



*Bad Good
Behaviour*



WILD HEART RANCH: BOOK TWO

KELLY FOX

GOOD BEHAVIOR

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BEFORE WE BEGIN

I had a lot of fun writing this book, but I'll be honest, I had a completely different story arc in mind for these guys when I started. Somewhere along the way, a *dynamic* cropped up—no whips or chains or humiliation, just a few commands mixed in with some crackling sexual tension—and I was off to the races.

Whereas *Sworn Enemy* was all about the redemption arc, *Good Behavior* is for the buttoned-up rule-followers who find themselves inexplicably drawn to highly inappropriate things.

I can relate. The series ain't called *Wild Heart* for nothing.

Content notes:

First and foremost, this is a forbidden romance between an ex-con and his former prison therapist. No aspect of their relationship—including the way they initially handle their dynamic—would ever be okay in real life.

Additionally, these two liberally switch between using each other's informal and formal names, depending on where they are in their heads. Hint: when Bram starts calling Nacho by his given name, things are about to heat up.

The secondary storyline involves saving victims of human trafficking and kidnapping. While I was mostly circumspect about their experiences, the awful things they survived and their impacts are named, including forced surrogacy and varying kinds of assault. Additionally, Ant is really going through it in this book and drops some pretty horrifying details in an effort to get people to take him seriously.

Finally, one of the characters is blatantly racist, and while she doesn't use racial epithets, she says Ant's and Nacho's presumed nationality like it is one.

Spoiler alert: She's not getting a redemption arc.

To Burns.

I made the bad guys hurt a little extra just for you.

NACHO

The sun's just coming up over the Central Texas Hill Country, and it's going to be another glorious blue-sky day. I check the rearview mirror as I hit my blinker and catch the teardrop tattoo just under my left eye. Days like these remind me of how far I've come and how lucky I am to have a good job with good people.

Turning into Wild Heart Ranch, I pull up in front of the bunkhouse to pick up my buddy, Ant. Everyone here is already up and moving about, so I hit the horn twice. When the front door opens several minutes later, I hang my head out the window, ready to chirp at him to hurry his sleepy ass up.

Huh. That's not Ant.

It's Dr. Barlowe, my prison therapist.

He's just Bram now.

I served only one year of a two-year prison sentence, and he's responsible for my early release.

No, Ignacio. You were a good boy and earned that early release all on your own.

I imagine his velvet baritone in my ear, and my heart starts pumping a fucking cumbia on speed. I yank my head back into the truck, knocking it against the window frame, hoping the early-morning shadows hide me from his view.

His eyes, however, don't miss a single detail. Some things never change, I suppose. He shoves his hands in his pockets and approaches my window.

“Ignacio.”

He’s the only person who’s ever called me by my given name. Even my mother calls me Nacho.

“Dr. Barlowe,” I respond automatically.

I curse at how quickly this...dynamic...slips into place between us. In my head, he’s Bram and I’m Nacho, but the sound of my given name on his lips feels like I’ve broken sobriety. I’m high on the rumbling, perfect sound on his tongue, and I can’t help but call him what I always have.

Mostly I’m just hoping I don’t sound like a breathless teenager. That’s probably a lost cause because, even this early, Bram is clean-shaven and perfectly coiffed. He’s wearing pressed slacks with a starched button-down that strains across his brawny muscles. Even his sleeves are precisely rolled, revealing cabled forearms covered in gorgeous tattoos.

It’s so unfair—he looks as if someone went and mixed the DNA of Clark Kent and David Beckham in a lab, then added a sprinkle of genius Dom on top for extra spice. I thought I’d cornered the market on stylish and inked, but he’s got me by a cool mile.

Also, I’m pretty sure that’s Tom Ford cologne on freshly washed skin wafting into the cab of my work truck.

“You hit your head,” he says, reaching through the window.

He carefully rakes his blunt fingers through my hair, and his touch sends electricity cascading down my neck and out through my fingertips. Wincing, I grab his wrist when he passes over the spot where my skull made contact with the window frame.

“I’m fine, Dr. Barlowe. I promise.”

His eyes fall to my hand on his wrist, and I let go as he pulls away, crossing his arms.

The sun clears the horizon, highlighting the strength in his tattooed arms. I run a quick hand through my hair to ensure I’m somewhat presentable.

His eyes track my inked fingers, and a heated silence passes between us.

“Is something wrong with Ant?” I ask, needing to say something to break the spell.

He blinks, distracted. “Uh...he’ll be fine, but he got some news that upset him, and he’s going to need a minute to put himself back together. I decided it’s best if I come out and let you know what’s going on.”

“Oh.” I’m a little thrown, so I go for humor. “Don’t be coy, Dr. Barlowe. Tell me.”

His eyes flick to my lips as he rubs the back of his neck. “Sorry, it’s not bad news. It’s just—Charlie and Justin went to Vegas this weekend and got married. Ant just found out, and he’s kinda upset.”

Wait...what?

“That’s where they went?”

Shit. Now *I’m* upset. Justin and I co-manage his brother’s fencing business, but we’ve become close over the last year, and I thought we were something like best friends.

“It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. Erik flew them out on his friend’s plane.”

I check my phone, just in case I missed a message, but...no. Ouch. Still, Bram is standing right there, so I neutralize my expression.

“I don’t suppose anyone’s all that surprised. They’ve been kinda gross with all that swooning over each other.”

“Don’t be so judgmental, Ignacio. I seem to recall your love of regency romances,” Bram responds dryly. “And don’t think I didn’t notice all those poetry books in your checkout record.”

I wrinkle my nose, not wanting to admit how that poetry infiltrated my brain in a way that changed me. My words up to that point had always been harsh, a way to hide who I was, but the poems knew my truth. So does Bram, it seems.

“I was limited by the prison library, and you know it. And don’t worry about Ant—I’ve got him covered. I’ll buy him a coffee on the way to our first project and get him to talk about it. That’ll put him in a better mood.”

“That’s kind of you.” Shoving his hands into his pockets, he steps back from the window. “It is very satisfying to see you doing so well, Ignacio. Make sure to stay hydrated today.”

Recognizing the command, I inhale sharply. My eyes fall to his belt, and I can almost feel it across my thighs, binding me to the chair.

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe.”

With an efficient nod, he turns back to the house, his perfect ass flexing as he climbs the steps.

I grab the top of my steering wheel and collapse forward, a familiar swelling against my zipper. Fuck. *This is why I don’t come here anymore.*

A few minutes later, Ant comes jogging down the steps, carrying his lunch pail, but his eyes and nose are red and his mouth is tilted downward.

Climbing into the cab, he puts on his seat belt and slumps back, crossing his arms over his chest.

He’s worked up a good scowl, and I’m pretty sure there’s going to be a rant in three, two, one...

“You know, they act like I’m their little brother and then completely ignore my existence when they do the most important thing in their lives. I mean...seriously. Who goes to Vegas to get married, anyway?”

Before I can list the number of his favorite celebrities who’ve done that exact thing, he continues, “And if you’re getting married in Vegas, can’t you at least, I dunno...reach out? Tell people? *And* they didn’t even tell me. Erik did.”

“I’m in the same boat, dude. I didn’t know until Bram came out here,” I say, tensing my jaw.

“They could’ve at least given us a heads-up,” Ant grouses. “I thought when you called somebody family, that kind of

thing was assumed. Guess I was wrong.”

“Have they told anyone else?”

“No. Erik says they’re gonna announce it at that Sunday dinner thing everyone *else* is invited to, and I’m not.”

Oh, I feel that.

I mean...I get it. Sunday dinner is a Goodnight family tradition, and I’m not part of that family. *But* it’s also kind of a queer family tradition, and I won’t lie, I always feel a little left out when Justin comes in on Monday mornings with some funny Anders story. I mean, who doesn’t want to join in on a pop-up pool party?

“I hear you, man. But this is a good thing, right?” I ask, trying to be the mature one.

“Of *course* it’s a good thing. But I’d rather they didn’t call me family if they’re gonna leave me out like spare parts.”

Same, buddy. Hard same.

“Tell you what, I’ll buy you a coffee, and we’ll try to get this day started on the right foot.”

Ant shifts his jaw, pouting. “Can I get an extra shot and whipped cream with mine?”

“Friend-o, you can get whatever drink you want. Hell, I’ll even spring for a chocolate croissant.”

He lets a small smile creep onto his lips. “Okay. That’ll make it better.”

We fall into a companionable silence, letting the Texas roads take us toward the side of town where our customer lives. My mind drifts back to Dr. Abraham Barlowe and the dank therapy room where he and I first met.

I’ve just been dragged from solitary confinement to this...I dunno. Interrogation room? It’s slightly nicer than I’m used to, but I’ve been handcuffed to a table. Meanwhile, my knee is killing me, and there’s still a gash in my side.

I’m here because I fought back against one of the Aryan assholes I avoid like the plague. He’d approached me in the

yard, telling me what he'd like to do to my hole. I told him to get the fuck away from me, but I knew it was bad news and spent the rest of the day on edge.

Sure enough, he was waiting for me in my cell after dinner, leaving me to wonder which guard sold me out. This particular motherfucker's upper arm is full of tally marks counting the number of men he's punked—raped—in here. I doubt he's any shade of gay and every shade of violent psychopath.

No fucking way was I going to let him punk me without a fight. He came at me fast, shoving a shiv into my side. Blocking out the pain, I brought him to his knees with a sucker punch, then brought my knee to his face, obliterating his nose.

Fucking lights out.

I grabbed the shiv, just in case, but tossed it when the guards came in. I kept my mouth shut and cooperated, letting them throw me into solitary without a peep.

So now I'm in whatever the fuck this room is, waiting to see which kind of fuckery they've got in store for me.

After several minutes, a clean-shaven white guy with brown hair, an Adonis jaw, and a killer body walks in. He's classically fuckable, wearing khakis and a white button-down under a dark blazer stretched across impressive arms.

He walks past me, and damn, that ass. He's got cake for days, and I bet it's all muscle. That, plus his stiff demeanor, makes me want to pick around the perimeter, see if there's an edge I can exploit, a desire I can get a fingernail under and unravel all his corporate composure.

Some stiff necks need you to fuck 'em to relieve the pressure, but not this dude. He's in the room for thirty seconds, and I know without a shadow of a doubt that this guy irons his sheets and is absolutely a controlling beast in the bedroom.

He wouldn't even have to get undressed. Just unzip and take me against this table, that wall, whatever. I bet his perfectly styled hair wouldn't even move.

Silently, he sits across from me and places his clasped hands on the table. I slouch back, unbothered. I'm not sure what his deal is or why he isn't saying anything, but the one thing I've learned in prisonlandia is that you don't let the assholes with all the power know you're uncomfortable.

Or that you're hard as a fucking rock.

Letting my eyes wander down his body, I slowly lick my lips and send him a wink. His composure remains ice-cold.

Yeah, I would bottom so hard for this one.

Finally, with the smallest raise of his brow, he introduces himself. "Hello, Ignacio. My name is Dr. Barlowe."

There are about fifteen ways to say my given name, but he's managed to land on the version I use—Ig-nah-see-oh. I know for a fact, however, that there's a note in my file instructing staff to call me Nacho.

Wondering what his play is, I lift my chin.

When he realizes that's the entirety of my answer, he continues, "I've been asked to talk to you about the incident in your jail cell."

"You mean when that Hitler motherfucker tried to punk me? Or when I was put in solitary with a stab wound and not even a fucking Band-Aid?"

His prominent Adam's apple slowly rises and lowers. "I was not made aware of any injuries. I will have the doctor examine you after we're finished here."

"You're a doctor. You've got strong-looking hands. Why don't you examine me?"

"My doctorate is in psychology, with a focus on trauma."

"So, no prostate exam then? Pity."

His expression is a solid stone wall. Nothing's getting through this one. Fuck, that's sexy.

"I'm here because I was asked to inform you that Mr. Hightower died from his injuries."

My throat constricts. Fuck. I want to vomit all over this table. But I can't let this Frosty The Snowman motherfucker see any of that.

"That doesn't make any sense. I broke his nose. You can't die from a broken nose."

"You can if your airway is compromised. He was deprived of oxygen until he could be transported to medical, which was delayed because several fights broke out after you were taken away. By the time they got him to medical, it was too late."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"So, what now? I'm here on a murder charge?"

Dr. Barlowe, or whatever, holds up his hands. "I don't believe so. The state's attorneys are involved, but my understanding is the video proves it was a premeditated attack and you acted in self-defense. It also showed that you took his weapon but released it when guards got there, which works in your favor."

I roll my eyes, the vein in my temple pounding.

Breathe, pendejo. Focus.

"Let me guess," I say, sounding cocky as fuck. "It also showed me getting stabbed and receiving no medical attention, so they want this to go away."

"I wouldn't know about that. I've been asked to provide support because your attacker died."

"Not because I was attacked, but because the attacker died. Got it."

"Violence has escalated in the two days since his death. Given the volatile nature of the situation, the warden has chosen to keep you in solitary for the rest of your sentence."

I lean forward, a little dizzy.

Fuck, I really might throw up.

"So because I didn't let him punk me, I get to be jumped, stabbed, and kept in the hole for a year? What the fuck?" I

ask, yanking on my handcuffs, the sound loud against the metal table.

“Ignacio, I’m going to have to ask you to calm yourself. While our conversation is not recorded, this room is under surveillance, and guards will not hesitate to intervene if you are seen acting aggressively.”

“You have no idea how fucking aggressive I can get.”

“Your record indicates you’re a model prisoner with no marks on your record. I would hate for that to change.”

Fuck this guy and his resting bastard face. I fucking killed somebody, and I can’t fucking breathe right. Rising, I kick away the chair, satisfied by the deafening clang of metal on concrete. I yank ineffectively at the bolted-down table, ratcheting up the noise in the small room.

A guard pokes his head in, and Dr. Barlowe stills him with a single gesture.

“This is a therapy session, and Ignacio is allowed to express his feelings. He’s upset but unable to harm himself or me. I will call if I need your assistance.”

Disgruntled, the guard retreats.

“That’s right, bitch. Listen to your Daddy,” I shout after him. The guard slams the door, the metallic snap of the lock ringing in my ears.

Unruffled in the extreme, Dr. Barlowe’s voice is calm. And firm as steel.

“Sit. Down.”

“Fuck you, you Dom-looking motherfucker.”

“Ignacio.”

The deep, cold way he says my name sends a shiver down my spine. I like it.

“It’s adorable you think you can tell me any-fucking-thing.”

“Check your attitude, Ignacio. Now.”

“Say please, Daddy.”

His eyes somehow grow colder, and I wonder if maybe I finally went too far. Tilting his head to the side, Dr. Barlowe reaches for his belt.

Oh shit.

“The fuck are you doing?”

By way of answering me, he removes it swiftly, creating a powerful crack that echoes through the room. I take an uneven breath, ignoring the precum sliding down my hard cock.

Silently he picks up the metal chair and sets it behind me. I turn to mouth off some more, but he leans close, his lips nearly brushing my earlobe.

“Sit. Down.”

He pairs this with a press of his thumb right behind my knee, causing my leg to buckle. My ass lands in the perfectly placed chair, and before I can mount a defense, he’s lashed his belt over my thighs, strapping me to the seat. His eyes pause on the tent in my prison-issue jumpsuit, but he stands without comment.

“You can’t do this.”

He smooths down his shirt and adjusts his jacket, rounding the table to sit across from me once more.

“You can’t do this,” I repeat helplessly as my cock throbs.

“Mr. Rivera, I believe in you. We can utilize the rest of your sentence to prepare you for the outside world. My instruction is purely for your betterment. Surely, compliance is not that heavy a burden.”

I snap my mouth shut, unsure how to process the leather across my thighs and the words: I believe in you.

“Mm. Better,” he says, examining me. His brow wrinkles as he leans over the table and taps under my chin. “Sit up. Straighten your shoulders.”

I comply without a thought, then curse. He raises a brow, and I suck in my lips. While my chest rises and falls rapidly

with my efforts, he sits across from me, breathing easy. The only evidence of a struggle is the single bead of sweat tracking down his temple.

My cock brushes against the table apron, sending a shiver across my hips. Holding his eyes, I carefully shift my hips, letting my cockhead drag back and forth across the narrow bit of underhang.

Tapping his lips, he rises like some sort of mythical creature, sending adrenaline racing through my veins. Circling behind me again, he grips the chair on either side of my hips, pulling me back just far enough that I can no longer rub off against the table. This puts a slight stretch on my cuffed arms, and he corrects my posture by placing his hand at the very top of my chest, almost at the base of my throat.

“Mm. Perfect,” he says in his rumbling, commanding voice.

I inhale sharply and focus on the warm leather across my thighs as he retakes his seat.

“Eyes up.”

Mine snap to his and, unless I’m mistaken, there’s a pleased twinkle in his eyes. Motherfucker is enjoying this.

God help me, so am I.

“Now, talk to me about what you want to do when you get out and what plans you have to accomplish those goals.”

Unable to stop myself, I tell him everything.

BRAM

Why did I go out to the truck? Nacho didn't need my warning. Hell, he's been avoiding me for months now, ever since we ran into each other at the grand opening.

You know why you went out there.

Yes, I do. I had to put eyes on him, make sure he's taking care of himself.

"Brother, what's going on?" Levy asks, nudging me. "Dude, you dropped, like, half a shell in the eggs."

My heart is still racing from the feel of his thick, black hair between my fingers and how quickly he sank back into his role, breathless as he said my name. My proper name.

Dr. Barlowe.

Nacho is very much his own man, but when we slip into this dynamic...*Ignacio* is all mine.

"Bram?"

I startle and look over at Levy, who's pointing to the pan in front of me. I look down and mutter a curse before walking the pan to the trash can and dumping the contents.

"You okay, brother?" Levy asks, handing me the carton of eggs.

"I'm okay. I just didn't sleep well last night. Gonna need some extra coffee to get through this day."

I'm not somebody who easily lets people in, but my brother and I have always been close, even if we are complete

opposites.

I'm starched collars and pressed slacks, he's old band T-shirts and blue jeans. I go to the barber for a trim every other week, and Levy's schedule for hair maintenance is spotty at best. I write lists, he writes poems. I like to dissect thought patterns, and he likes to let horses help people listen to themselves.

While we are different, neither of us looks at the other with judgment. I admire his free spirit, and he admires my practical attention to detail. We've always been there for each other, and finding this job was a stroke of luck and exactly what we needed.

As much as we are open with each other, I can't imagine sharing what went on with Nacho in our prison sessions. I've always been the kind of person to take charge, but I'd never done anything like that with a patient or a lover. I don't even know if I could describe it.

I liked telling him what to do.

Sounds like nothing, but in our limited time together, it was everything.

As I crack new eggs into the pan, I laugh, thinking about how naive I'd been to think a prison system would mesh with my need to keep order.

Nothing is orderly in a prison system.

Moments before I'd walked into that life-changing first session, I'd been informed one of my longtime patients had died by suicide. His parole had been denied again and, despite the fact we'd talked about that possibility, the moment he was placed in his cell, he grabbed the syringe he'd stolen from medical and took a massive overdose of his homemade prison meth.

I should've cancelled the session, but my newest prisoner assignment, Ignacio Rivera, had killed a known rapist in self-defense. He was on the shortlist for early release due to good behavior, and the warden wanted to verify we weren't releasing a dangerous criminal into the wild.

