

# Sunlight You Can Hold

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The first thing Enzo remembers about the gym is the sign.

It was the summer of '76, heat bounced off the asphalt in waves, he and Paulie stood side by side on the sidewalk staring up at their brand new neon miracle: GET BIG, glowing bright blue against the dusk. Except the “G” at the front already flickered like it had doubts. Enzo told Paulie he’d fix it tomorrow. Tomorrow never came. He liked it better that way. The stuttering letter reminded him of the candles in church, the ones that sputtered but never fully went out.

Paulie had laughed that day, all swagger and twenty-year-old optimism. “People are gonna think we’re geniuses,” he’d said. “Real businessmen.”

Enzo had just shrugged, hands still taped from his last fight, sweat drying into his shirt. “We just gotta keep the lights on.” And for a long time, they did.

Now, from above, his gym looked like an island—fluorescent lights flickering against concrete walls, a radio murmuring in the corner, and a ring sitting at the center like a relic. The ropes sagged slightly, taped at the corners where they’d split open over the years. Metal and sweat seeped from the faded foam mats. Out in the lot, the last rays of sunlight hit the windows in fractured orange, and the street beyond hummed with traffic. The city moved forward, always in motion, but inside everything felt frozen in time, stagnant air suffocating, and thick with dust. Sometimes Enzo swore he could still hear metal plates clanking long after everyone’s gone.

Enzo rested on the edge of the ring, elbows glued to his knees, a frayed towel draped around his neck. He was in his late fifties, face rough but still handsome in a way that suggested a fight survived. His calloused hands rest on his thighs as he studies the worn rubber tiles, tracing invisible lines in the cracks.

His gaze drifts across the room, catching on the photos hung on the opposite wall: him holding a championship belt in '71, grinning like someone who had never been hit by anything he couldn't punch back; a photo of Paulie wiping down a counter in their opening week, both of them looking way too young to own anything, and a few shots of boxers he coached over the years, kids he'd trained, pushed, patched up. Some stuck around. Some didn't.

From there, his eyes dropped to the trophy case beneath them. Dust gathered in the corners of the glass, catching the fading sun. The belt inside still looked leaded, heavier than it should be. Even behind the glass case, it pulled him in.

The bell cracked through the smoke-thick air, and the whole arena seemed to lean in at once. *Ten seconds.* That was all that stood between Enzo and the championship belt, but the world had shrunk too small for thoughts like that. It was just heat, breath, leather.

Across the ring, his opponent lurched forward on legs that didn't look like they could hold him. Sweat and blood had glued his left eye nearly shut; the other burned with a kind of feral brightness, the look of a man who'd stopped thinking about technique and slipped into something rawer, animalistic. He swung wide, reckless, the punch carving a wild arc that would've gotten him chewed out in any gym on the East Coast. Enzo felt the wind of it as it missed by inches.

He didn't think. He stepped inside, shoulder brushing the man's chest, and sent a left hook up along the jaw. Clean. Controlled. Just enough.

The man's body folded before the sound even registered in his ears.

*Nine seconds.*

The canvas thudded beneath him, a dull, final sound that echoed in Enzo's ribs. The ref dropped beside the fallen fighter, fingers slicing through the haze, voice lost under the crowd's rising

howl.

*Eight.*

Enzo kept himself still, ready. Breath poured out of him in hot bursts he couldn't steady. Across from him, the man tried to push himself up, but his arms slid, trembling, as if they were no longer under his control. His face was twisted—not with pain exactly, but with a stunned, hollow confusion, like he'd arrived at a version of the night he hadn't prepared for.

*Seven.*

Someone in the stands shouted his last name. It cracked in the air like glass.

*Six.*

The man's good eye flicked up toward Enzo, swollen and shining. Not angry. Not pleading. Just... lost.

*Five.*

The ref made the call, waving his arms. It was over.

The arena broke open with applause, stomping, a thousand voices smashing together. Somebody threw a program in the air like confetti.

Enzo exhaled once, slow, and only then let himself look away from the man on the mat. Trainers were already rushing in, kneeling, lifting his shoulders, trying to assess the damage and blink him back into the world.

He lifted the belt when they handed it to him, managed a grin when the camera flashed. The gold plate caught the lights, too bright to stare at for long.

But while the shutter clicked, he checked—just a quick glance—to make sure the man was getting to his feet. His legs

shook. His head hung low. He didn't look at Enzo.

Even while the crowd roared for the new champion, Enzo knew he'd remember this instant more vividly than the photograph. The moment the cheering blurred and the night split in two: the one he stepped into, and the one that left somebody else behind.

The clock above the door fell into rhythm with his breathing, a quiet metronome marking time now that the noise was gone.

From the front desk, Paulie cursed under his breath. "Damn thing ate another card."

