond the stacks.

They were a perfect pairing.