I'd known from his records that he was a good man I could help, and I'd needed a fucking win. According to his file, he'd asked to be called Nacho, but when he'd defiantly flirted with me right out of the gate, something inside me snapped. I'd decided right then and there that *Ignacio* would listen to me. That this one would make something of his life, so help me, God.

As a therapist, I am painfully aware of how irrational my actions were, but I had to be right about Ignacio Rivera. Had to.

When Nacho was released, I realized I wasn't built for prison therapy. Or maybe I just couldn't keep returning to that depressing building, knowing I'd never see him again. I should have felt far more guilty about our dynamic, but if I'm honest with myself, I just missed it.

And him. God, I missed *him*.

In the meantime, Levy had been enjoying his work as an equine therapist with the educational programs in the Waco area but could never make a decent living. So, I quit my job at the prison and moved in with my brother. Lost in a holding pattern, I did PRN work for the local hospital network while waiting for a sign. A sign for what? I had no idea.

While helping non-incarcerated patients is, I guess, easier at some level, dealing with Big Medicine reminds me far too much of Big Prison. For the most part, the doctors and nurses want what's best for the patients, but this country's healthcare system doesn't give a cold shit about the people under its care.

Having already fudged my ethics in prison, I found it easy to alter insurance paperwork so patients with severe mental health issues could get their medications and return to their families. On more than one occasion, I'd worked with our hospital chaplain to misdirect or delay an immigration officer to give a patient time to slip out the door.

My boss had warned me on several occasions that the local head of ICE was complaining about the hospital's inability to hold on to undocumented patients. She often did this while

pushing a problematic case folder across the desk to give me the opportunity to do it again.

When the county district attorney threatened to file charges, pertinent video tapes suddenly went missing and they had to withdraw their threats. To this day, I don't know if the chaplain or my boss stole the tapes, and I've never asked.

Several months later, Charlie Wills reached out to Levy and offered him a job at an equine therapy center. Levy discovered Charlie also had an opening for an experienced trauma therapist, and it felt like my sign had finally shown up. I'd go with my brother and stop living this half-life.

Time to start over in a new place.

The fact I'd directed Nacho to apply for a job in the same area hadn't swayed my decision in the slightest. Besides, I had no way of knowing if he'd gotten the job.

The interview with Charlie had gone better than expected. He'd offered us the positions on the spot, pending a background check. We come from a rough neighborhood, but neither of us has anything on our records, so it was a lock.

A new start for the therapy brothers.

While waiting on the official offer from Charlie, I casually perused Instagram and happened to find Nacho's account. I'd been amazed at how quickly I verified he got the fencing job and was living just outside of Johnson City. Not that any of that is relevant.

From a professional standpoint, it's completely, utterly irrelevant.

When our background checks came back, Charlie asked us out to the ranch for a quick talk. Not sure what to expect, we were still surprised by the setup of the therapy offices. They're in the barn itself. Even if patients are not involved in equine therapy, they'll still be around horses and other barn animals.

A WHITE CAT MISSING HALF AN EAR SITS AT THE TOP OF THE STALL and meows as Charlie invites us into his office.

“Don’t worry about Smokey. She likes to say hi to everyone.”

More surprising than the setup is the NDA he has us sign as we walk in the door. Before Charlie can bog us down with the niceties, Levy cuts straight to the point.

“Are you rescinding either of our job offers?”

“No. But a few things have changed, and I need to give you more of the broader picture so you can decide if this is still a good fit for you.”

It’s then that his stoic business partner, Erik, walks in, joined by a sweet-tempered bloodhound.

Levy sits and puts his forearms on Charlie’s desk. “This should be interesting.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Erik says, dropping into a chair next to Charlie. The dog, whose name tag says Moose, does a series of lazy circle eights between Charlie’s legs before lying down.

Charlie pauses while I sit next to Levy, then dives right in. “As you can well imagine, a community equine therapy center is not exactly a money-making machine,” he admits, grimacing a little. “And the search-and-rescue element is all volunteer.”

“I was wondering about that,” Levy responds, stroking his beard.

That’s funny because, of the two of us, you’d think I’d be the one concerned with the profitability of the business we signed up to work for. Turns out, I haven’t even considered it. The business isn’t what’s holding my attention.

“Erik and I fund this place with a private, high-end bounty hunting operation, have done for years. It’s all perfectly legal, but when you’re being paid by an oil tycoon to find their runaway middle child, you often find things you can’t unsee.”

“What things?” I ask, thinking I know the answer. Wealth reveals a person’s true nature, and human nature is often pretty fucked up.

I would know.

“Before I tell you, I’ll remind you that you’ve signed an NDA.”

Levy and I share a glance, then nod.

“A subsection of the mega-rich like to traffic humans. Erik and I started turning over whatever evidence we’d found to the appropriate authorities.”

Having counseled a number of trafficking victims through both the prison system and the hospital, I admire the man for the courage of his convictions.

Levy, knowing the futility of their plight, snorts. “Bet the appropriate authorities were chomping at the bit.”

“Sometimes it was enough to fire up the authorities, but far more frequently, they’d look the other way.” Charlie scowls, seeming to remember something specific. “But neither of us could’ve lived with ourselves had we ignored what we found. So we started going on self-funded rescue operations.”

Levy and I exchange a glance.

That takes balls.

“Doesn’t sound totally legal,” I note dryly.

Erik responds, “We don’t go out of our way to break the law, but we will do what needs to be done to save the people who’ve been swept up in this.”

“And it’s just you two?” I ask, wondering if I’m missing something.

Charlie clarifies, “Yes and no. Our main focus is the people who have been trafficked and enslaved. We try our best to direct the local authorities to the criminals running the operations, but we also don’t wait to help the people if the authorities are too busy ignoring traffickers and pedophile priests to go after trans kids.”

Facts.

“Okay, but do the criminals ever come after you?” Levy asks.

Charlie’s fingers go to a scar near his hairline. “I had a guy come after me here, but that didn’t go well for him.”

“Wait,” I say, leaning forward, tapping the desk. “Here as in here?”

“Yes. He broke into my house.”

“And...”

“It didn’t go so well for him,” Charlie repeats with a raised brow.

I have more questions, but Erik sends me a cut-it gesture while Levy goes in with another question.

“What if the authorities are on the take?”

“We now have contacts down the road in Wimberley who can take care of the traffickers extrajudicially if the authorities are somehow involved.”

“Wimberley as in Wimberley, Texas? As in swimming holes and shopping Wimberley?”

Charlie grimaces. “Eh...the less you know about that, the better.”

“And what happens to the people in all of this?”

“We work with legitimate anti-trafficking organizations on the ground as much as possible, as they are the most equipped to help with reunification, transport, and immigration.”

“That’s admirable,” I respond, “but I’m curious as to why you’re telling us all this.”

“Sometimes the people being rescued fall through the cracks in the system. We find alternatives for them, which sometimes requires transitional housing. As much as we want to keep our anti-trafficking work separate from Wild Heart, we’re not going to throw someone to the wolves just because they don’t fit into some bureaucratic box.”

“So we’ll occasionally be working and living with victims of severe trauma,” Levy verifies, which checks with my understanding.

“Yes. In fact, we’ve recently had such a person join us, which prompted us to make sure you have the facts before you officially sign on.”

“Yeah, but this one’s not temporary,” Erik grunts. “He’s ours, and he’s here to stay.”

My eyes widen at the gruffness in his tone. “Uhhh...are you saying that you own him now?”

Erik sends me a look. “I thought you were supposed to be the smart one.”

Levy laughs, and I discreetly elbow him.

“And no,” Erik answers brusquely. “Ant is ours, as in he’s been staying with my family for a while, and now he’s been set up with a local job, and we’re about to offer to have him live here at the bunkhouse in exchange for cleaning up after the horses.”

Moose lets out a low woof of agreement, and Erik rubs his head.

Levy and I share another look, and I lean in. “I have no problem providing emergency support for a temporary resident, but it’s considered unethical to provide therapy to a member of the same household.”

Guilt twinges my belly. Who appointed you the king of ethics?

“He’s refusing therapy at this time. But he’s a sweet guy and he needs friends.”

“Friends?” I ask, raising my brow.

“Yeah,” Charlie says, using his fingernail to scratch at something on his desk. “He’s still learning how to live as a free adult.”

“I don’t see any problem with that,” Levy says, knowing I agree.

“Good,” Charlie says, letting out a relieved breath. “So you’re still interested in the positions?”

I don’t even have to look at my brother to know his answer.

“Yes,” we say simultaneously.

While I’m happy about the prospect of working with my brother in his chosen field, the addition of these severe cases makes the years of feeling lost fall away.

These are people I can help.



“BRAM?” LEVY ASKS, AND I HAVE A FEELING IT’S NOT THE first time he’s called my name.

I blink, realizing I’ve been staring out the window. He raises his brow, and I look down at the eggs, snarling at the burnt edges.

“Bram, what’s going on? This thing with Charlie and Justin got you in a knot too?”

“Uh, no. But I went out and talked to Nacho, and he seems upset as well.”

“He’s your patient from Waco, right?”

“Uh, yeah. I was asked to talk with him after a violent incident,” I say, omitting the more prurient details. “I didn’t work with him long. He didn’t have much time on his sentence and wanted to get out and do good wherever he landed.”

“Looks like he followed through. It’s nice to see the community accept him, even with his history,” Levy says, keeping his tone even.

He respects me enough not to pry, and hopefully, he’ll assume I’m keeping patient confidentiality, not that I’ve crossed major ethical lines.

Fuck. I’m not even sorry.

Just thinking about it, I can picture leaning over to strap Ignacio in, smelling his arousal mixed with the prison laundry soap in his always pristine clothes. It was all I could do not to sink my mouth onto his cloth-covered cock. I would push his chair under the table when I wanted him to access the underhang he could rub himself against, and I'd keep it back when I wanted him to sit there with no relief.

What we did was never about pain or humiliation. Even as I'd tighten the belt across his legs, I never locked it in place. He could've loosened the belt by simply parting his thighs, but he never did. He wanted someone to pay attention, to notice whether or not he complied.

And I'd noticed everything. I'd needed his breathless compliance, needed to soothe his upset heart, and needed his cheeky rebellion when he started feeling better. I loved instructing him on how to sit properly and impress potential employers with his words and ideas. We'd practice interview questions, and he could barely hide his satisfaction when I praised his hard work.

In our last session, I'd pushed our usual boundaries further than ever. I'd given him instructions about cleaning his cock thoroughly as I stepped up to him. He was seated, and I knew I was too close, yet I rocked forward as he turned to me. I could maybe fool myself into thinking it'd simply been a mistake, but I palmed the back of his head and rolled my hips, a split second of madness.

I suppose that doesn't sound like much compared to how other people have abused their power, but I know what I did. He acted as if nothing had happened, but the sound of Ignacio inhaling my scent fueled many, many instances of self-pleasure in the days and weeks after.

Worse, that was the last time I saw him in prison.

By the time I found out the warden had approved Ignacio's early release—which I'd signed off on—he was already gone. I certainly couldn't admit that it felt like a profound loss. I'd swung from proud to distraught on a minute-by-minute basis,

shocked to find I'd grown to need him as much as he needed me.

God, don't be a creeper, Abraham.

I've mostly kept this to myself because I don't want Levy implicated in any way, but maybe also because I want him to still think of me as his rule-follower brother.

What a joke.

Once I've managed to cook a pan of edible scrambled eggs, I allow myself to remember Ignacio's beautiful smile. I don't know if I can stand to be away from him again, knowing he's so close.

NACHO

Ant and I make our way to Willow, the tiny, super-queer coffee shop just past Pedernales Falls. I never take anyone here, but I think Ant needs it. Hell, I do too. I don't think Justin and Charlie are purposefully excluding us, but Ant's right—it does sting to be called brother, to be treated with kindness, and then not included in the typical family things.

Honestly, if I said something about the Sunday dinner, I know we would instantly be invited and apologized to. But I resent having to point it out.

“Willow?” Ant asks as we park the truck. “What kind of coffee shop goes by the name Willow?”

I point out the logo, a bunch of delicate stems with wispy balls of white fluff running up the sides, tied together with a rainbow ribbon.

He cracks up, a sight that makes me feel way better than when this ride started.

“Is that a *pussy* willow?”

“Yyyep,” I say, popping the *P*. “Lesbian-owned coffee shops are the *best*.”

Shaking his head, he checks his phone as he hops out of the truck. The smile slides off his mouth and a snarl takes its place. I up-nod him, and he shoves the phone back into his pocket.

“Charlie just texted me. Says he and Justin will be back tomorrow, and he’s got big news for me.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket. Rolling my eyes at Ant, I check, and sure enough, it’s pretty much the same message.

“Is it wrong that I want to ruin their ‘surprise’ and tell them we already know?” I ask, setting off the bell as I open the door for Ant.

He scrunches his nose. “I dunno. Ask me after coffee.”

Speaking of which, the smell of coffee beans roasted by artisanal lesbians wafts over me, and I try to put on a happy face.

“Hey, Z.”

Zoya’s been Willow’s head barista since her sister opened the shop, and there’s something comforting in seeing her drying a stack of coffee mugs, wearing her black-gray-white-and-purple Ace T-shirt, as we walk in.

“You finally bring a friend, and you’re *both* giving Wednesday Addams,” she deadpans.

I like Zoya because she doesn’t try to be too cheerful in the morning and gives as good as she gets. Her hair is currently a faded violet, and she’s wearing a few more piercings than normal.

“Wow, Zoya, you look positively festive.”

“It’s International Asexuality Day,” she says, pointing to the board. “And Susan let me set the special.”

I find the special and crack up. It’s the AroAce: a cup of plain black coffee, no cream, no sugar, full price.

“An inspired choice, but the two of us need all the extras.”

She grins. “Don’t I know it. I saw you coming and restocked the creamer at the coffee station.”

“Thank you, my friend. I’ll let Ant tell you what he wants.”

Ant steps up to the counter, self-consciously touching his ponytail. I think the Wednesday Addams comment hit a nerve.

Looking up at the vast variety of coffee options on the chalkboard behind her, he asks quietly, “Can I get a Mexican vanilla mocha with an extra shot and whipped cream on top?”

“Sure thing, baby queer. Would you like some chocolate shavings on top of that?”

His eyes go wide. “You know I’m gay?” he asks, looking around, touching his ponytail again.

“Not to assume or anything, you just look like the kind of guy who’s been told he was wrong his whole entire life.”

The thing about Ant is he’s a little...uneven. I don’t know his whole story, but I know it’s not good. I’ve also learned he can swing between shy and prickly, and there’s not much rhyme or reason to what’ll set him off.

Setting his jaw, he fixes her with a glare. “Actually, the johns who passed me around always said I was their most cooperative *girl*. Saved my face on more than one occasion.”

Zoya, whose default setting is unbothered, swallows thickly, flicking her eyes to mine. I grimace, sending her a subtle shake of my head.

I had no fucking idea.

“Shit, dude. I mean...um. Pronoun check?” she asks, completely flustered.

“He/him. Johns like that are always fucking straight. They just like little ‘girls,’” he says with pointed air quotes, “who can’t get pregnant.”

Jesus. Fucking. Christ.

“Ant...” I start, but he holds up his hand, silencing me as he stares down my favorite barista.

Zoya takes a deep breath and sends Ant an understanding look.

“Welp. Guess I can’t charge you for this now,” she says, quickly adding a couple of croissants to our tray.

He snatches the chocolate croissant and steps back before taking a bite. “Thank you.”

I turn to her to pay for my coffee, and she waves me off. We share a longer look.

“Shit, I stepped in that one,” she whispers as Ant wanders off.

“Yeah, but it was fun to see somebody put you in your place for once.”

“Shut up.”

She glances back over at Ant, worrying her bottom lip.

“Hey. You didn’t know. I didn’t either.”

Blowing out a gust of air, she responds, “Yeah, but I’m usually the one getting onto others about making assumptions. Lesson learned. Think I should apologize again?”

“Knowing Ant, probably not. But next time we come in, make sure to give him shit. He’ll appreciate it.”

“That *is* my specialty.”

I leave her a tip for the full value of the order and fill my ridiculous travel mug, adding more cream and sugar than reasonable. We get out to the truck, and I check in with him.

“You okay?”

He shifts his jaw, pulling off a piece of croissant and eating it before he answers.

“I’m okay. I didn’t mean to snap at her like that.”

“I think you just made sure she knew what was what.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I am a little surprised though. You’ve never talked about what happened to you.”

He shrugs. “I’m tired of people thinking they know me just from looking at me. Like I’m weak or something. But I’m not, and if they knew what was in my head...well. They wouldn’t think that anymore.”

“Yeah?”

“Put it to you this way. I’ve been *working* since I was eleven, and this is the only job I’ve ever had that allows me to keep my gender and my clothes.”

I clench my fists, taking a few deep breaths.

He continues as though having opened a spigot on a truth he’s been holding inside him for too long, “My grandfather sold me to traffickers. I sorta...went numb for a bunch of years, I guess. Got passed around a lot. Never even dreamed of what a different life could be like.”

“Shit, Ant.”

I fucking hate people sometimes.

Staring out the window as people go in and out of the coffee shop, he explains, “Charlie and Erik pulled me out of a hotel room in downtown Austin. So this whole thing with Charlie getting married and not telling me makes me feel, like, disposable all over again.”

“Ant,” I say, reaching across the console for an awkward hug. “He doesn’t view you that way, man. Super promise.”

He stiffens, and I immediately pull back.

“Sorry. Shouldn’t have hugged you without asking.”

“Yeah, I don’t...” He lets out a ninety-year-old sigh, touching his ponytail. “Hugs are usually okay, but they’re hard sometimes too.”

“Seriously, dude. I want, like, five minutes alone in a room with your grandfather.”

He finally turns and meets my eyes with a fierce sort of determination. “Me too. Actually, I have a very long list of names of people I’d like to revisit.”

“You kept a list?” I ask, shocked.

He taps his temple. “Yep. Memorized every single one of them. Wrote them down when I got to the Bashes to get them out of my head, but...I want them all dead.”

He continues to look into my eyes, searching for my response.

Tapping my teardrop tattoo, I meet his confession with one of my own. “I’ve killed two men, Ant. One was terrorizing my neighborhood, and the other was trying to rape me in my cell. Both times I nearly threw up. Couldn’t stand the thought of taking a life. But if we ever run across someone who hurt you like that? I’ll kill him with my bare hands, and I won’t think twice about it.”

He runs his hand along his ponytail and returns to looking out the window. “Yeah?”

“Anything for you, little brother.”

“Thank you, Nacho.”

I pull out of the parking lot, and we ride in silence as we make our way over to the new project, a bit of newly developed land right outside the city limits.

Bonnie Mullins, our project contact, waits as we pull into the drive. She waves us over with a broad grin.

“On time and everything,” she says, smiling genuinely. “I appreciate that.”

I set aside Ant’s and my conversation and put on a professional smile. “We try to keep as close to the schedule as possible. By the way, I’m Nacho, and this is Ant.”

“Nacho and Ant, got it. I’m Bonnie. Just you two working on this?”

“Yes, ma’am. This is actually a pretty easy installation since it’s a chain-link fence. We’ll spend today putting in the posts, let them cure overnight, and come back tomorrow morning to add the fencing. After that, you’ll be good to go.”

“Excellent. My dogs are anxious to have a yard,” she says, pointing to the two monsters behind her.

“Shit,” Ant says, stepping back.