Enzo looked up. "Use the spare reader."

"Already tried. This one's just pretending it's broken so it doesn't have to work Mondays."

Enzo smirked. "Like you."

Paulie grunted in response. "You're hilarious."

"Say what you want," Enzo said, tossing him a screwdriver, "but that butter knife's not fixing anything."

"Worked last week."

"Yeah, and Ma's lasagna spoon worked for changing fuses. Didn't mean it was smart."

Paulie chuckled then sighed. "You going tonight? Bruno's thing?"

"Yeah. Soon." Enzo wiped his face again. "Just need to shower."

Paulie gave him a look—half teasing, half genuine. "Don't chicken out."

"I ain't."

“You get weird at parties. You talk too much or not at all.”

“Then I’ll do both,” Enzo replied, finally climbing out of the ring.

Paulie went back to muttering at the machine. He was visiting for a week before the wedding—his life’s in Arizona now—but it’s moments like this that made time feel paper thin again, like you could poke a hole right through it, and get a glimpse of the past.

Enzo slipped into the aisles to finish his locking up ritual, emerald tracksuit whispering with each step. He fixed a crooked dumbbell someone left behind, wiped off fingerprints, tapped a treadmill button like he was checking for a pulse. Routine made holy through repetition. Lights clicked off row by row. Darkness didn’t fall; it crept, climbed, filled the gym from the floor up.

The cracked mirror by the free weights stopped him like it always did—a spiderweb in the corner from a dropped plate years back. He always said he kept it because it gave the place character. Truth was simpler and harder: it reminded him that some things break and still get used. Some things don’t need fixing to keep going.

He stared at himself the way people look at old pictures when no one’s around. The crack sliced his reflection into uneven pieces; forehead off, mouth split, gold chain scattered in fragments. Under a flickering fluorescent, he could see the years plain: the thinning hair, the stubborn softness in the jaw, the lines carved by sun, pride, and time.

When the light died, the crack caught a thin line of moon, holding the broken pieces together for a second. Then it faded, and the room sank into silence. Everything stayed where it was. Everything waited. He blinked, the weight of the moment settling, and headed for the locker room.

The locker room echoed with the faint, rhythmic sound of dripping faucets. Enzo changed into a crimson button-up, the kind that still smelled faintly of a cologne he hadn’t worn in years. His

reflection stared back from the foggy mirror—same face, different light. The years showed up mostly in his eyes. He adjusted his collar and looked down at the open laptop on the bench beside him.

“Module 5: Conducting the Ceremony.” The course narrator’s voice droned through tinny speakers. Enzo rewinds, scribbling notes on a yellow notepad: *Pause between vows. Maintain eye contact. Smile naturally.* He underlined that one twice.

He’d been at it every night for weeks. He and Patrick—Bruno’s fiancé—planned it together in secret. Enzo was going to officiate the wedding. Bruno didn’t know yet. The kid had once said, “You’re the closest thing I ever had to a Dad,” and Enzo had felt something shift inside him, something he didn’t know how to name. Maybe this was his way of showing he felt the same.

He shut the laptop and scrutinized his reflection for far too long. Examining the scar running along his cheekbone, a parting gift from Bruno’s biological father. Then there was a peppering of bruises at different stages of healing around his eyes, he still trained like he was ten years younger. The collar still didn’t sit right. He smoothed it for the umpteenth time anyway.

Outside, the city was a patchwork of neon and cracked asphalt. A bus rolled by, its windows flashing dull reflections of tired faces. Enzo locked the gym door and clipped the keys to his belt loop with a carabiner. He headed down the block, past the same liquor store, same laundromat, same bulldog barking from behind a rusty gate.

His phone buzzed. Patrick’s name lighting the screen.

“Yeah?” Enzo answered, voice low.

“You’re still coming, right?” Patrick asked, voice broken softly by the background noise of music and chatter.

“On my way. You got the music?”

“Got it. And the cake. And about a hundred balloons Bruno

pretends not to hate.”

Enzo cracked a smile. “You’re good for him.”

Patrick laughed. “He says the same about you, you know.”

“Yeah, well. Don’t tell him I said that.” Enzo said through a smirk.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

The call ends. Enzo slipped the phone back into his pocket and kept walking. The night smelled faintly of petrichor and worms. He picked up the pace, it was bound to start storming any minute.

The flower shop sat on the corner; its windows fogged from the humidity inside. Through the glass, tulips, lilies, and carnations lined the counter like soldiers standing in formation. The bell above the door chimed when Enzo entered.

“Evening, Enzo,” the florist greeted. She was an older woman with silver hair pinned back in a sunflower clip, hands always damp from the stems she trimmed.

“You’re still open.”

“Always for you,” she said, kindly. “What’s the occasion?”

He looked around, suddenly unsure. “Engagement party.”