I agree. They’re quiet. And they’re staring us down like they’re calculating the manner in which they’d like to kill us

and eat our entrails.

She sees his reaction, and her eyes go wide. “Oh no. They look vicious, but that’s all a big smoke screen. I promise, once they know you mean me no harm, they’re sweet as pie.”

“Those are some huge German Shepherds,” I say, grimacing. Fuck, their teeth are big and *sharp*.

She nods. “I worked with a lady who trains and sells them. She’s a little rough around the edges, but when I said I was a little nervous being a single woman out in the sticks, she said she had a bonded pair I might like. She trained them to be nearly silent and to take German commands, but I’m teaching them English,” she says with a giggle.

Ugh. First of all, I’m flattered she feels safe enough around Ant and me to talk about the fact that she lives alone. Hell, I *look* like an ex-con, no matter how nicely I dress. Women, way more than men, tend to read something *safe* about me, and I’m kinda proud of that fact.

It’s just...I know the German commands are a *thing*, but it’s something I saw with the skinheads from my old neighborhood. Like they wanted to be extra in their devotion to the Third Reich.

She must read something in my expression because she holds up her hands. “I’ll keep them inside the whole time, but I promise they are way more bark—er, death stare—than bite.”

Knowing it’ll make her feel better, I respond, “Honestly, they’re the perfect dogs for a single woman living alone. I’m glad you’re giving them a great yard to play in.”

The minor tension of the moment dissipates, and her smile returns. *Win*.

I grab the clipboard and have her sign the required documentation. She hands me back my rainbow flare pen, smiling. “Nice pen.”

“Thanks. Got it at Austin Pride last year. They were a hot-ticket item, but I knew the guy handing them out.”

“Then you might want to put it away because I’m a notorious pen thief,” she jokes.

Laughing, I pull the pen away in a dramatic fashion.

She cracks up, taking it from me. “No, no! It’s accidental, I promise!”

I snatch it back from her playfully, and the three of us share a good, hard laugh that seems to reset the day. Even the dogs have gone from plotting our demise with a 1940s German accent to floppy-eared, head-tilted curiosity.

“Thanks, Bonnie. We’ve got everything we need to get started on the fence posts, and we’ll let you know when we’re done.”

“Sounds great, y’all,” she says, rubbing her hands together. “I have a cooler on the side of the house filled with waters and Gatorades, and there’s a little basket next to that with protein bars. Feel free to have as much of that as you like.”

I turn to Ant. “See? The day’s already looking better.”

He nods, resting his head on my shoulder. “It is, Nacho. Thanks for listening.”

BRAM

I thank the translator and disconnect the Zoom call. My therapy sessions are usually with locals, but this was with Biyu, one of the trafficking victims we're housing until we can find a way home for her.

We're sitting in my office in the Equine Therapy and Rescue center, a beautiful barn built by the surrounding community. Levy also has a small office, but most of his work is in the cathedral-like indoor riding area surrounded by stables.

I've decorated my office with soothing prints and bright greenery, but my favorite feature is the window looking out on Levy's equine therapy space. It has blinds that I allow patients to control, but they almost always leave it open enough to see the horses.

It's all meant to lend a sense of peace, but I'm not sure how well that's working today. I have a small couch on the wall opposite the window, paired with two comfortable chairs around a pretty rug. It works for a variety of comfortable seating options. Because I'm screen sharing to the flat-screen above the couch, we're using the chairs, a setup I'm starting to call trauma theater.

I'm told Biyu is fifteen years old, but she's not even five feet tall and severely underweight. The translator I used today is trained in translating trauma, and I used every last bit of her skills.

Smokey, the cat, has taken a liking to Biyu, and on days like this, she curls up at Biyu's feet, a silent show of support. Today I learned Biyu was taken from her mountain village in China and somehow ended up in Dallas. Ours is one of the worst states for human trafficking, and today was particularly hard.

I'm usually able to separate myself from the issues, but something about her reminds me of the first time I met Ant. I don't know all the details, and I'm committed to letting him come to me in his own time, but I'd bet my paycheck he and Biyu have a lot in common.

I pull up the translation app on my phone and speak into it, letting it talk for me.

"You did very well today. That must have been hard. You are brave."

Smokey jumps into her lap, and she pets her while avoiding my eyes.

"Xiè xiè," she says, which means thank you. The app translates that and her question. "Am I really going to see my family again?"

"We are trying very hard to arrange that."

She looks up, her eyes meeting mine with a terrified sort of hope. She wants to believe me, but I doubt, given everything that's happened to her, that trust comes easily.

She looks about as drained as I feel, so we leave my office and step up to the low fence that surrounds the riding area. Levy is leading one of the horses—Apple Jack, I think—in a circle, something he does when he knows I've got a particularly tough session.

Smokey climbs over the fence, then does her little circle eights around Levy's and the horse's feet before walking back toward us. You never can tell what a cat is thinking, but Levy follows her. Biyu's eyes widen as Levy approaches with the tall, gentle horse.

"Would you like to pet him?" Levy asks into his translator app.

It takes a few tries to make himself understood with the infernal technology and some creative miming, but when she nods and timidly steps a little closer, we know she understands.

I have my doubts as her delicate fingers stroke up and down his nose, but Apple Jack stands absolutely still. Surprising Levy and me, she opens the gate, stepping off the walkway into the therapy space.

Running her hand down Apple Jack's neck, she steps closer. I silently check in with Levy, and he nods. This is a good thing.

As her hand smooths up and down the horse's velvety hide, a few tears fall and hit the soft dirt. Stilling her hands, she leans into him, pressing her face against his neck while Smokey sits at her feet. After a few seconds, her shoulders rise and fall, and her faint cries echo lightly through the space.

Levy and I share a brief, unspoken moment, both of us wiping tears. This is why we do what we do.

Then, as quickly as it started, her cries settle, and she steps away from Apple Jack with a quick pat and a respectful bow. Taking a moment to wipe her eyes, she sends Smokey a wave and then gives me a small nod.

We take the pathway back to the bunkhouse, the crushed granite crunching softly beneath our feet as we walk in companionable silence. I accompany her down the hallway to the room she shares with Katrina, a young woman who came to us a couple of weeks ago.

The translator helped Biyu tell us that she would rather bunk with someone else, and we got lucky with Katrina. She's a good egg, funny and sweet, and when Biyu sees her again, she grabs her arm as if she'll never let her go.

Katrina and I share a glance. Helping Biyu also helps Katrina, and I'm glad to see it. I cross the house back to my room and crawl into bed, allowing myself ten minutes to deflate while staring at the ceiling.

Levy: I need to hit something.

I'd forgotten that Levy also had a heavy session today. He's helping a local woman leave her husband, and the police have been involved multiple times.

***Bram:** I'll be right over.*

I change into my workout gear and head back to the therapy barn. I meet with Levy in the back, where we have mats laid out. Wordlessly, we step onto the mats, bow to each other, and begin trading self-defense moves.

I start with a sneaky behind-the-knee kick, immediately taking him to the floor. Dancing back, I let him reset, and he comes after me with a hip jab and full-on body slam onto the mat.

"Fuck," I breathe out. "Guess your day looked like mine."

"Yep. You working with that other kid from the Dallas area?"

I nod, accepting his help up.

We nod, and I go in with a strike, which he blocks while I avoid a kick. We separate, bouncing on our feet, fists raised.

"I'd like just a few minutes alone in a room with my patient's asshole husband," Levy growls. "He walked in, saw she'd brewed a fresh pot of coffee, and threw it at her. Burned her face and neck. Mostly first-degree burns, but she was terrified."

"Fuck. I didn't realize they were still in the same house."

"No, he had to move out. He broke the restraining order. Again."

"Do we need to talk to Charlie about...?"

He's already shaking his head. "No, he's been put in jail, and the charges will probably stick this time. Patrick was furious," he says, talking about our local sheriff.

Levy curses, knocking his temple with a wrapped hand. "Mom and Dad always taught us that violence is not the answer, but they didn't know the questions we'd be asked."

“Agreed. Hell, I’ll join you. I spent the better part of my afternoon waiting for my translator to tell me exactly how many ‘owners’ Biyu had in the six years since she was taken from her family.”

“Fuck these human traffickers,” Levy spits out.

“I know Charlie likes to leave them to the authorities, but I suspect he doesn’t hold back if confronted by one.”

“Exactly.” Levy shakes his head and goes in for a rabbit punch to the side that I can’t quite block. “I don’t think it happens often though. It sounds like they try to avoid direct confrontation. I’m curious. I sometimes wish...”

“What?”

“Nah, doesn’t make any sense.”

“Say it.”

Scrubbing the back of his head, he pauses, then barrels forward. “It’d be worse in so many ways, but I almost wish we could be there in the moment. My guy yesterday? He told me the four-hour drive from Dallas to Austin felt like a death march. He was surprised when he was fed and given a private room.”

I grunt in response. “Yeah, Charlie said the translator app went down. What good are we if we can’t talk to them? Hell, he couldn’t communicate with the kids, and they wouldn’t eat the ice cream he bought for them because that was how their captors drugged them.”

He cracks his neck. “Still. We could at least be there in a supportive capacity. Can’t be easy, managing dozens of traumatized people between the two of them. Just having the extra bodies would help. Or, hell, what if they’re needed in two places at once? I mean, it’s not like we can’t defend ourselves if things get a little hairy.”

I think he’s oversimplifying and, perhaps, gunning for an excuse to punch a human trafficker in the mouth, but I don’t hate the idea.

Bringing up my knee, I connect with Levy's hip, causing him to spin to the side and back again.

"Look, they're not going to agree to that without seeing what we're capable of."

He gets me with a few body blows, but I pull away before he can do too much damage. Breathing hard, he responds, "They've seen our self-defense classes. They've seen us spar. Surely they know we can handle ourselves."

"I suspect handling oneself in a controlled environment and handling oneself in dangerous situations are two separate things."

Levy stops and runs his knuckles over his chin. "What if we joined them on a search and rescue? Aren't they saddling up to search for that girl who went missing over by Vidor?"

"They can't saddle up," I say, pushing his shoulder to get him back to sparring. "It's all marshland. They're bringing Moose to track with the other bloodhounds, but everything is on foot or by boat."

"So they'll need even more bodies to cover the area," Levy says, going in for another leg sweep.

I trip but maintain my balance, gesturing for him to come at me. We go on like this for another twenty minutes, sparring and debating our involvement with their operation. By the end, we're both dripping with sweat, and he's convinced me to at least chat with Charlie when he gets back from his honeymoon.



"HEY, GUYS, COME ON IN," CHARLIE SAYS, AFFABLE AS always. He's wearing his usual linen shirt, Wrangler blue jeans, and scuffed leather boots with leather bracelets and a long pendant.

"I hear congratulations are in order," I say, offering him my hand. He shakes it and moves on to Levy, who pulls him in for a hug.

“Mazel tov.” Levy slaps his back, and Charlie grins at the aggressive affection.

“Thanks, you two. Means a lot. I...uh. My mom is pretty mad that we went off without telling her and Dad.”

Scratching my chin, I ask, “Have either of you talked to Ant or Nacho yet?”

He grimaces. “Not...yet.”

Levy laughs. “Good luck with that. You better hope they don’t join forces with your mom.”

He lets out a long breath. “Yeah...we may have fucked up with how we handled that.” Gesturing it aside, he turns back to us. “Looks like you’ve got something on your minds. What’s going on?”

I start us off. “We think we could be valuable to you on the ground in these ops where you encounter highly traumatized people. Both Levy and I have had to navigate and de-escalate dangerous situations with our clients, and we’re capable with self-defense. At a minimum, we’d be an extra set of hands. And with the help of the translation app, we could provide some support when needed.”

“You two want to go with me and Erik to these warehouses? Do you even know what you’re asking?”

“Not entirely. But you and Erik are mostly doing this all on your own, and you don’t have to.”

“This is not an area where I’m willing to do a lot of experimentation, guys. I hope you understand. I’m sure your experiences in prison and in the hospital system are invaluable, Bram, but I can’t afford to bring you in on a mission only to discover that you freak out when shit goes wrong.”

“We assumed you would feel this way,” Levy says, running his hand over his beard the way he does to calm his nerves. “Totally reasonable since there are ways in which we are untested. Sparring in a self-defense class doesn’t always translate to a calm head in a crisis situation. We’d, of course,

pursue any training you feel would give us an advantage. But there's another obvious solution."

"And that is?"

"You're gearing up for that East Texas rescue. That's not a dangerous situation. We could go with you."

Charlie drums his fingers on his desk. "We *could* use some additional bodies on the search. Frankly, I suspect the mother and father are so distraught that they may impede the search unwittingly."

"We'd be happy to run interference with the family and whatever else you need," I offer.

More tapping. "Okay, fine. Erik and I could definitely use your help on this. That doesn't mean we'll be magically convinced you're ready. These trafficking ops are mostly rescue missions, but there are days when they feel like combat missions."

"Did you have combat experience prior to this?" Levy asks.

"Technically, no. Erik and I almost got ourselves killed in our first unofficial rescue, but it was a risk we were willing to take for ourselves. Neither of us is willing to take that risk with another human life."

"Would it make a difference to know that we just really, really want to have a chance to punch a bad guy in the face?" Levy asks.

Charlie chuckles, fiddling with his leather wristbands. "It shouldn't, but it kind of does." He pauses, inhaling deeply and exhaling slowly. "Real talk? There are times when, logistically, we could use more hands. Whenever we do a mass rescue and reunification, we rent out a hotel and use the conference rooms to coordinate services.

"We try to work with local doctors and mental health professionals, people who can continue to help them after we've left. Still, emergency trauma intervention wouldn't go away in many of the cases we're seeing. I don't have any

objections to bringing you in after the fact when it makes sense to do so.”

“That sounds good too,” Levy says. “But genuinely, consider us. We’re not trying to be part of that takedown crew you’ve talked about. But we don’t mind a little danger if we can help people.”

“What’s your motivation here? What’s prompting this conversation?”

I speak up, “We’ve always tried to help disadvantaged populations. Always. It’s something our parents taught us.”

My parents did okay with their little convenience store in a rough neighborhood, and they were always there for neighbors who needed it and always included us when it was time to help.

“You want to honor their memories,” Charlie guesses.

“Yes. But we also want to be worth something.”

“An admirable sentiment, for sure, and I think your parents would be proud of what y’all are doing now. My main hesitation is that people who want to do good go rushing in, thinking they’ve got all the solutions. But really, they lack a complete understanding of the situation.”

I nod, remembering how simplistic my ideas had once been regarding the issues my own patients face.

Charlie continues, “Erik and I learned the hard way to go in with questions, not solutions. The exact moment we think we’ve got the situation understood is usually the exact moment where we are the most wrong. And most in danger. Your savior complex has no place in an operation like this.”

Levy’s jaw ticks. “*Right*. Like you two don’t have savior complexes.”

The savior complex line hits home because our mother used to tease him with that phrase whenever he brought home a stray cat or got in trouble for standing up for the smaller kids on the playground.

Despite knowing how awful humanity can be, I sleep well at night, knowing I'm part of the solution. Levy can't *not* think about the suffering people experience. His clinical training helps him to focus on what he can do, and that, paired with his deep empathy, makes him an amazing therapist. But it comes at a cost.

He works with the horses because they help him stay grounded and prevent him from spinning off into despair about the human condition. I'm one of the few who knows he needs the horses as much as his patients do.

“Oh, for sure. That's at least how we started. But when you're put in your place by the people who've actually lived the experience? Well, that's a lesson you don't forget.”

It's a good point he's making, and one that new therapists sometimes struggle with—letting the patient come to you with the solution and empowering them to follow through.

“See how we work on this search and rescue in East Texas. I think that'll give you the information you need.”

More drumming on the desk. “Okay. I'll talk to Erik, but let's do it.”

NACHO

Justin and Charlie are back, but now they're ignoring us. Great. Ant and I have another day of hard work, but we're quiet, like we're trying to wrangle how we feel about things.

I'm a little relieved to drop him off, if only because our individual anger seems to be multiplying in each other's presence. Instead of going home, though, I turn out of Wild Heart and head back toward town.

The one thing I miss about drinking is the social aspect. Drinking gives you a fun, low-commitment way to be around other people, and I've found it difficult to replicate in a nontherapeutic or recovery-related environment. Sure, those environments are great, but sometimes you want to saddle up to a bar and have a beer.

Thankfully, Sandy, the bartender at the Broken Oak, has my back. She's sassy, but she respects my sobriety. I walk in and head in her direction. Sandy greets me with my usual: an ice-cold Topo Chico with a lime shoved down the neck.

"Thanks, Sandy," I say, hopping onto the barstool.

"Why so glum, chum?"

"I don't know if I even want to get into it. It's been a fucking *day*, and I don't want to go home to my fashionable tin can and stare at the four walls, y'know?"

"Then you've come to the right place. Some days just need a do-over."

I nod along. “True story.”

She sends me a wink and moves on to the next customer while I return to sipping my mineral water. Just as I’m contemplating the jukebox, a voice I haven’t heard since the grand opening of the therapy center—and now twice in one week—sends a buzz of warmth down my spine.

“Ignacio.”

I turn as Bram climbs onto the stool beside me, his posh scent immediately familiar.

“Wow,” I say, going for the joke. “You’re acknowledging my presence in public.” I press the back of my hand to his forehead. “You feeling okay, Dr. Barlowe?”

We both react to the contact, and I check my hand as though I might find electrical burns.

“I can go if you would prefer,” he says, looking very much like he’d prefer to stay.

I shake my head. “I’m kidding. Sorry, just in the middle of a weird week.”

He eyes the bottle in front of me. “I thought you were sober?” he asks, careful in his phrasing.

I turn the bottle around, showing him the label.

“I am sober. Topo Chico has some of that effervescent thing I like about beer.”

He nods. “Smart. Though...is this the best environment for you?”

“Dr. Barlowe, are you trying to tell me what to do?”

He holds up his hands. “No. Absolutely not. That would be inappropriate.”

I snort, then cover it up by taking a drink.

“And before you ask, Sandy knows I’m sober and never offers me alcohol. It’s just nice to be in the community without having to say the words, ‘Hello, my name is Nacho, and I’m an alcoholic.’”

“Fair.” He nods. “I was going to order a beer, but I can...”

I cut him off. “Order your beer. Being around alcohol is not my trigger. Being around family, on the other hand...”

He chuckles, then orders a Guinness.

“Why do you like that stuff? It’s basically beer sludge. Like drinking a loaf of bread.”

“Ignacio, are you trying to tell me what I can and can’t drink?” he asks, lightly mocking me.

I roll my eyes. “No.”

“Mm. Thought so,” he says, his eyes lingering on my hands before he continues, “Sandy’s one of the few bartenders in this place who knows how to pull a proper pint.”

“So snobby,” I retort, knocking his shoulder.

He stiffens at the contact, and I quickly return to my own airspace. We’re not going to talk about the thing we’re not talking about, so I need to stop testing the waters.

As if in silent agreement—something we’re both good at—we go back to our drinks, nursing them, chatting with Sandy, and generally ignoring each other. After a while, though, he finally looks back over at me. I lift my chin, and he grins at the familiar gesture.

“Sorry to be nosy, but you said you had a weird week. Anything you need to talk about?”

I’m not exactly surprised by his offer—he never could leave well enough alone—but I am surprised by how relieved I am to have his attention again.

He always did give excellent advice.

That’s the story I’m going with, anyway.

“I feel stupid even talking about it,” I start as Sandy replaces my spent Topo Chico.

“You know my thoughts on that, Ignacio.”

I let out a dramatically long breath and imitate his stoic response. “If it makes you feel stupid, then that’s the thing you

need to talk about the most.”

“Ah. You were paying attention.”

As if I could ever ignore him.

“Okay, but you’re not allowed to make fun of me for being stupid.”

“I’m not *allowed*?” he asks with a knowing brow.

More shivers down my spine.

“Fine. This thing with Charlie and Justin getting married bothers me more than I’d like.”

He bobs his head. “Doesn’t surprise me. I could tell you felt off about it the other day.”

I scratch at the label on my drink. “I know they don’t owe me anything. Hell, Jason and Justin took a big chance with me when they gave me this job. They’ve promoted me and paid me a good wage, and I like what I do. But...*still*.”

“Just because you’ve been on the receiving end of a well-deserved acknowledgment doesn’t mean you can’t also feel some kind of way about not being included in an important family event.”

“*Exactly*,” I say, my gesture nearly taking out my bottle. “That’s what Ant and I were talking about. They’ve made us feel like we’re part of the family and that the work we do for their business is appreciated, but—”

I cut myself off with an annoyed grunt.

“Whatever comes after that *but* is the important part. Tell me what comes next.”

Something about the soft command in his voice has me straightening my posture.

God, I’m an idiot.

“*But*...they don’t involve us in the *real* family stuff.”

“The real family stuff?”

“Like that Sunday dinner they go to. Me and Ant have never been invited. So, like, maybe we’re one kind of family,

and everyone else is another kind of family who gets to take part in the big family traditions.”

I swallow quickly, annoyed that I’m actually getting emotional about this. His warm hand lands on my elbow, grounding me.

“Hey, now. You’re not stupid for feeling that way. You already know they can invite whoever they want to dinner. Right?”

I nod.

“But when you’re so included in other ways and not included in this one way, it can be painful and confusing. In fact, I bet if you said something to them, they would be horrified to find they’ve overlooked you and Ant in some of the more important family events.”

“I agree. But then, telling them I feel left out sounds ungrateful and needy.”

Bram is usually good at not reacting before hearing me out, but he’s already shaking his head before I finish.

“It takes courage to point out when someone you love has been inconsistent in their behavior. Especially when you know their reaction will almost certainly be positive, save for the fact that they will feel bad for having missed the mark.”

I wince, and he points at my expression. “This is the real issue. You don’t want them to feel bad about it.”

“Who would want to make the Goodnights, of all people, feel bad? As for Charlie and Justin...they’ve done so much for me, and getting married is a good thing.”

Bram takes a drink, considering his words. Snickering, I reach out and thumb away the bit of foam clinging to his upper lip. I nearly stick my thumb in my mouth to suck off the foam, but we are in public, and I value my sobriety.

Had that been whipped cream, however...

He touches his upper lip, lowering his chin. “Thank you, Ignacio.”

“Of course, Dr. Barlowe.”

We both refocus on our drinks, and Bram continues our conversation as if nothing’s *happening* between us.

“Put it to you this way. Ant tells me you’ve been like a mentor to him. If you hurt his feelings, wouldn’t you want to know what you’d done and be given a chance to correct it?”

Scrunching my nose, I think about the hug I’d given Ant earlier in the week and how I immediately apologized when I realized it was the wrong thing to do.

Ugh.

I hate Bram’s stupid reasonable response. He looks down his nose at me, the way he does when he’s about to give me an order. I refocus on my bottle of fizzy lime water.

“Ignacio. Look at me.”

Fuuuuck.

I do as he says, and his pleased smile makes my cock twitch.

“Talk to Justin,” he says, acting like he doesn’t know he’s given me a verbal hard-on. “Don’t wait more than a week to do it.”

I nod, even though I don’t remember what I’m agreeing to. Oh. Right. Talk to Justin.

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe.”

“Good.” He takes a drink of his beer, his hand shaking ever-so-slightly. “Good,” he repeats.

Before I think too much about it, he asks, “Has Ant ever talked to you about our Friday night dinner? It’s our take on a Shabbat dinner.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know what that means.”

“Shabbat means Sabbath, or day of rest, and Jewish people celebrate it with a traditional meal.”

“I’m not...religious. Like, I don’t believe in God.”

“Neither do I.”

My mouth drops open. “But...you just said you’re Jewish.”

“There are religious, ancestral, and cultural aspects of being Jewish, Ignacio. Levy and I aren’t religious, but we like to honor our family traditions. Like I said. Shabbat, but not.”

“Wait,” I say, narrowing my eyes. “Does this mean I’ve been left out of something else?”

“Not left out, I promise.” He chuckles, and I can’t remember if I’ve ever heard him laugh. I like it. “Levy and I have always held a dinner every Friday night, even when it was just the two of us. With Ant, since we’re all living in the same space, it’s natural for us to include him, as well as anyone else who is staying with us. It would be no hardship for you to join us.”

“Well, as long as it’s no hardship,” I snark.

“You know what I mean, Ignacio,” he says, sending me a stern look. *Mmph*. “Levy and I will be out of town for a few days, but next Friday, we’ll be there. You are welcome, and you should come.”

That doesn’t sound like an invite.

Rolling the bottle between my palms, I answer quickly, “Alright, I’ll go. Is there something I should bring?”

“You only need to bring yourself.”

“Okay.”

I down the rest of my mineral water, catching a bit of tension in his jaw as I go to stand.

“Are you sure there isn’t anything else, Dr. Barlowe?”

He traces his finger around the lip of his pint glass, contemplating. “Like I said, this won’t be the traditional Shabbat dinner, but it is considered respectful to prepare for the meal by bathing and wearing nice clothes that are freshly laundered. Wear shoes you can slip out of and socks to keep your feet clean and warm.”

His understated order is the perfect combination of wine and muscle relaxers, making me wonder if this conversation would be considered a break in sobriety.

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe,” I breathe out, my cock thickening as I slide off the stool.

“Good—” He stops himself. Clearing his throat, he holds out his hand. “Give me your cell phone so I may text you about the menu.”

I tap my lips with my pointer finger, considering him with a teasing grin.

“Ignacio, your telephone. Now.”

My chest rises, and I dig into my pocket, producing the phone. Unlocking it, I hand it to him, our fingers brushing, more electrical burns shorting out my system. Though it’s a toss-up as to whether the contact or his order is increasing my heart rate.

“I’m adding in my information now,” he says, texting himself. “By the way, I’m putting myself in as Dr. Barlowe, but you may address me as Bram at dinner.”

Locking eye contact, I respond, “And you should probably address me as Nacho.”

“Yes. Of course.”

We’re both a little breathless as we stare into each other’s eyes. For a moment, the world around us freezes, and it’s just the two of us, unable to look away from each other. Then the moment passes and the bar around us seems to start up again and go forward in real-time while we’re still shaking off the aftereffects of pausing our orbit around each other.

Taking my phone from his sure grip, I tuck it back into my pocket and send him a wave of acknowledgment as I head toward the door. Despite being stone-cold sober, I’m unsteady on my feet by the time I reach my truck, looking forward to next Friday a little more than I should.

BRAM

“We’d love to help you with a search-and-rescue mission, Charlie,” Levy says in a high, mocking tone. “You’ll see. We can be *valuable to the mission.*”

We’re standing in hip waders, enduring unseasonably warm weather and air so thick with humidity I feel like I’m about to choke. Also, I’m pretty sure I just saw an alligator slither past.

Honestly, I’m glad for the distraction. Aside from the Ignacio—*Nacho*—thing, which I can’t bring myself to consider, Katrina will be gone by the time we get back, and I’m feeling a little sadder than I anticipated.

I mean, Katrina is going to school in Indianapolis and staying with a family who comes from Cameroon, just like her. These are good things. Very good things that also made me shed tears when Katrina gave me an enormous hug before we left. She even promised to FaceTime Biyu with the translator app.

Pull yourself together, Abraham.

“We volunteered for this,” I remind my brother. “If Charlie or Erik catches us complaining, you can kiss any hope of more-involved missions goodbye.”

“I know. It’s just I’ve got swamp water in my boots and sweat in my ass crack,” Levy moans as we reach the edge of our grid. Having followed the grid in a north-to-south direction, we start back, now moving east to west. We landed

about eight hours ago, and local law enforcement assigned Charlie as the leader of a group of volunteers.

Erik and Moose, his droopy bloodhound with the sunny disposition, coordinated with a few other bloodhound handlers, so we each had a search grid with a dog.

Imani Brown's mother and father joined the meeting this morning. They couldn't stand the idea of just waiting around, but when Charlie delicately explained what to do if she is found dead versus alive, Mrs. Brown ran from the room, wailing. Levy and I acted quickly to soothe her and her husband. We convinced them to go home, and one of the community members asked if she could help with any chores they had. She left with them to go put up some new drapes while they wait for news.

Unfortunately, after hours and hours of grid searches, there's still no sign of Imani.

Just as I'm beginning to lose my hold on a positive attitude, there's barking from one of the other search grids, and our private comms crackle to life.

"Guys, we found her," Erik says, giving Moose the order to stand down.

"Dead or alive?" I ask.

"Alive. Badly hurt and traumatized, but alive."

He drops a pin on his location, just a few yards from where we are. We start clumping through the thick mud, passing a curtain of kudzu—the fast-growing, green vines common in this area—into a small clearing. It takes us a moment to understand what we're seeing.

"Fuck," Levy curses under his breath. "There's a house under all that mess."

It's more like an old wooden shack camouflaged by years of lichen and vine overgrowth. A few other searchers enter the area, but the law enforcement on the ground holds them back while waving us through.

The one-room space has a bathroom and an out-of-date kitchen and is as dark and dank on the inside as one would imagine. It smells of earth and blood, and Erik moves quickly, grabbing a bolt cutter from his pack, going after the handcuffs binding Imani to a wire-frame bed with a thin mattress.

Given the state of her, there's no question about what she's been through.

The EMT team is led by an efficient, practical battle-ax of a woman, and she comes in on the walkie-talkie. "It's a thirty-minute hike to your location, which is about all we have of the sun. Not a good spot to be in after dark, so if the patient is mobile or can be transported out without us, it would be in your best interest to do so."

"I can walk," the teenage girl says, using her freed hand to pull the gag out of her mouth. "Just get me the fuck out of here."

Erik snips away the last of her restraints, and she immediately sits up. We step closer as she lists to the side before holding up a hand.

"Don't fucking touch me."

"You're the boss," Levy says, stepping back.

Taking a deep breath, she swings her legs over so her feet land on the floor. Everyone's face is riveted with concern and constraint—wanting her to take it slow but unwilling to keep her in that horrible bed for a second longer.

After another wavering moment, she stands, her torn clothes practically hanging from her as she grips the metal bed frame.

Charlie and Erik wear matching grim expressions, and given what they've seen, that says a lot.

Charlie looks over at me and gestures with his chin. "I think this is you."

I nod and take a beat to compose myself.

Even surrounded as she is by people, Imani looks entirely alone. Her missing person photograph showed a young Black

woman with a mischievous grin, pretty high cheekbones, cute clothes, and a glossy mane of perfect coils cascading down her shoulders.

She runs her hands over her dry, matted hair and scowls. One of the detectives, also a Black woman, hands her a hair tie. Imani smooths her hair into a bulky ponytail, then looks to the detective for confirmation. She reaches out—with a silent look for consent—tucks in a few rogue strands, and then sends her a thumbs-up.

“I know someone who can restore your hair once you’re ready,” she says quietly, and Imani simply nods in return.

Another officer is trying to find her clean clothes, but we’re all as quiet as the dust motes filtering through the one beam of light in the dark space.

Keeping a respectful distance, I break the silence and introduce myself.

“Hi, Imani. I’m Dr. Abraham Barlowe, but you can call me Bram. My job is to help people who have been through terrible things.”

With the dull cast of her skin and her sunken cheekbones, it’s clear she hasn’t had a decent meal in the two weeks she’s been missing. In contrast, her expressive brown eyes look especially large. The sarcasm in the lift of her brow cannot be understated.

“*People who have been through terrible things,*” she mutters, annoyed by my skirting around the obvious.

She’s fifteen, and honestly? I’m grateful to see the attitude. It reminds me a little of Ignacio.

“You don’t have to talk about a damn thing—unless you want to—and I’m not about to ask you a bunch of questions. I’m just here to let you know there will be people here to show you that you can, and will, have a life beyond this.”

“But will *he*?” she asks, anger rising. “Will *he* have a life beyond this?”

“Not much of one if we have anything to say about it,” I say, lowering my voice as the conversations start to pick up around us.

Something about that amuses her, and she smirks, opening her mouth to retort. Only, instead of a retort, she freezes, fear blooming in her eyes.

Fuck. That’s...that’s not a good look.

“Is the man who did this to you here now?” I whisper. Levy, Charlie, and Erik pick up my question over the comms and move with Moose into a semi-circle around us.

“He kept me blindfolded the whole time. I only saw glimpses of him. But there was another guy, someone who would bring supplies. I recognize his voice.”

“And you know what he looks like?”

She nods.

“What’s the color of the shirt he’s wearing?”

“Green.”

Not wanting to give anything away, I don’t move a muscle.

Erik whispers through the line, “The only person in green right now is the park ranger.”

Park ranger? I mouth.

She nods, stepping closer to me. “He came to our school last year and did a presentation about the ecosystems or some shit. I remember his voice. I think the guy who did all this is his dad.”

I clench my fists, and she catches the movement.

“Stay here with her. We’ve got him,” Charlie says.

Erik orders Moose to stay with Imani while he and Charlie move in lockstep toward their target.

The park ranger clocks the shift and turns, heading out the door. Levy follows, and Imani and I watch out the window as he starts to run. He fakes to the left, slipping past Charlie and Erik, but he doesn’t see Levy coming up from behind.

Bastard always could run quietly.

Levy tackles him, taking him down hard—probably a little harder than entirely necessary—sending sounds of concern through the gathering volunteers. Levy pins his arms behind his back and keeps his knee on his spine until the police officers present can cuff him and clear the volunteers.

“Well, that was satisfying,” Imani says, reverting to snark again.

“Very,” I agree. Turning to her, I continue, “Look, we need to get you to the hospital, but getting out of here is going to be...complicated. Normally, we’d put you on a stretcher and wheel you to an emergency vehicle, but we can’t do that out here, and we’re losing daylight. Can you walk? Or would you prefer to be carried?”

“Don’t you fucking put your hands on me,” she repeats. “I can walk. But, um...can I walk with your dog?”

“Sure. His name is Moose. You can hold his leash if you’d like,” I say, pretty sure Erik won’t object.

“And...can I get a washcloth or something?”

I thin my lips, hating my response. “We’d rather you leave all the evidence intact. If you can.”

“I know,” she says, with the wisdom and irritation of an eighty-year-old. “I listen to true-crime podcasts. I just want to wash off my face if that’s okay with you.”

“Okay.”

I find a tiny linen closet in the bathroom and grab a washcloth. I’m surprised the decrepit cabin has hot water, so I get it nice and steamy before running the washcloth through it. Squeezing it out, I return to the main room and hand it to her.

She wipes down her teeth, face, throat, hands, and armpits while one of the officers brings in an oversize T-shirt and a pair of drawstring pants about two sizes too big on her. We give her the privacy to change, and when she returns to the main room, she looks a little numb, like some of that initial fight has burned off. She watches the officers bag her clothing

along with other evidence for a few moments before we head out.

Speaking to the officer holding the handcuffs Erik cut off her, she says, “Save those for me.”

I think she was going for snarky, but her voice comes out papery and haunted.

We start off through the wetlands, avoiding mud where we can, giving her plenty of space as she grips Moose’s leash tight. Right as the sun goes down, we reach the waiting EMTs.

“Would you like me to go to the hospital with you?” I ask as I hand off Moose to Erik.

She shakes her head, and her eyes drift toward the detective who gave her the hair tie, whose name I discovered is Regina Jones, but everyone calls her Reg.

Reg smiles. “I’m happy to ride with you.”

Imani then turns to me. “But can you be there when I talk to the cops?”

“Absolutely.”

“Good. I don’t trust them.”

Reg and I exchange a look. Something tells me she knows exactly what Imani is talking about.

“Imani, we can keep it to just me and Dr. Barlowe if you’d like,” Reg assures her.

Charlie’s voice comes in through the comms. “I’m going to look into the police officers’ union and see if there’s anything problematic.”

“And my mom is going to be hysterical,” Imani says, running her hands over her borrowed clothes, rolling her eyes as though that’s the worst part of all this.

“I’ll be there for your mom too,” I promise. “If you’d like, I can intercept your parents before they talk to you to see if we can create a calm reunion.”

“Good luck with that,” she says, shaking her head. “They went into my computer last month and found my DMs to my girlfriend. Pretty sure they are just over it at this point.”

“All I saw were parents who desperately miss their daughter and love her very much. I promise they are just happy you’re alive.”

For the first time since we found her, she sheds a tear. “Okay. That’s good.”

I hold out my hand, and she examines it before slipping her small hand into mine for a brief moment.

“You’re okay,” she says.

“You’re okay too, kid. Once you’ve recovered for a while, we’ll invite you to come out and hang with our horses. I think you’ll like them.”

“Every girl loves her ponies,” she cracks, then lies back and closes her eyes as the EMTs push her stretcher into the ambulance.

She’s got a long road ahead of her, but I have faith.

NACHO

Justin and I walk out of our Saturday morning AA meeting, a little emotional. One of our friends had a relapse, and we didn't even know it.

When he came in and asked for the twenty-four-hour chip, it was a real gut punch.

I've come to learn that falling down is often part of getting up, and it was a reminder to not take my own sobriety for granted. We found out after the meeting that he'd been arrested for a DWI and was feeling horrible about it.

Justin and I stayed a little later, and Justin walked through some of the legal issues with him, letting him talk through his guilt about doing something so dangerous and irresponsible.

"I could've killed somebody," he says, tears streaming down his face.

"I've been in the same situation," Justin says. "You and I got real lucky. Real fucking lucky. We know the deal—when we're struggling with ourselves, we can't make it dangerous for everyone else. But it's hard to maintain sobriety while beating yourself up. You can't hate yourself sober."

"What if I can't help but hate myself?"

"Go back to the basics, learn the lesson. Use it to propel you forward."

We sit with him while he cries, then walk him out to his car, where his wife's waiting. They switch places, and she goes in for her Al-Anon meeting. It's tough, like seeing a

vision of the future and how my alcoholism can impact somebody I love. Like a lot of folks in AA, I struggle with the idea that I'm even worthy of a relationship to begin with, and days like this one make me question even more.

More shit to plow through, but I'll save that for a different day.

Justin and I get into his truck and head back toward the ranch. When we hit the highway, I decide to go in on the subject that's been bothering me all week.

"So am I *not* supposed to know you and Charlie got married?"

"Shit," he says under his breath. "I keep meaning to talk to you, but we got busy as soon as we hit the ground, and then it feels like I haven't even seen you until today. Hell, how did you even find out?"

"Erik told Ant."

He lets his head fall back to the headrest. "Why would he do that?"

"I dunno, man. Maybe he thought it was important information."

"Fuck. I've gotta let Charlie know." Turning to me, he says, "You know we weren't trying to keep it from you, right? We just...wanted a few days with it all to ourselves."