Her face softened. “Yours?”

“Kid I know. Feels like mine, though.”

She nodded knowingly. “Then tulips. Yellow ones.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Why those?”

“They mean cheerful new beginnings. Besides, they look like sunlight you can hold.”

He nodded. "Yeah. That sounds right."

Enzo watched the florist wrap the stems in brown paper, careful, practiced. Then she tied off the yolk-colored tulips with a shiny white satin ribbon. The way her fingers guided the ribbon made him think of another pair of hands he had once tried to teach, another body stiff with uncertainty.

Bruno had been seventeen, all elbows and nerves. He held his gloves too tight, shoulders locked like a kid bracing for a storm. Enzo circled him in the ring, the canvas creaking with their foot-steps.

"You wanna beat a bigger guy?" Enzo said. "You don't out-muscle him. You out-think him. Big guys fall hard when you take their balance."

Bruno nodded, sweating through his shirt.

"Try." Enzo tapped his own chin. "Come at me."

Bruno stepped forward, threw a shaky jab. Enzo slipped it easily.

"Again."

Bruno tried. Faster this time. Enzo deflected, guided him by the elbow.

"You're flinching," Enzo said. "You can't fight someone you're scared to touch."

Bruno swallowed hard. When Enzo stepped in, Bruno reflexively jerked away, eyes squeezing shut. "*He was terrified,*" the thought ripped through Enzo like a lash.

Enzo stopped instantly.

"Hey." His voice softened. "Look at me."

Bruno blinked up at him, eyes wet with something he tried to blink away.

“You ain’t him,” Enzo said quietly. “You hear me? You’re not him. And I ain’t him either.”

Bruno’s breathing steadied. Enzo rested a hand on his shoulder. “We go slow. We go smart. And when you’re ready, you’ll hit back. Not outta fear. Outta control.”

Bruno nodded, jaw tight with determination. The kid learned quick. By the end of the month, he wasn’t flinching anymore, he was hitting back.

The bell chimed softly as Enzo stepped back onto the street. The bouquet felt good in his hands—alive, solid, grounding.

Outside, he paused under a streetlight. The tulips glowed faintly against the dark. He looked at them like they might tell him what to do next. For a moment, he almost turned back. Maybe Bruno won’t like the surprise. Maybe it’s too much, he never knew him to be sentimental.

He imagined Bruno’s face when he found out—surprised, maybe embarrassed. Then Patrick’s grin, the way he’d said, “*He’ll love it, trust me.*”

A raindrop landed on his wrist. He laughed quietly to himself. “Alright, alright,” he muttered, as if someone up there was pushing him along.

Bruno and Patrick’s place sat at the end of a quiet street, porch lanterns glowing a soft yellow, like mid-afternoon sunlight. Laughter spilled from inside. Enzo hesitated at the gate, listening. Through the window, he spotted Bruno in a white shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbows, pouring drinks and smiling in a way Enzo didn’t see often. The kid had grown into someone steady. Someone who’d found their place in the world.

He stepped up to the door and shifted the tulips from

one hand to the other. He could hear music now, something soft and old. For a second, his throat tightened, a quiet swell of pride warmed his chest. He thought of that first night years ago—the kid sitting in the lot behind the gym, eyes bloodshot, hoodie soaked clean through.

“You runnin’?” Enzo had asked then.

Bruno shrugged, voice tight “Guess so.”

“Your old man know you’re here?”

His body stiffened, “He doesn’t care.” hesitating before he continued. “Not since he found out I was...y’know.”

Enzo had known. Everyone in the neighborhood knew what the man was like, even if no one had the guts to say it. They used to spar in the ring, Bruno’s father was well known for his explosive temper, worsened by his tendency to overindulge in drink.

“Alright, you’re welcome to stay as long as you like” Enzo said, tossing him a towel.

“Start by cleaning the mats, then we’ll go get some grub.” Bruno nodded, shoulders still tight.

And somehow that had been the start of everything. He blinked the memory away, the hint of a smile tugging before he could stop it.

Now, standing on the porch, Enzo felt that same quiet pull, the one he’d felt that night behind the gym—the sense that something cracked might finally be mending.

He raised his hand to knock, but the door swung open before he touched it. Bruno stood there, startled, smile slowly spreading.

“Coach,” he said. “You made it.”

“Course I did,” Enzo replied, holding up the tulips. “For you

two.”

Bruno accepted them gingerly, eyes glistening in the light.  
“They’re perfect.”

Inside, laughter swelled. Patrick waved from the kitchen, mouthing *thank you*. Enzo nodded, a small, private smile.

For a moment, the noise faded. His heartbeat ticked calm and steady—nothing like that frantic clock back at the gym. He felt the years between them collapse into this one small, quiet joy.

He finally stepped inside, letting the warmth settle into his chest.