"I get it, man. I mean, you don't have to tell anyone a damn thing. But finding out secondhand wasn't...great. It's a real good way to make somebody feel like they don't matter that much to you."

"You *do* matter," he says, sending me a pleading look. "You and Ant matter so much to us. Charlie and I... I don't regret getting swept up in the moment and flying off to Vegas. Honestly, it was the most romantic thing ever."

"And see, man, I love that for you. I don't know anyone who's worked harder for his happily ever after. It's just... words like brother and family are sacred to people like us. Me and Ant...we can't go back to our families, right? You know

how that last visit with my mom went. So, it's real tender, you know?"

He drops his chin to his chest, and...argh. Bram was right. I hate that he feels bad.

He responds with absolute sincerity. "I promise it doesn't mean we don't think of you as family. We genuinely do. You're incredibly important to us, both to me and Charlie and to me and Jason. When you start a business, those first employees can make or break you so fast. You were the best decision we ever made for our business. Though I hope you know you're more than an employee to us."

"I do know that, but it is nice to hear."

After driving silently for a while, I bump his shoulder. "So, tell me about Vegas. Don't leave out any details."

"Oh, there are some details I will definitely be leaving out. But Saturday morning, we were just..."—he pauses to blush, which cracks me up—"...making love, and there was a moment where we were looking into each other's eyes, and I knew I'd never want my life without him. Aaand at that same moment, he just sorta blurted out, 'Marry me. I'll get Erik. We'll go to Vegas. Marry me. Today.'"

"Oh, *damn*. That's romantic as *hell*."

His grin lights up the inside of the truck.

"It was. When we got there, we had to go to the courthouse and wait for the paperwork, which sort of sucked because everyone around us was drunk and sloppy. After a while, we decided it felt kinda like a party."

I laugh at the visual.

"And even though we were looking for anything but, the only places with availability had Elvis officiants."

I laugh even harder, and he continues, "So we just got the classiest-looking one."

At this point, I almost have to pull over. "Fucking classiest Elvis impersonator. Fuck, dude, that's hilarious."

“He had a good voice too. Most Elvis impersonators are just about the cheese factor, but he was, like, weirdly sincere. I couldn’t tell if it was cool or sad.”

“We’ll go with cool,” I say as a thought occurs to me. “Oh shit, dude. How is Charlie’s *mom* taking this?”

He grimaces. “We didn’t tell them until after we got home, and it didn’t go well. It’s probably gonna take a family wedding or reception before she forgives us.”

“You should do it in the therapy barn. It worked well for the grand opening, and you know the horses will behave during the ceremony.”

“Wherever we do it, it’ll have to be sooner rather than later, or we will absolutely never live it down.”

“Especially after all that shit y’all went through just to get her to accept you.”

He drops his head back on the headrest. “Yeah...that was brought up.”

“You know, I feel a little better now.”

“Why? Because we managed to piss off and hurt everybody we love?”

I grimace. “I didn’t even ask—how is Jason taking it?”

“Considering the fact that he and Patrick already went and got married, pretty well.”

My jaw drops to the floorboard. “When did that fucking happen?”

“About a month ago,” he says, laughing at my expression.

“Yeah. Y’all owe us a major party.”

“I think we can arrange that,” he says, his smile dimming. “Hey, Nacho? Do you think Ant will ever forgive us?”

I take a moment to organize my answer. “I don’t think it’s about forgiveness. It’s not that it just sorta hurt his feelings. Speaking for myself, it made me doubt my place in your life. I don’t know if y’all understand that y’all are his world.”

“Shit,” Justin whispers softly.

“He shared a little bit of what he went through, and the way he talks about Charlie walking into that hotel room and pulling him out of there? Ant worships him. The way you taught him all about fencing? He worships you too. He spent a lot of years feeling like a throwaway and has been working really hard to rebuild himself brick by brick. And I swear I’m not trying to make you feel bad, but this? He said it made him feel disposable all over again.”

“Double shit.” Justin leans forward, putting his head in his hands.

“Look, I think what he needs right now more than anything is reassurance. But...” I stop, thinking over what I’m about to say next. “I know this probably sounds stupid coming from me, but Ant needs to be in therapy. I think he’s got so much anger that he doesn’t know what to do with it, and sometimes it turns back inward on himself. Like, he’s hurt, but at least a part of him thinks y’all didn’t include him because something’s wrong with him.”

Justin shakes his head. “I hear you. I hear you. Me and Charlie are gonna make this right for him. I also think we’re going to have to push the issue on the therapy. He deserves support for all the shit that must be in his head.”

“And,” I say, tapping my thigh, “if you’re going to go to the Goodnights’ every Sunday without including him, call it something other than a family dinner. Or stop talking about it.”

Justin’s eyes go lunar as his jaw goes slack. “Fucking *hell*. I didn’t even think about that.”

“I know. Nobody’s excluding anyone on purpose, and not everyone can be invited to everything, but he brought it up.”

I decide not to let him know how it makes me feel, but he’s a pretty smart guy.

“I do that to you too, don’t I?”

I scratch my neck and admit, “Sorta.”

Gesturing between us, he says, “I promise it’s an oversight and not anything else. I’m going to bring this up to Trip, and the first thing he’s going to do is call and apologize. He’s been so busy, we’ve been so busy...it’s not purposeful. I fucking promise it’s not.”

“I *know*. But it *is* nice to hear.”

We pull into the ranch, and he gets out, coming around to my side. Opening the door, he pulls me into a hug. “I’m genuinely, genuinely sorry.”

“No more apologies,” I say, patting his back. “It’s just...if you’re gonna be bringing in delicate people, you have to be aware of the things that can set them off.”

He kisses the side of my head, cracking us up before he hugs me again. “Thank you for saying something.”

“Anytime, brother.”

I wave as he makes his way into his house, then head back to my trailer, grateful I listened to Bram’s advice...er, order. Orderly advice, maybe?

After parking and making my way inside the trailer, I pull out my phone, letting myself in while texting him one-handed while I shuffle out of my jeans.

Me: I talked to Justin today. He did feel bad, and he apologized.

Dr. Barlowe: Excellent. I’m glad to hear it. I mentioned something to Charlie as well.

Dr. Barlowe: He hadn’t considered that Erik would say something to Ant.

Me: Justin didn’t either. I think Erik knew Ant would want to know.

Dr. Barlowe: Interesting.

Me: Look at us, communicating like real adults and everything.

Dr. Barlowe: Good job.

I fall back onto the couch in my T-shirt and boxers. Absentmindedly stroking my belly, I consider his words. *Pretty sure he wanted to say good boy instead of good job.*

I could leave the conversation there, but, of course, I don't.

Me: Thank you, Dr. Barlowe. I'm glad you approve.

There's a pause on his end, and I wonder if I haven't pushed it too far.

Dr. Barlowe: How did your AA meeting this morning go?

Me: It was OK.

Dr. Barlowe: Just OK?

Me: A good friend had a setback. It was hard to see.

Dr. Barlowe: Does that make you worry about your own sobriety?

Me: I don't know if I would say worry. It just reminds me that I can't ever get complacent.

Dr. Barlowe: I hope it also reminds you that there is nothing wrong with having to start again.

Me: His wife was waiting for him in the car, and then she went to her Al-Anon meeting. She looked devastated. I would never want to do that to somebody.

Me: #singleforlife

Dr. Barlowe: If you broke your arm and couldn't work for several weeks while it healed, how would that make you feel?

Me: Ouch. Why do you have to break my arm?

Dr. Barlowe: Answer the question, Ignacio.

Fuck, that's so good.

Me: I'd feel shitty about it because it would put Justin and Jason behind, and I don't want to do that.

Dr. Barlowe: But do you think they should fire you for accidentally breaking your arm?

Me: Pretty sure that's illegal.

Dr. Barlowe: *Why is it illegal?*

I release a sigh, seeing where he's going.

Me: *Because people break their arms all the time. We're allowed to be human.*

Dr. Barlowe: *What if it's somebody with osteogenesis imperfecta, brittle bone disease? Somebody who not only has many broken bones but will continue to experience that for the foreseeable future. Is that someone who deserves employment? Love?*

Me: *Of course they do.*

Dr. Barlowe: *Now, if you're #singleforlife because that's how you wanna live, that's one thing. But being in recovery doesn't mean you don't deserve to be in love and build a life with someone.*

It's my turn to hesitate because the visual of Bram walking through the front door and pulling me into a deep kiss has me sidetracked. God, I bet he loves like crazy. I bet whoever he ends up with will feel so protected and...never mind.

I can protect myself, of course. But I'm learning there's a difference between being able to throw a punch and being safe in your thoughts around someone else, to feel safe with them emotionally, mentally.

Needing to shake off the visual *and* feeling a little mischievous, I take off my T-shirt and take a selfie with the RV park framed in the window behind me. The con who did most of my tattoos loved flowers and Mexican history, and his work on my chest is a gorgeous black and gray Aztec collar piece adorned with roses that wind up my neck. Those same roses encircle the Aztec warrior that adorns one arm and the Mayan skull and headpiece which adorn the other. Each series of tattoos trails from the top of my shoulders down the back of my hands and onto my fingers.

I traded him regular blowjobs for his work and have zero regrets. I suppose some people would find that distasteful, but considering he was a genius with a rigged tattoo machine and had a hair trigger, I think I got the better end of the deal.

And his artwork makes for a damn good picture.

Me: Yes, because I have so much to give someone.

Me: <trailertrash.jpg>

Dr. Barlowe: Put your shirt on.

Me: But it's hot.

Dr. Barlowe: Right now, Ignacio.

I do as asked and then send him a clothed selfie to prove I complied.

Dr. Barlowe: Thank you.

I crack up, knowing he's gotta be dying to call me a *good boy* at this point.

Me: Oops, I lost my boxers. Looks like I've got a one-piece-of-clothing limit this afternoon.

Dr. Barlowe: Ignacio, that's inappropriate.

Me: Oh, I'm sorry. I'll put my boxers back on.

My boxers were never off, of course, but this little back-and-forth has me in a state of half-chub, a fact that the thin material does little to conceal. At all. I fire off another selfie.

Me: <appropriate.jpg>

Me: What are you wearing, Dr. Barlowe?

A minute later, he texts me a selfie. He's sweaty and unshaven, and it looks like he might be in a hospital. Most important, though, is his displeased expression. His eyebrow is cocked sky-high, and he's giving me his best *if-we-were-in-lockup-I'd-belt-your-ass-to-the-chair* look.

I wanna lick the sweat from his neck.

Me: Somebody needs a shower.

Dr. Barlowe: Somebody needs a reminder to behave.

Me: I am so forgetful sometimes, Dr. Barlowe. What would you suggest to help me remember?

I stare at the screen for several minutes, but he doesn't text back. I can't tell if I'm disappointed or pleased that I got to him. Either way, I can't wait to see how he handles me at Friday dinner.

BRAM

When we told our friends back in Waco we were moving into a bunkhouse to save money and pay down our college loans, we were met with, at best, skepticism.

“Aren’t bunkhouses full of dark wood paneling, long musty hallways, and uncomfortable bunk beds?”

Levy sent them pictures of our setup, and all that nonsense went away.

I do have to admit that Charlie pulled out all the stops with this place. From the moment you walk in, a great room encompasses a generous living area, reading nooks, a spacious dining area, and a completely tricked-out kitchen. There are two wings on either side, with bathrooms at each entrance, plus a half-bath just off the house’s main entrance.

Since Levy, Ant, and I were the first to stay here, Charlie’s allowed us leeway with the decorations. Levy tends toward bright abstract pieces, and I tend toward muted modernist art. The combination, along with our combined love of far too many plants, gives the place a welcoming vibe.

At least, I hope it does.

“Are you actually sweating?” Levy asks as I take the roast chicken with potatoes and carrots out of the oven.

Ant told me Ignacio doesn’t like fish, so I left off the fish course, which is a shame. I may have to work with him on that.

“Bram?”

Fuck. Pay attention, Abraham.

Turning to my brother, I point out, “Somebody left the living room a mess, and I had to spend an extra hour cleaning.”

“Are you actually nervous about Nacho joining us?”

“No. But Nacho has never been to a family dinner, and I want him to get the full experience,” I explain, ignoring Levy’s thoughtful expression.

“Well, I’m sorry for the mess. I would’ve pitched in if I realized we were making more of a *to-do* about it.”

He eyeballs the table as he says this, his point pretty obvious. While we always have a nice layout, I may have gone a tiny bit overboard with a new tablecloth, placemats, and chargers. And maybe a few of the slightly fancier candles added to the center of the table.

“Wait. Are we doing an actual Shabbat dinner?”

“Of course not. I just want it to be nice.”

Levy and I were raised in a more humanist tradition. Our parents never took us to temple, save for very special occasions. But no matter how poor we were, they always did a big Friday night dinner, adjusted to our family’s beliefs and customs. It was a tradition neither of us wanted to abandon, even as we had to contemplate life after the accident.

We generally don’t talk to other people about the car accident that took our parents away from us. We’d been coming home from a family vacation, another little tradition of ours. Even though Levy and I were college men at that point, we loved the camping trips we’d take right before the beginning of the fall semester.

Levy and I survived. Our parents didn’t. Life is shitty that way sometimes.

At first, I thought continuing the tradition of a big Friday meal would seem silly or extra, especially since Levy and I are anything but religious. But no. This feels like a way to

remember them, and it's a weekly reminder of the love that always permeated our family home.

Anyway, it's just *Nacho*. I don't know why I'm so nervous about everything being perfect.

Ant joins us and lets out a whistle.

"Ooh, we're going all out for our guest tonight. I guess the rest of us are chopped liver, not deserving of the fancy place settings."

"Oh please. We've always had beautiful place settings, and we'll use these going forward."

He winks at me, nudging my side with his sharp elbow. "I know. I'm just giving you a hard time because you've been a nervous hen, making sure everything is perfect."

Heat creeps up my neck, but I shut it down. I don't know what it is they think they're saying. I just want to make sure our guest is comfortable.

Speaking of the devil, there's a knock at the door.

"Come on in," Ant yells, and I find his loudness irritating.

Hrn. I may have let myself get a tiny bit worked up over this. I bite my lower lip as Ignacio walks through the front door.

Oh, my good boy.

He followed my instructions to a T, stunning in tight, perfectly worn-in dark-wash jeans with a crisp white button-down and a sharp charcoal vest fitted closely to his trim frame. His sleeves are meticulously rolled to his elbows, revealing enticing tattoos and veins. His hair is artfully mussed with pomade, and a cheeky little swoop highlights the glossy black strands. Pausing in the entryway, he toes out of his high-end loafers to reveal pretty argyle socks that pick up on the white, indigo, and gray of his outfit.

Ant grins and goes up to him, giving him a hug. "Welcome! You're gonna love it. Bram makes the best roast chicken I've ever had in my entire life. We have it every week, and I never get tired of it."

His praise makes the heat rise again, and Levy's eyes fall to my roasted cheeks. He raises his brow, brother-speak for *we'll talk about this later*.

Not if I have any say about it.

"That's kind of you, Ant," I say. "And Ig...*Nacho*, you look very handsome this evening."

He acknowledges me with a confident smile and shy eyes as he holds up two bottles of wine.

"That's so generous of you. You didn't need to buy two bottles."

He shakes his head. "One of these is a nonalcoholic sparkling dark grape. I looked up Shabbat dinners and wasn't sure if you did anything with the wine or not."

"How thoughtful." I take them from him, noting that the alcoholic one is kosher. I show Levy, and we both smile.

"Should I chill these?"

"The guy at the store said to serve them at room temperature. Though—uh, did I choose the right one? I mean, for you guys?"

Levy chuckles. "Actually, I'm pretty sure it'll be the only thing on the table that's truly kosher. Which would make our mother very happy."

My eyes track the nervous bobbing of Nacho's Adam's apple, and it makes me want to settle him, give him something to do to get him out of his head. Levy would definitely pick up on that, so instead, I usher him into the dining room just as Biyu quietly joins us, with Smokey as her little white shadow.

We'd all practiced with our translator apps before her first Friday night dinner with us, but then she begged us to stop trying to hold a conversation with her. Something her human translator eventually translated to, "Americans are too loud at dinner."

Probably true.

Anyway, she seems okay to eat quietly with us as background noise, which I still view as a win.

Now that we're all assembled, we stand around the table and, nervous, I begin the dinner the way I always do.

"Now that the sun has gone down and the work is done, we welcome a day of rest and the chance to appreciate all the good things of this week."

I turn to Nacho. "We go around the table and say one good thing that's happened this week, one thing we appreciate, and one thing we are leaving behind. You don't have to participate if you don't want to."

"I would love to participate," he says quickly. Grimacing, he continues, "I don't know if I'll say the right thing, but I would love to participate."

"Then we'll go first, and you can see the kind of things we say. Would that be helpful?"

He nods, and I pat his back, wishing for so much more. His chest rises, and I linger for as long as I dare.

As is the Barlowe family custom, we start with the youngest person. Since Biyu doesn't like to use the translation app at the dinner table, she emails her three things to her translator in advance, who sends them to me, and I read them aloud to the table.

Pulling up my phone, I read, "I slept through the night without nightmares. I appreciate Levy for finding the candy from home that I like, and I'm leaving behind—"

I stop, my voice catching in my throat. Biyu looks up, and I point to the part I'm translating. She quickly—so quickly—touches her chest, then refocuses on her plate.

"Uh. I'm leaving behind despair. I choose to hope that I will see my family again."

My voice cracks a little at the end, and Levy squeezes my hand.

"Xiè xiè, Biyu," I manage, thanking her as best I can.

“Xiè xiè,” Levy and Ant say to a modest smile from her.

She hates being the center of attention, so I’m grateful when Ant goes in with his three for the week.

“I got a free chocolate croissant and fancy coffee after I stood up for myself. I appreciate that we had a nice customer earlier this week, and I’m going to leave behind the resentment I feel about not being made a part of Justin and Charlie’s wedding.”

“Thank you for sharing,” Levy and I say in unison.

“Uh, thank you for sharing,” Nacho says, clearing his throat.

Levy is next. “My good thing is I started writing lessons at the community center. I appreciate that the guy giving the writing lessons is a hot silver fox.” He leers, then admits, “Even though he is married.”

Levy has a *thing* for silver foxes.

“And I am leaving behind my resentment that Ant took the last of the chocolate milk and didn’t write it on the grocery list.”

Ant grimaces. “Sorry.”

Levy sends him a wink. “No problem, little brother.”

“Thank you for sharing,” we all say, Nacho joining us this time.

My offering is next. “I had a breakthrough with a patient this week. I appreciate her willingness to work so hard even though we had to cover some really tough ground.”

Ant and Levy glance at Biyu, correctly guessing the patient I am speaking of.

“And I am leaving behind the desire to murder the person responsible for her pain.”

A nervous laugh goes around the room, but they say to me, “Thank you for sharing.”

“Damn,” Nacho says, laughing. “I thought therapists were supposed to be neutral.”

Levy and I share a look and laugh.

Levy explains, “We’re supposed to appear neutral for our clients, but we can feel however we’re gonna feel.”

“Gotcha.”

Nacho’s eyes catch mine for a split second before he looks away.

“Okay, Nacho. It’s your turn if you’re comfortable.”

“Thank you, uh, Bram,” he says, clearing his throat. “Um, my good thing is that I got invited to this dinner. I appreciate being included, and I am leaving behind the fact that Topo Chico is not the same as beer.”

A gentle laugh goes around the table, and Nacho flushes when we say, “Thank you for sharing.”

I will email Biyu’s translator with each of our three things at the end of the evening, and I make a note to include Nacho’s three things too.

I lean into him a little. “Was that okay?”

He looks around the table. “Yeah. This is...this is amazing. I had never heard of this kind of dinner before you invited me.”

“You’re welcome to join us every Friday.”

He flushes again. “I’d like that.”

I go around the table and pour the wine and the sparkling grape for Nacho. We toast to setting down our responsibilities and resting, then I slice the chicken as everyone sits. I serve Levy the quarter leg and Ant a wing and half a chicken breast, with Biyu getting the other half.

Looking at Nacho, I ask, “What part of the chicken do you like?”

“Uhh...I kind of like everything. Just get what you like, and I’ll take whatever’s left.”

“That wasn’t the question, Nacho. Tell me what part of the chicken you would like.”

“Um,” he blinks, and I’m grateful Ant and Levy don’t notice the tension between us. Biyu, however, spares us a quick glance.

“Yes?”

“I, uh, like the leg and wing the best.”

“Perfect,” I say, slicing through the chicken easily, then placing them on his plate. “I’m going to also give you some chicken breast since this is a smaller bird tonight.”

“Thank you, Dr. Barlowe.”

Ant snorts. “Dr. Barlowe? Nah, we call him Bram. Or asshole.”

I point the knife at Ant. “I wasn’t the one who drank all the chocolate milk.”

He holds up his hands. “*Okay*. Note to self: don’t drink all the chocolate milk.”

“Or,” Levy says, perfectly reasonable, “we buy more so there is enough chocolate milk for the week.”

“Or we do that,” I say, taking the thigh and the rest of the chicken breast.

We dive into the food, and I’m relieved the conversation flows easily. I should have known Nacho would fit in perfectly and that all my stress about making this good for him was for nothing.

It wasn’t even that hard to think of him as Nacho. He is a gracious and handsome guest, and when we finish at the table, he helps put away the food and the dishes.

When he retrieves Biyu’s plate, she flinches at the unexpected closeness. The three of us freeze, having seen Biyu have a strong emotional reaction to triggering events. Nacho, however, smoothly bows his head and steps back. His immediate respect for her space neutralizes her fear, and she thanks him with a slight bow of her own.

Biyu returns to her room with Smokey, and we retire to the den for a game of cards and more conversation. Finally, Ant yawns and goes down the hallway leading to our three bedrooms.

Nacho gets up, heading toward the front door. “I’m just gonna use the bathroom real quick before I take off.”

“No problem,” I say, gathering the rest of the cups while Levy puts away the cards.

Levy angles off to his room, and I wait for Nacho outside the guest bathroom. Not expecting me, Nacho runs straight into my chest as he exits.

“Shit. Sorry, Dr. Barlowe.”

I do love it when he calls me that.

“No need to apologize. You weren’t expecting me.”

He shifts uncomfortably. “Thanks again for inviting me. This was just what I needed, and I’m looking forward to next Friday.”

“Excellent. Did you wash your hands?”

He looks back to the bathroom, confused. “Uh, yeah?”

“Good,” I say, fastening the buttons on his vest he’d undone after dinner. “Hygiene is important.”

His chest rises and falls beneath my fingers.

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe. The cons sometimes made fun of me, but good hygiene prevented me from getting sick in jail.”

Straightening his primly buttoned collar, I nod. “You take such excellent care of yourself, Ignacio. Tell me, what is your supplement regimen?”

Before he can answer, I interrupt him, reaching for his shoulder. “Here, stand up straight.”

He faithfully follows the direction of my hands.

“Thank you, Dr. Barlowe.”

“You’re welcome, Ignacio. Proper posture is so important for spinal health. Though, I apologize. You were about to tell

me what supplements you take.”

“I—I don’t take supplements.”

I let my disappointment show, and he lowers his head.

“I will bring you a multivitamin next week.”

“Dr. Barlowe, you don’t need to do that,” he protests. “I can buy myself a multivitamin.”

“I insist. It will make me feel better.”

“Of course. I’ll do whatever you want, Dr. Barlowe.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, wondering if that’s an invitation to do more.

“Thank you again for coming, Ignacio. Be safe on your way home.”

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe,” he says, opening the door.

As he makes his way down the stairs, I step onto the porch, unable to help myself.

“Ignacio—”

He turns to face me. “Yes, Dr. Barlowe?”

“You were a very good boy this evening.”

His chest rises sharply as he slowly raises his eyes to mine.

“Thank you, Dr. Barlowe. I’m glad I could be good for you.”

With that, he quickly gets into the truck and puts on his seat belt, avoiding my eyes as he backs out and turns toward the gate.

I close the door and carefully bash my forehead against the solid wood.

What am I *doing*?

NACHO

Jesus fuck. That was the hottest, sexiest...*fucking good boy*. That man is going to be the death of me, I swear. It's a good thing the RV park is only a couple of miles down from the ranch, or I'd end up wrapped around a tree.

I drop the keys twice before finally letting myself into my trailer. My fingers are equally uncooperative with the vest, and I lose a button to my nervous fumbling. Finally free of it, I yank my shirt over my head and toe off my shoes, nearly busting ass as I strip off my fancy argyle socks. I finally wrestle off my jeans, tossing everything into the built-in hamper before crawling naked and hard onto my perfect bed.

Pumping some lotion into my fist, I stroke myself, firing up the memory of the last time I saw Dr. Barlowe in lockup.



I'M A MONTH INTO SOLITARY, AND EVEN THOUGH IT HAS MOSTLY sucked, Dr. Barlowe was right. Our little sessions are legit keeping me out of serious trouble, and I've made strides toward putting together a life I'm proud of. I'd been white-knuckling my sobriety, but he insisted I join the prison's AA group.

It's not my favorite thing, but hearing other guys talk about the same issues with anger and self-control makes me feel less alone.

And while it's all helpful, the thing I look forward to the most is our little unspoken dynamic. I'm always handcuffed to the table when he walks in, my posture perfect, my demeanor pliant.

Sometimes I'm good for the entire session, and he finds a reason to call me a good boy. Sometimes I'm defiant and need to be strapped to the chair until he's satisfied I've learned my lesson. My heart races every time he takes off his belt like maybe this will be the time he crosses the line. But he never does.

Still, it's beyond obvious this turns me on, especially when he leans over to belt me in. I can't exactly hide my erection in prison-issue, but he never reacts and never touches me beyond tightening the belt and correcting my posture. His actions and demeanor are always efficient and professional.

It's low-key pervy, and I love it.

While I enjoy this kinky shit, I have to admit he's a damn good therapist. This morning we're talking about how I feel like a dumbass for getting busted, like maybe prison is the only thing I have to look forward to. His take, however, is different. When I tell him how my arrest went down, he grins.

"You making fun of me?"

He draws his chin back, almost as if physically struck by my words. "I would never make fun of you, Ignacio. I respect you far too much for that."

Those simple words—I respect you—make me hard. I whimper, rolling my eyes as my cock brushes the overhang.

Wordlessly, he stands and pushes my chair in, essentially trapping my cock between my stomach and the hard wood. He has to know what he's doing, but I dare not move a centimeter. Worse—or better, depending on your perspective—he continues to heap praise on me until it's time for the guards to take me back to my cell.

"You are incredibly smart, Ignacio. When you knew you were about to be arrested, even though the arresting officer noted you were drunk and belligerent, you did everything

possible to give yourself the least amount of time. You ditched the weapons and didn't self-incriminate," he notes in his efficient, sterile style.

Bastard's edging me, and he knows it.

Before he calls in the guard, Dr. Barlowe rises and makes his way around the table, his shoes practically under the chair as he faces me. I keep my eyes on my hands, trying not to think about the fact his cock is mere inches from my face or that I can smell his earthy personal scent.

"You take excellent care of your clothing and hygiene, Ignacio."

"Thank you, Dr. Barlowe," I whisper, staring forward as I subtly roll my hips.

"Tell me, Ignacio. Are you circumcised?"

I nearly swallow my tongue as I shake my head, not daring to look him in the eye.

"Good," he says, breathing heavily. "Good. Are you keeping up with your intimate hygiene?"

"Yes, Dr. Barlowe."

Fuck, did he move in closer?

I turn my head, careful not to make a big deal of it, and inhale deeply. His hand lands on my head, and he pulls me in closer, then steps back so quickly I can't tell if that happened or if I imagined it.

"Excellent. Make sure to pay extra attention to the details, Ignacio. Maybe tonight you can spend a little more time ensuring your cleanliness."

He has to know that being in solitary means I shower alone, and I'm pretty sure he's telling—ordering—me to soap up and jack off.

"Of course, Dr. Barlowe. I'll do it a few times to make sure I get the job done."

"Good boy." He grips the back of my neck, stroking the side with his thumb as he presses the button for the guard.

After waiting anxiously to be escorted to the showers, I take my time, just like the good doctor ordered. Pulling back the loose foreskin, I drip soapy water over my glistening, exposed glans, then draw the skin up and over, enjoying the slippery sound as I push my cock through the bubbly lubricant again and again, teasing myself until I can't hold back.

I come with Dr. Barlowe's velvety, insistent voice in my head. True to my word, I clean myself again in the same way before exiting the shower, shaken and spent.



I THRUST INTO MY TIGHT FIST, THE MEMORY OF HIS SCENT pushing me over the edge. Cum spurts from my cock, coating my abdomen in thick stripes. I continue stroking myself, milking the last of the good stuff until it's dripping down over my fist and my tiny room smells like sex.

Every time I shower, I think of his directive to clean my cock, as though he wants it kept clean for his consumption. I used to imagine him paying off a guard to look the other way while we fucked, but he's never even come close to touching me like that.

The one thing I haven't done since our first encounter is call him Daddy. I don't want him to give me that cold look ever again. Besides, I like being called a *good boy* too much to fuck with...whatever this thing is. I love his authoritative tone. He always listened in therapy, but after, he gave me a command or two to follow, almost like he was trying to keep me out of my head.

I was raised my entire life to prioritize loyalty to family above all else. One of his early demands was to prioritize me. Whenever I'd talked about being loyal and worried about what my family would think of me once I was on the outside, he'd remind me that I'm worthy of the life I want, regardless of their opinions.

Weird thing is, I believe him.



AFTER FOLLOWING HIS INSTRUCTIONS TO CLEAN MYSELF, I couldn't wait to tell him how thorough I'd been. Also, he found a job opening at a family-run fencing company in Johnson City, and per his request, I'd completed my résumé. I thought it was a waste of time since I wouldn't be out for another year, but he insisted, saying I needed to start getting my name out there now.

Even if I don't need it right now, I'm proud of how I explained my jail time. I'd hand-written the résumé and requested to go to the library to type it and send it to Dr. Barlowe. Before I could do any of that, though, I get a surprise visit from my state-appointed attorney.

"Barney? What are you doing here?" I ask as the guard walks me into the visitor's room.

A lot of people end up with shitty attorneys, but I got lucky. He's a good egg, even if he is a little twitchy.

"You're getting out this afternoon," he says, grinning wildly.

Wait, what?

"How? Why? What did you do?"

He shakes his head. "I didn't do anything. You're being released due to overcrowding and good behavior. Dr. Barlowe apparently gave a strong recommendation, and the warden signed off on it."

"Really? Why didn't he tell me?" I ask, still confused.

"Yes, really. And I don't think he was allowed."

Huh. No wonder he insisted I polish up my résumé and apply for jobs. Sneaky bastard.

"Holy shit. What do I do now?"

He walks me through the procedures and waits for me as I make my final walkthrough. I ask a guard I trust to give my

commissary balance to someone who needs it, and I further entrust him to pass on some of the items that mean more on the inside. This all feels fucking surreal, but I can't stop to take it in.

"Barney, I've got to type up this résumé. Can you help me get to a library or something?"

Hell, where am I going to sleep tonight?

"I can do one better," he says, walking me to his car.

Barney takes me to his office, where he sets me at a computer to type up the résumé and email it out while he orders pizza.

Before I type up the résumé, I email Dr. Barlowe.

Dr. Barlowe,

I got out today, and I hear you're the person responsible. So...thank you. I won't ever forget our sessions. I'm just sad I couldn't thank you properly for everything you taught me. I don't have a phone yet, but I have this email account. If there's anything I can do for you out here in the real world, just let me know. I'll do anything you want me to.

Ignacio

I type up my résumé and send it to the email provided. I refresh the inbox about a million times before the pizza arrives, but I don't get a response from Bram. He's probably already gone for the day, so I grab a slice and focus on the things I should be doing, namely, getting a job and getting out of town.

I take a bite of hot pizza and...fuck, it's the best pizza I've ever tasted. A reminder that I can build a life full of simple, amazing experiences.

After we've devoured the entire thing—to be fair, Barney only had two slices—I get an email from Jason Jennings asking if I can come in for an interview tomorrow morning. Not wanting to ask Barney for anything else, I take a chance and give my mother a call.

Dr. Barlowe wanted me to have a post-jail plan that put some distance between those who wouldn't support my new goals and me.

He's right, of course. As much as I never want to return to jail, I've only started believing I can create a better life for myself. I'm not strong enough to resist my family if they want to guilt me into helping with the family "business."

"It's just a few packages, primo."

Spoiler alert: It's never just a few packages.

Which means I've got to make this quick. Honestly, I'm surprised by how proud she sounds, and when she insists on lending me her car, I tear up.

"I can't take your car, Mamá."

"I don't drive it anymore. Take it. Go where you need to go. Sell it if you need the cash."

I check my email one last time before we leave Barney's, but Bram still hasn't replied.

Barney takes me to my mother's house, and she's already packed my things. Barney helps me put them in the car. I hug her with everything I have until she pats my shoulder.

"You have to leave, Nacho. Your cousins will be home soon, and you don't want them to know you're out."

I wipe away a few tears, and she pushes two hundred dollars into my hands.

"Make something of yourself," she says in her soft Spanish. "Make me proud."

"I will, Mamá. I promise."

Feeling like I've barely missed being dragged back into this life, I give Barney a back-pounding hug and get into my mother's old '88 Cutlass Supreme.

Needing to put some distance between me and my old life, I make the two-and-a-half-hour drive to the Texas Hill Country and spend the night in the car.

The next day I walk into the Jennings' Ranch Supply store, owned by Jason Jennings, who also owns the fencing business, and walk out with a job. Sleeping in my car sucks donkey balls, but Jason cuts paychecks every week, and soon enough, I'm able to move into a junked-out teardrop trailer in a tiny RV park several miles back from the highway.

A few more weeks in, Jason gives me a work truck to use. When he gives me my first promotion and raise at the ninety-day mark, I sell the Cutlass, fix up the tiny trailer, and sell it too. I use that cash to buy an old junked-out Airstream at auction.

It needs a shit ton of work, but I find that the work, the occasional hookup, and my Saturday AA meetings do a pretty good job of keeping me out of trouble.

My only regret? Dr. Barlowe never replies to my email. I may have pushed it too far with the I'll do anything line, and I hope he doesn't hate me or think I'm ridiculous for wishing I could see him one last time, to genuinely thank him and maybe tell him that striving to be his good boy this last month has changed my perspective on pretty much everything.



I BLINK BACK TO THE PRESENT.

Huh. Guess I got my wish after all.

BRAM

I spend the rest of the weekend berating myself. I'd done so well the entire evening, and then right at the very end...I had to say it. Pursuing anything with him would be illegal at this point, but Ignacio needed to hear that he'd pleased me as much as I needed to say it.

I know it's fucked up and that I've been lying to myself. There's a reason I never responded to the email he sent me when he got out, even after I knew we lived in the same area. Even after he showed up in the kitchen on the day of the therapy center's grand opening.

I knew I wouldn't be able to control myself around him.

I'm still chewing on it on Tuesday, so I take the day off and decide on a long drive. Heading into Austin, I go to a hiking trail Levy and I have been wanting to check out.

When I told Levy I wanted to go alone, he didn't question it, and I'm grateful. With the way things are going, I'll probably have to tell him about my connection to Nacho, and I'm not looking forward to it.

After hiking for a few hours along Lady Bird Lake, I'm starving. I end up in a food truck park on Barton Springs. I thought I'd done a good job of clearing my head, but all I can think about as I eat tacos dripping with hot sauce is that I can't wait to bring Nacho here to show him how much I want and approve of him.

I spend the drive back swinging between excitement and dread, knowing, at the very least, I'll get to see him every

Friday for dinner.

A few miles from the turn-off for the ranch, Nacho appears on the side of the road as though my overwrought mind has somehow produced him from thin air. His Jennings work truck is parked off the shoulder, and he appears to be repairing a section of fencing.

Despite knowing the havoc he wreaks on my self-control, I pull over. He's wearing earbuds and hasn't seen me yet. Taking a deep breath, I approach him, putting my hand on his shoulder. He startles and turns around, looking up at me with wide eyes.

"Dr. Barlowe," Nacho says, removing his earbuds. "How are you?"

The way he says *Dr. Barlowe*—breathy and reverent, like an honorific—goes straight to my cock.

"I'd be better if you had on a safety vest, Ignacio. Or at least some cones to signal to other drivers to slow down."

"I'm well off the highwa—"

"Where is your water?" I ask, cutting him off.

He pulls his chin back, confused. "In the truck?"

"How long have you been working out here, and why don't you have Ant or Justin with you?"

He raises his brow, amused.

I don't know why I'm peppering him with so many questions, but I need his answers. Right now.

Patiently, he answers, "About an hour, and this was a last-minute request from this customer."

"Fine. But you're going to dehydrate out here if you're not careful."

He drops his chin, a troublemaker smile playing on his lips. Finally, he raises his chin and looks me in the eye. "I told you, Dr. Barlowe—I have a water jug in the truck, and I'm used to working out in the sun all day long. No need for you to worry over me."

“Just because you’re used to it doesn’t mean you should go without water for extended periods. Going forward, keep your water with you at all times. Also, where’s your hat? Are you even using sunscreen?”

The day started off in typical Texas style: chilly in the morning and scorching in the afternoon. There’s no way he should be out here waterless and hatless.

“I’ve got melanin,” he says, gesturing to his darker skin with a gleam in his eye. “I don’t need sunscreen.”

“Even people with dark complexions need sunscreen, Ignacio. Please start using it regularly.”

“I don’t want to,” he challenges, and I secretly love it. “It leaves a white cast on my skin.”

“If you don’t care about the health of your skin, at least think about your tattoos. They’ll begin to age if you don’t care for them.”

“And what kind of sunscreen do you use on your tattoos, Dr. Barlowe?” he asks, tracing the dragon scale pattern on my lower arm.

After letting him touch me for a little too long, I pull my arm back. “I use a sunscreen that doesn’t leave a white cast. I will text you my recommendation.”

He taps his inked fingers on his pretty lips, considering me.

“Ignacio, this is nonnegotiable.”

His chest rises sharply. “Yes, Dr. Barlowe. I look forward to following your recommendations.”

“Good—” I cough. “Excellent. Also, where do you live? I don’t have your full contact information on my phone.”

“Just a few miles past Wild Heart, in that little RV park off 165.”

How did I not know he lives so close to me?

Because knowing is dangerous.

“Is that place even safe?” I ask as I type in his information.

“Is any place truly safe, Dr. Barlowe?”

He’s mocking me, trying to spin me up, and I refuse to rise to the bait. This doesn’t discourage him in the slightest.

I narrow my eyes, and he licks his lips before answering me.

“If we’re talking about my Airstream, I’ve refurbished it and added a new lock. I’d say it’s safe enough.”

“Are you sure? What kind of lock are we talking about? It’s a deadbolt, I hope.”

I’m not *that* worried about his safety, but I need to give him a task, something to do just for me.

“Now, now, Dr. Barlowe. You don’t have to worry about me. I’m a free man and an adult human being at that. I know how to keep myself safe.”

“I’m sure you do, Ignacio, but you’re not allowed a gun, and that RV park has a reputation.”

Ignacio shakes his head as his eyes twinkle with far too much mischief. “C’mon, Dr. Barlowe. That place is full of swinging retirees. I’m the youngest person there by about thirty years. As for *personal protective equipment*, you know as well as anyone that there’s a difference between what is allowed and what is done.”

Groaning, I run my hand over my face. “Ignacio, please do not tell me you have an illegal weapon in your possession. They will put you back in jail, and I won’t be there to...” I stop myself.

“Advise me? Protect me? Ask the warden to let me out early?”

Cracking my neck, I will myself to stay in place only to shuffle back, afraid of what I might do if I stay close to him. “Exactly.”

“By the way, I like your tattoos,” he says, gesturing at my uncovered forearms with an ink-covered hand. “Never

would've guessed it.”

“It was important to maintain a professional appearance.”

“Good call. Couldn't have anybody thinking anything untoward was going on in our little sessions, now could we?”

Ignacio's eyes sparkle with the implication, leaving me with just my bare fingernails holding on to self-control.

“Not if I wish to keep my license,” I finally answer, narrowing my eyes at him with no heat behind the gesture.

Even as I take another step back, I scan him from head to toe. The Jennings' Fencing Supply-branded clothes he's wearing are good quality, fit perfectly to his trim form, and are neatly starched and ironed despite the fact he's been working all day. He could be the catalog model for this brand of work attire.

Actually, he could be a model for far more expensive brands, given his lustrous hair, thick eyelashes, and sharp cheekbones. Even the teardrop tattoo under his eye enhances his pouty, dangerous aesthetic.

His boots, however, stand out. He's clearly cared for them as best he can, but they have seen better days.

“Are you not making enough to buy better boots?” I ask, concerned.

“I make plenty. I'm just saving my money. I paid off my court fees, and now I'm saving for a down payment on a house and some land. If that means I've got to wear shitty boots for a little longer, I'll survive.”

Needing distance and something—anything—else to focus on, I stalk over to his truck and grab the water bottle from his cooler, returning to shove it in his hands.

“Here, drink at least half of this.”

“Now?” he asks, a grin tugging at his lips.

I square my jaw. “Right now.”

Locking eyes with me, he unscrews the cap, maintaining eye contact as he swallows the cold water. I'm distracted by

the rise and fall of his Adam's apple along the column of tattooed skin, and his smirking grin makes me wonder if he can read my mind.

If he knows what I'd do with him—to *him*—if given half a chance.

Pulling the bottle away from his lips, he tilts it toward me so I can see that the water is, indeed, half gone.

“Happy?”

“That you've clearly been dehydrating yourself while working in the hot sun with subpar boots? No. But I do appreciate your compliance just now.”

“I would hate to worry you,” he purrs.

My eyes fall to his crotch, and I inhale sharply at the visible bulge. He catches the movement and takes another drink of water, letting some dribble out of his mouth and down his long, perfect neck.

Purposefully, I think.

I exhale softly, letting the words I've been biting back for what seems like an eternity tumble from my lips.

“Good boy.”

Ignacio chokes a little on the water but recovers quickly, his deft fingers gathering the escaping droplets from the edge of his plush lips.

I send him a sharp nod and turn on my heel, walking away from him quickly without making it seem like I'm running.

“It was nice seeing you again, Dr. Barlowe. I've missed our sessions,” he calls out, his voice full of tease and promise.

I walk a little faster, opening the car door as his gentle chuckle reaches my ears. Dropping into the seat, I shut the door and close my eyes, grateful no one is here to witness this tragedy. Pressing my palm against my hard cock, I order myself to calm down. The pressure doesn't erase the need, however, and I check for traffic and then pull onto the highway, going much faster than the speed limit.

I'm home soon enough and, thankfully, Levy and Ant appear to be in their rooms. Practically running to the bathroom, I unzip my jeans as soon as I shut the door. Spying the hand lotion next to the soap, I pump it into my palm and stroke myself, desperate for relief, knowing this won't take long.

Gripping the countertop with one hand and tightening my grip on my cock with the other, I speed up, carefully keeping my harsh breaths and the shlick-shlick sounds of jacking off to a minimum. I imagine Ignacio kneeling in front of me, his mouth open, waiting. That visual is all it takes for the massive orgasm to slam into me. I aim the thick stripes of cum into the sink, managing to get it everywhere but, and shuddering as my knees give out from under me.

Gripping the counter with both hands, I bring my head up, catching my reflection in the mirror. Shame and desire flush my cheeks, and I cannot account for how this man affects me. Taking a few deep breaths, I wash my hands and use bleach wipes on the mirror and countertop to erase all traces of this foolishness.

The reality is, had we not been in public, I would have taken things much, much further. I know I should stop myself, but there is not a single atom in my body saying no.

NACHO

Trip from Rebel Sky requested an ornamental fence around their pool area since their youngest is a little too curious about the water. I feel like being snarky and pointing out that there should've always been a fence there, but...whatever.

Ant and I get the job done pretty quickly and are about to head out for the day when Desi and Sam come up to the truck on Ant's side.

I roll down his window and send them a wave, joking, "Well, lookee here. Two of my favorite queers."

Desi blows me a kiss and Sam pretends to toss his hair over his shoulder, netting a laugh from me, but not Ant. Desi and Sam exchange grimaces, then Sam climbs up on the footboard, sticking his head in the window.

"Hey, Ant. Hey, Nacho."

Ant's muttered, "Hey," is a little on the salty side, confirming his opinion of them.

Sam, however, is undaunted.

"It's come to our attention that we somehow missed the boat on inviting y'all to our Sunday dinners. We feel awful about that. I promise it was an oversight. Me and Trip have been busy with the kids and the business... It doesn't matter. I'm not here to make excuses. We just want to let you know we're genuinely sorry, and if you two and the therapy brothers would start coming—as soon as this Sunday if you can—it would mean the world to us."

Ant scratches his nose, but the anger from a few seconds ago is completely gone. With the way he's back to fidgeting with the button lock on his door, I suspect he's trying not to cry. I know I am, so I answer for both of us.

"Well, shit. That's so sweet of you, Sam. We'd love to go. Right, Ant?"

He nods and sends Desi and Sam a trembly but genuine smile.

Sam shakes his head. "Dammit. Open this goddamn door, Ant. Let me give you a hug."

Ant freezes, and Sam quickly adds, "If that's okay with you."

Ant takes a deep breath, then shrugs like it's no big deal. Sam opens the door, holding out his hand, which Ant grabs and uses to get out of the truck. I hop out and cross around the front to hug Desi while Sam puts his arms around Ant and doesn't let go. He says something low in Ant's ear, and the tears Ant's been trying to hold back find their way down his cheeks.

Sam pulls back from the hug. "You and me? We've been through too much of the same shit to not be there for each other. I swear, Ant, it was just life stuff. I never ever meant to exclude you."

Gesturing at me with a twinkle in his eye, Sam continues, "To be fair, I *was* excluding Nacho, but that's only because he's a degenerate ex-con with a facial tattoo."

The four of us laugh, all of us teary-eyed and a little lighter for having this interaction. Desi comes in for a hug with Ant, and I give Sam a hug.

"You're a good man, Sam Goodnight," I whisper. "I think he needed that more than he realized. Me too."

We exchange another round of hugs, and I fire off a text to Levy and Bram, telling them about Sam's invite.

Levy: That's so kind of them. I'd love to go.

Bram: Me too. I'm glad they talked to you.



OY, MONDAY MORNING HAS COME *WAY* TOO QUICKLY. AS I make my giant travel mug of coffee for the day, I chuckle, remembering Bram's insistence that I get enough water.

Coffee counts, right?

My need for caffeine is his fault, anyway. We'd gone to Rebel Sky for Sunday dinner, and Bram had insisted on picking me up while Ant and Levy went with Charlie and Justin. The ride hadn't taken long, but he'd called me Ignacio with that glint in his eyes as his hands kept finding excuses to touch me—correcting my posture, complimenting the buttons on my vest, removing a piece of lint from my jeans, high up on my inner thigh.

Before I could process any of that, Trip had greeted us at the door with the biggest hug and a heartfelt apology for excluding us. The meal had been Desi's apparently famous enchiladas, which were fantastic.

By the end of the evening, I was wearing a pair of borrowed swim trunks and was judging the massive cannon ball contest between Ant and Anders—who, by the way, is as crazy as everyone says. We'd scored them on a scale of one through five based on the artistry and size of the splash. They'd been neck and neck until Anders lost his shorts and was immediately crowned the winner.

Bram had driven me home while fussing with my waterlogged hair and complimenting my ability to charm everyone I meet. Just as he'd pulled up to my trailer, he swiped his thumb over my bottom lip, claiming I had a smidge of whipped cream on the delicate skin.

Never mind that my dessert had been in the to-go box Desi gave me, still untouched.

"You were such a good boy tonight," he'd purred, his thumb still playing with my lip before drawing away and breaking eye contact to look out the windshield. "Sleep well, Ignacio."

I'd taken the hint and exited the truck, but I'd barely gotten in the door before I had my cock out, making a break for my tiny bathroom. I'd only had to imagine kneeling at his feet before blowing my load into the sink thirty seconds later.

Even when I managed to sleep through the geriatric orgy playing out across the parking lot, I'd wake every few hours to tented sheets and my corrupted imagination. I'm chafed as fuck this morning, and yet...zero regrets.

I remember Ant telling me the therapy brothers are booked out weeks in advance but always make room for emergency clients. As I consider the benefits of a mental health crisis, I shove a piece of toast in my mouth and head for the door.

A piece of toast does not a healthy breakfast make, Ignacio.

Whatever. I need to get this day going. With the inadequate toast hanging out of my mouth and the coffee clipped to my belt, I open the front door, stopping when something heavy tumbles down the light aluminum steps.

Carefully pushing the door open the rest of the way, I find a new pair of boots in my size at the bottom of the steps.

Laughing, I pick them up, noticing there's a water bottle off to the side, and it's the kind with notes every few ounces.

Drink this amount by NINE.

Drink this amount by NOON.

Drink this amount by THREE.

Complete the bottle by FIVE.

"Motherfucker," I say, chuckling.

There's a sticky note taped to the bottle.

Dear Ignacio,

The water bottle will help you to comply with your hydration goals, and the boots are a gift to celebrate how far you've come.

Dr. Barlowe

PS You've really done a nice job with your home.

I'm amused and pleased that he's continuing our dynamic here on the outside, and I wonder if he waited till I went inside last night or if he brought them over this morning. I don't know his intentions or if he even knows what he's doing, but I like it. A little too much, probably.

I'd thrived under his careful attention while in jail. It had never come across as picky or judgmental, but rather a desire to make things right for me. More specifically, I think *he* had wanted to be the one to make things right for me. And I don't think he acts that way around anyone else.

At least, I hope he doesn't.

I reverse into my pretty trailer, switch out my boots, and fill my new water bottle. Both are top quality, which he knows I appreciate. I don't own a lot, but what I do own is as nice as I can afford or make for myself. He knew that the imperfect state of my boots, however functional, would bother me.

Not wanting to overthink it, I get into the company truck and make the short drive to Wild Heart. I normally hit the horn a couple of times to let Ant know I'm out here, but Bram is waiting for me. Seeing him makes my heart pound, but I can't let it show.

Instead, I pull up beside him, my bad-boy smile in full effect. "You're one bossy son of a bitch, aren't you?"

"Are you wearing your new boots?" he asks, ignoring my attitude as he cranes his neck to see for himself.

Gesturing for him to back up, I open the door and stick out my foot, wiggling it about. "They're beautiful, and they fit perfectly. Thank you...Dr. Barlowe," I say, unable to keep the desire from my voice.

Adjusting his collar, he gives me a short, sharp nod.

"And the water bottle?"

Biting back a laugh, I hold it up.

"Why is the water red?"

“It’s Kool-Aid,” I respond, holding back a chuckle. It’s sugar-free Kool-Aid, but he doesn’t need to know that.

Touching his fingers to his forehead, he shakes his head in that sexy, disapproving way.

“*Ignacio*. Kool-Aid is *not* appropriate for hydration. You need clean, filtered water to stay hydrated all day.”

“But I don’t like plain water, Dr. Barlowe.”

Tensing his jaw, he sticks out his hand. “Give it to me. I will refill it with water and something that *isn’t* Kool-Aid.”

I hold the bottle just out of reach, taking the time to peruse his body. He’s wearing pressed pants and a white button-down without a single wrinkle. Better, the sleeves are rolled neatly, putting his strong, tattooed arms on display. I wonder if he’s done that for me the way I did it for him last Friday.

Stepping in close—so fucking close—he squeezes between me and the steering wheel, stretching to take the bottle from my extended hand. Once he’s captured the bottle, he starts to pull away but stops for a second, our faces so close I can feel his hot breath on my lips.

Straightening, his eyes fall to my crotch for just a second before he walks off.

“Nice to see you again, Dr. Barlowe,” I call out, unable to keep the amusement out of my voice.

Other than a slight shoulder roll, he doesn’t respond. A few minutes later, Ant comes out with the bottle in hand. Not going to lie—I’m a little disappointed.

He gets into the truck and puts my water bottle in the cupholder, explaining in Spanish, “Bram said to bring this out to you. He added some of the cut fruit from breakfast to it.”

I snort. “He made fun of me for bringing Kool-Aid.”

Rolling his eyes, Ant nods along. “He is forever wrinkling his nose at my food choices.”

Something like jealousy fires in my belly. “Oh, does he make you eat healthy?”

Ant raises his brow. “*Make* me? I don’t think anyone could *make* me do anything. Not anymore.”

People might assume as an ex-convict, I’m the tougher one, but more and more, I’m finding that Ant is built differently. Still, Justin pointed out that Ant only ever uses Spanish with me. At first, I thought he didn’t know how many people in our circle speak the language at least a little, but Justin said it’s because he trusts me. Which—just a guess—means he was punished for speaking Spanish at some point.

I’d just assumed and started speaking Spanish with him because I thought it’d be more comfortable for him. Now I do it on purpose so he can take back his language.

“True, I can’t picture someone making you do anything, even if Bram is a massive hard-ass.”

Ant uncrosses his arms and turns to me, wrinkling his nose. “Hard-ass?”

“Yeah. Like, even at dinner last week, he was still all stern and judgmental.”

He dismisses me with a wave of his hand. “Please, that’s just the outside. He doesn’t like people to know it, but he’s a real kitty-cat.”

“Seriously? Did you just call Dr.—*Bram* a kitty-cat?”

“Don’t get me wrong. He’s a very appropriate sort of guy.”

“Appropriate,” I repeat dumbly.

“Yeah. I can pick up on a predator pretty quickly, and there’s nothing predatory about him. He goes out of his way to...I dunno. Show me he’s never going to come on to me?”

Knowing what I do about Ant’s history, I’m grateful he’s comfortable around Bram.

“So, he’s, what? Standoffish?”

Ant shakes his head. “It’s hard to explain. He’s thoughtful, *and* I will never have to worry about him trying to take advantage of me.”

“So...are there people who *do* set off your alarm bells?”

He wrinkles his nose. “I ran into Jason and Justin’s father the other day, and he’s not a good person. I wouldn’t want to be in a room alone with him.”

Interesting.

“Agreed. I guess I was asking if there was anyone in our group who set off alarm bells. Like, I know Anders can be inappropriate sometimes—”

He holds up his hand. “Anders is inappropriate in a way that everyone sorta agrees with, and he would never harm me.” He stops and thinks as the road rolls by in the gray morning light. “I mean, I know my opinion doesn’t mean anything, but nobody associated with the Jennings brothers, the ranches, or the vineyard makes me nervous. I’m not always totally comfortable as the outsider, but I’m not picking up anything bad from them.”

I draw my chin back as I turn onto the highway leading into town. “Outsider? Whatever. Every single one of those people would protect you with their lives.”

Ant’s eyes fall to his lap, and he fidgets with his fingers.

Anxious to change the subject, I continue, “Anyway, let’s look at the schedule and see what we’ve got planned for the day.”

“Sounds good,” he says. Ant holds up his fist, and I bump it.

Apparently, chafed is now more or less a permanent condition of my cock. For the last month, every Friday dinner has been followed by Saturday ointment.

Dr. Barlowe walks me out to my truck after dinner, inquiring about my job, verifying that I’ve started taking the supplements he recommended, adjusting my posture. Always ending the night by telling me I’ve been a good boy.

He wants more. I know he does. I also know why he hesitates. It’s more than just the laws. It’s important to be able to think of himself as a force for good in the world. Pursuing whatever this is contradicts that carefully crafted self-image.

And God, do I want to make him contradict himself, to be so fucking hot for us that he breaks all his own rules. I've jacked off dozens of times to every possible scenario, each time imagining his rare, pleased smile. God, I am so fucked in the head.

He's also texting me to demand updates, which is inexplicably hotter. There's, of course, malicious compliance, but I prefer what I'm calling *delicious compliance*. And oh, do I make him pay.

Dr. Barlowe: Please provide me with your water intake today.

I answer with a shirtless selfie of me chugging an enormous glass of water, a fair amount of it dripping down my chest.

A few days later:

Dr. Barlowe: Have you begun using the sunscreen I suggested?

I send him a ten-minute video of me applying it while wearing only a pair of shorts with a four-inch inseam.

Dr. Barlowe: Have you booked your annual physical?

I do as he asks, then send him a voice memo of the doctor asking me to turn and cough. I make sure to capture the cough.

Dr. Barlowe: I passed by the Kerr family farm and saw their new fencing. Excellent job. I'm proud of you.

I don't respond to that one because it makes me feel a little too warm and fuzzy, and I'm afraid I might say something too sincere. I'm pretty sure sincerity would be about as welcome as admitting we have a dynamic to begin with.

BRAM

After another horrifying session with Biyu, I need some fresh air. I borrow the ranch truck and go for a drive to check out the H-E-B in Marble Falls.

Letting my thoughts go, I pick up a basket and mindlessly peruse the massive produce section. Charlie usually provides soups and sandwiches for our visitors, but I want to cook something for Biyu outside of our Friday dinner. Care for her in a way that isn't about rehashing her trauma.

Anders mentioned that one of his friends puts peaches on her pizza, and it's surprisingly good. Since it's the beginning of peach season, I went digging online and found a promising recipe I'm going to try out.

I'm bagging a few pounds of gorgeous-looking peaches when I get a text from Charlie.

***Charlie:** We found Biyu's parents. They still live in the same house she grew up in. They told our contact they never lost hope.*

***Me:** That's amazing news.*

***Charlie:** We're arranging transport for her now.*

***Me:** How does that work? Will she have to travel alone?*

***Charlie:** No. A local female therapist will accompany her, taking her as far as Beijing, where she will meet with her translator and be united with her parents, then transported home.*

***Me:** And we'll get confirmation when she arrives safely?*

***Charlie:** Yes. We're also providing Biyu and her family with additional support.*

***Me:** I'm glad to hear it. Levy and I have some ideas about providing online help to ease her re-entry.*

***Charlie:** Wasn't sure if it's legal for you to provide therapy to someone in another country. Don't want to involve you in anything that would threaten your license.*

I laugh, thinking about the ways in which I've already done that to myself.

***Me:** Let us worry about the legalities. We'll talk soon.*

***Charlie:** Okay.*

Gripping my phone, I take a deep breath and exhale slowly. Biyu's story is one of the most harrowing I've ever heard, and the amount of strength in that quiet wisp of a young woman is unlike anything I've ever seen.

Our shared living arrangements have never been totally comfortable, but she understands we're trying to help. She chose to give us a chance despite previous repeated disappointments.

Not wanting to get emotional in H-E-B, I put my phone away and refocus on the groceries. When I look up to find the sign for the condiment aisle, I spy Nacho two aisles down, pushing a basket full of processed crap and not one single green thing.

Speaking of things that will get my license revoked.

I swear I seem to conjure him whenever I need him the most.

He hasn't seen me yet, and it's interesting to observe how other people react to his brand of swagger. He's a friendly, sharp-dressed guy, up-nodding everyone he runs into, but he's covered in prison-issue tattoos, easily identifiable as an ex-con.

The tight smiles he gets back are a little funny, though I'm less amused by the hot mom in velour track pants hungrily looking him over despite the huge rock on her left hand.

Eyes off the goods, lady.

Returning her flirty smile with a wink, Nacho turns to dip down the snack aisle, which finally sets my feet in motion. Knowing he'll choose something absolutely awful, I double-time it, brushing past Mrs. Real Housewives of Burnet County.

As I enter the aisle, I stutter-step to a halt. I keep forgetting how sexy he is up close, even with the terrible grocery store lighting. Worse—better?—he looks like a giant kid, tapping his inked fingers together as he reviews the selections, finally landing on a huge box of Twinkies.

“Put those back,” I command.

Nacho startles and drops the box as he pivots to face me.

“Dr. Barlowe,” he says, his voice high and shaky. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

Narrowing his eyes, Nacho makes a disgruntled sound and spins back around. He bends to retrieve the box, deliberately displaying his perfect ass. Instead of returning the box to the shelf as I've instructed, he raises his brow in challenge as he drops it into his basket.

I walk over, pluck the box out of his basket, and put it back on the shelf. Biting his lip, he reaches for it again, defiant. I grab his arm, loving how his chest rises abruptly at the touch.

“Those are mine,” he pouts, amusement lighting up his eyes.

I like the pouting. Too much.

Taking the fresh veggies from my basket, I put them in his. “You need to learn how to eat better.”

He immediately tries to remove the vegetables, but I stop him with my hand over his in a firm grip.

“Ignacio, you will take these, you will cook them appropriately, and you will eat them.”

“Why should I?”

“Because I said so. Because you work in the sun and need to combat the free radicals bombarding your body all day long. Are you even using the sunscreen I recommended?”

He crosses his eyes and then points to a tube of that exact sunscreen in his basket. “Bossy motherfucker,” he mutters under his breath.

“Bossy, perhaps. But it doesn’t give you a white cast, now does it?”

He shakes his head. “It’s fine.”

The video he sent me, several minutes of him slathering sunscreen across every delicious inch of his body, showed at least one weakness I’d counseled him on.

“And how is it going with you getting the back of your neck? I seem to remember you overlooking it in your video.”

His lips hook into a tiny little smile. “Yes, I have Ant get it for me.”

Is he lying just to get a rise out of me?

“Do you actually need help applying sunscreen?” I ask, hating how jealous I sound. More than that, hating how jealous I *feel*. “Even children can apply their own sunscreen.”

He shrugs. “I’m just trying to follow your directions, Dr. Barlowe.”

“Perhaps we should discuss flexibility exercises so you can reach the back of your neck by yourself. You need to be more self-sufficient.”

“But if I were self-sufficient, how would you ever help me?” he asks, letting his smile spread into a full grin, teeth and all.

“Even self-sufficient people need guidance, Ignacio. For instance, I assumed you would be interested in preserving your many tattoos, yet you still needed help remembering to use sunscreen.”

“You’re right, Dr. Barlowe. I might lose my head if you weren’t here to tell me how to keep it screwed on straight.”

Slowly running his teeth over his bottom lip, he inspects my body from head to toe. “Well, not *straight*, come to think of it.”

Frustrated by my arousal, I ask, “Why are you here? There are grocery stores in Johnson City.”

“I could ask you the same question,” he says, throwing my words back at me.

I grind my teeth, not wanting to cause a scene.

Grinning, he walks past me, trailing his fingers along my arm. “As stimulating as this conversation has been, I’ve got a hot date to prepare for,” he says, pointing at the enema box in his basket. “See you around, Dr. Barlowe.”

If he were mine, I’d drag him from this store and make him forget the thought of another man. But he’s not, and this thing between us is...pretend. Before I can think of a way to make him stay, Nacho disappears around the corner, whistling.

Forcing myself to walk in the opposite direction, I pull up my anonymous Instagram account. Nacho is vain about his beauty, as he should be, and he likes to share his workout selfies with the public. I haven’t addressed this yet. If I’m honest, it’s because this is the only place I can see his body how I want to.

Shamefully, I did look to see if he has an OnlyFans or similar account, but he doesn’t. Refocusing on Instagram, I remember he likes showing off his body and having people see what he’s doing. For instance, there’s already a selfie outside of H-E-B, telling people he’s shopping for a cozy night in.

Busted.

Ignoring the many, many offers to join him, I take a few breaths to center myself. When my heartbeat finally stabilizes, I return to the produce section and replace what I gave him, then make my way over to the checkout lanes, hoping to avoid trouble.

Trouble, however, is waiting for me. There’s only one available checkout line, and Nacho is in it. While he’s kept the vegetables in his basket, there are Twinkies by the checkout,

and he's put two—three!—of the smaller packages onto the conveyor belt.

He's as insolent as he is gorgeous, and once more, I imagine what I'd do if he were mine.

As Nacho swipes his card to pay, he turns and spies me, startling before fixing that same little smirk on his lips. Wiggling his fingers at me, he gathers his bags and heads for the exit. I'm tempted to throw my things aside and follow him, but that's too much, even for me.

There's an elderly gentleman ahead of me who, thankfully, only has two items, and the gal at the checkout gets through my things pretty quickly. When I exit the store, Nacho is rounding his truck, about to get in on the driver's side. Leaving the basket behind, I grab my bags, practically running toward him, having disagreed with myself about this particular boundary.

As he opens the door, I set down my groceries and step up to him, practically pressing against his back. He turns around, surprised, and I body him against the truck, nose to nose.

“Are those Twinkies in your bags?”

He licks his lips, his tongue dangerously close. “I told you. I eat what I want.”

“Twinkies need to be earned, and you haven't earned those yet.”

He scans the parking lot, ignoring our closeness. He leans in and whispers, “Dr. Barlowe, you're making a scene.”

“No, I'm not. There's no one out here to make a scene in front of,” I insist, pressing against him.

This is the first time we've had full body contact, and the weight of his cock against my thigh nearly makes me lose the last withering vestige of my self-control.

Gathering myself, I step back. “You want to earn these, don't you?” I ask, sliding one of the Twinkies out of his bag, holding it just out of his reach.

He lunges for it, and I pin him against the doorframe. “Come now, Ignacio. Wouldn’t you feel better if you earned them?”

His eyes meet mine as we share a breathless moment.

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe. I would love to earn them.”

Tickling my jaw, I wipe the sweat from his hairline. “Better. Show me your water bottle.”

He swallows thickly and then stretches to the passenger seat, his lower body still pinned by my hips. Hooking the bottle with an outstretched finger, he straightens, holding it in front of my face, proving he has, in fact, kept up with his water consumption. I take the bottle from him and unscrew the top, sniffing the contents.

“What is this?” I ask, regarding the bright lemon smell.

“It’s a calorie-free water enhancer,” he mumbles. “Plus, I add a little Topo Chico to keep it interesting.”

Watching him carefully, I take a sip. “Mm. This *is* tasty. I approve.”

“You know how I live for your approval, Dr. Barlowe,” he snarks, then leans back as I stand over him.

“You giving me attitude right now?”

“No, Dr. Barlowe,” he says, comically rounding his eyes.

As much as he’s playing with me, the pulse in his neck is going off like a telegraph as his chest rises and falls rapidly against my confining weight.

The sound of birds overhead reminds me we are very much in public and I need to stop. Hell, I needed to stop in the store, and pressing my body against his is yet another line crossed. The lines are like a bag of potato chips at this point. I couldn’t stop at one if I wanted to. Crossing one makes me want to hunt down the others and obliterate them.

Taking a deep breath, I step back and open the package of Twinkies, sliding one out.

“You’ve earned this today,” I say, holding it up.

Instead of using his hands, Ignacio takes the Twinkie with his mouth, capturing my gaze with a heated look as he bobs up and down before biting half of it and smearing the fluffy white center around his mouth.

“Mm. I love a good cream filling,” he moans, licking his lips.

Pushing the remaining half into his mouth with my thumb, I growl, “Stop playing with your food.”

Grabbing my hand, he swallows the Twinkie, then licks the remnants from my skin before letting it go. Completely out of my gourd, I raise my thumb to my mouth, sucking the tip, tasting the sweetness. Tasting him.

Maybe I could have pulled back before now, stopped the fucking runaway train before it went off the tracks. But the small taste of him on my tongue...that’s the breaking point.

Panting, possessed, I attack his mouth, moaning wantonly as he kisses me back with equal passion. I snake my hand behind his head and pull him impossibly closer, plundering his sweet mouth. He rolls his hips, and I let him, angling my thigh between his legs, giving him something to hump against.

His practiced cool gives way to a feral sexuality that nearly has me coming in my pants. I pull back, and our eyes lock as his breaths become increasingly ragged, our hold on each other—physically, sexually, hell, psychically—unbreakable.

He’s so fucking close. I can see it in the widening of his pupils.

“Come for me, Ignacio,” I roughly whisper in his ear before pushing my tongue past his waiting lips.

I grip him tight as he hunches against me, profane and perfect. With one final grunt, he pulls away from the kiss, pressing his face into my neck, gripping me tight as his body bucks and shivers through his orgasm.

I hold him as he goes limp, supporting his body until his muscles work again. Then I hold him for a moment longer. Because I have to.

“See how satisfying it can be to properly earn your treats?” I whisper, nosing his ear.

“Mm-hmm,” he says, still clutching my shirt tightly.

My heart pounds and alarms go off in my brain as the reality of what I’ve done finally hits me. I didn’t just cross *a* line. I crossed *the* line. Breathing heavily, I tuck in his shirt and straighten his collar, avoiding his eyes.

Swallowing, I step back.

“I’ll be watching your water consumption,” I warn, my voice a cracked husk. “Continue to send updates, and don’t get cute with your sugar intake.”

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe,” he says, equally breathless as he lets go of my arm.

“As for the sunscreen, try your best to apply it by yourself. We will work out a schedule to address your flexibility.”

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe.”

“Good boy.” I take another step backward, still avoiding his eyes. “I’m glad I ran into you today, Ignacio. Keep up the good work.”

I turn on my heel and walk to the truck with Wild Heart emblazoned across the side, my hands shaking. I’m glad there are no small children around because my pants do nothing to hide the outline of my raging erection.

The mere pressure of my underwear is nearly enough to trip my wire, and I’m reminded of a small detail from my therapy sessions with him. I am circumcised, and he is not.

I’ve never been intimate with an uncircumcised man, and I admit that curiosity has the better of me. Climbing into the truck, I imagine what would happen if I ordered him to slide his foreskin over my bare cock...fuck.

I start toward home, quickly realizing I’m risking an accident if I don’t get control of the situation in my pants. Pulling over, I unzip with shaking hands and push my shirt aside. I’ve barely started stroking when the orgasm hits and cum paints my belly as a gravelly *Ignacio* crosses my lips. I let

it dry on my skin, reveling in the tight sensation all the way home.

NACHO

I pull into the scruffy little RV park, my head oddly silent. I can't believe he went for it in broad daylight. I don't know what that means.

Making my way up the stairs, I open my door. The cold cum sliding around in my underwear is uncomfortable, so I go directly to the little shower closet, shimmying out of my clothes as the water heats. When I finally step under the hot stream, I'm relieved and a little sad to wash away the evidence.

I don't have a large enough hot water heater to indulge in a long, moody shower, so I clean myself as quickly as possible, then step out into the steamy hallway. Wiping down the mirror on the back of the bathroom door, my cock twitches at the sight of my swollen red lips.

I saw the moment he couldn't hold back another second. I've never had somebody look at me like that. I lazily stroke myself to a half-hard state, remembering the strength in his arms, the way he *took* me in that kiss, the taste of his tongue in my mouth, and the way he gave me permission to get off against him.

As hot as our encounter was, he refused to meet my eyes after, and it's hard not to take that as rejection. This little sharp nugget of truth makes it impossible to maintain an erection, and I release my cock, drying off before shoving my dirty clothes into the hamper.

As I slip into my favorite silky pajamas, I wonder if he scared himself. Guilt swirls in my belly, like maybe something about me makes a good man stray from his principles.

That's stupid though. This all started with Dr. Barlowe taking charge during our sessions, and he's the one who's continued it on the outside. That's not a complaint—I had no idea I'd love it so much, need it even—but I've been quietly going by his rules without knowing what they even are.

Dropping into the secondhand recliner that I re-covered myself—thank you, prison education—I pull up a browser window and try to figure out how to search for...whatever this is between us. I don't even know what to call it, so the initial search results for *I like it when he gets bossy* are all articles on shitty boyfriends who try to boss around their significant others in a hurtful way.

Bram isn't hurting me. Honestly, I can't imagine he ever would. I think hurting someone else goes against his principles, not just as a therapist but as a human being. I try *I like bossy men*, which comes up with more of the same, plus a few articles about being attracted to dominant men.

Reading through them, it's still not quite right. Many of the articles have to do with women being the more submissive spouse and men being more dominant. Depending on the flavor of the website, people are either pro or con, and none of it has anything to do with me.

One *Psychology Today* article does mention some people like domination due to boredom or impulse control issues. I never get bored, and while I like having fun, my continued sobriety proves I have a system for dealing with my impulses.

Truth be told, I don't like being told what to do. One of the reasons I get along so well with the Jennings brothers is that once they saw how well I worked, they never tried to micromanage me.

The defiance I showed Bram in our first meeting was pretty standard for me, if a little heightened because of everything I'd been through. Still, while I was a good prisoner,

I didn't let just anybody tell me what to do. That's a good way to get punked on the inside.

Because the word dominance comes up, I do a search on BDSM. I'm vaguely aware of what BDSM is, and I find several articles that discuss bondage and impact play but nothing on what Bram and I have going. Finally, I find a couple of non-whip-and-chain articles and run across a phrase I haven't heard before: power exchange.

Most of that is still way beyond what we've done and much further than I'd ever want to go. Some people engage in total power exchange, and...yikes. That's definitely not my yum.

Thankfully, I find a website that explains the various levels of power exchange. The basic level is conditional compliance. Finally, something that sounds familiar. I'll comply, but only because I want to and because I hope to get something in return: his praise and approval. And maybe, hopefully, his dick buried deep inside me.

Fuck, the memory of his cock pressed against mine, even through layers of fabric...

Focus, Nacho.

It's a little embarrassing to admit I still need approval at my age, but I've never had somebody be so consistently kind to me. He might get stern, and he absolutely gets bossy, but he's never once made me feel bad about myself.

The one thing that bothers me, though, is nearly every article about power exchange stresses the importance of having conversations ahead of time.

Hell, we're not even supposed to be doing this. How can we possibly have a conversation about it? Especially when he couldn't even look me in the eye after.

I wonder if he even understands that this wrong thing we're doing...we're not doing it right. Not to mention the thought of telling him how much I enjoy his demands makes my face so hot I can't stand it.

I mean, in general, I like a little give-and-take. I love bottoming, but topping is great too. Would I ever want to top Bram? Would he control from the bottom, or would I take charge? I have no fucking idea.

We haven't even made it to a bedroom, and I have no clue if we ever will. Based on how turned on I get when he fusses over my sugar intake, I can't imagine what having him in my bed would feel like.

It might blow my head clean off.

With my mind going in circles, I close out of the search engine and pull up Insta. I've got over a thousand likes on my H-E-B post, which cracks me up. We Texans do love our grocery store. I feel a little better about myself as I scroll through the thirsty comments.

There are always a couple of boo birds, people wondering why I post at all, saying I have no purpose for this account. It always amuses me when people feel the need to comment such things. It's as if they don't understand social media at all.

One commenter with a generic ab shot as his profile pic leaves a simple message: *Check your DMs.*

This is probably a massive catfish, but I'm feeling lonely and rejected. It can't hurt to check.

I don't think I could've been more wrong if I tried.

When I check the DM, it takes five scrolls to get to the bottom of the message, which I decide not to read in detail as the various slurs pile up.

Having had enough of that before and during my incarceration, I don't feel the need to engage with this person. *Screenshot and block, motherfucker.*

This afternoon has me in my head, which is never a good place to be. I normally go to my AA meetings on Saturday mornings, bright and early, but I might need a midweek pick-me-up.

Just as I'm grabbing my keys, I remember what Ant said about Bram's and Levy's schedules. They always leave room

for emergency sessions.

I pull up the equine therapy center's website, and sure enough, there's an online form for requesting a session. I type in my maternal grandfather's name, which coincidentally is Abrahán, Spanish for Abraham, and I list my nickname as Abe. I hint at some big-T trauma, which I know is Bram's specialty, and ask for help as soon as possible.

Within the hour, I get a response.

This is no automated *Thank you for your email. We'll get back to you soon* response.

It's a direct message from Bram himself.

Dear Abe,

Thank you for reaching out. I'm sorry to hear things have been so difficult for you, and I am happy to help you. I have a cancellation in my schedule for tomorrow evening at 7:30. I'm going to pencil you in. Please let me know if you will be able to make that time.

In the interim, if you feel you may harm yourself or others, please call my office directly or call 911. Your health and safety are very important to me.

Sincerely,

Dr. Abraham Barlowe, PsyD, NCC

I respond right away with a confirmation, which he follows up with instructions for finding the ranch and his office, along with a series of attachments I have no intention of filling out.

It's funny, his professional voice. He's not at all bossy or pushy. Actually, he sounds warm. Concerned. I'm a little jealous that his patients get to see that side of him.



I DROP OFF ANT THE NEXT DAY, THEN CIRCLE AROUND TO THE back of the therapy barn. I'm careful as I enter the building,

avoiding Levy and everyone else. In fact, it's so late in the evening that Bram and I may be the only two people in here.

I'm a little early as I walk into the welcoming therapy area. The waiting room is full of comfortable chairs and up-to-date magazines, and there's even a flat-screen playing an old eighties movie on mute.

The setup is interesting. Rather than being closed off from the rest of the barn, it's open to the equine therapy...arena, I guess you'd call it. Though the riding area is surrounded by horse stalls instead of risers. People in the waiting room can watch the horses while they wait. It's sorta peaceful, almost like a church.

The door with his name on it is closed, but the window blinds are partially open, and I peek inside. It's a larger office than I anticipated, with a desk off to the side, a small couch against the back wall with a TV above it, and a pair of chairs in front.

He's at his desk, facing away from me, focused on the monitor in front of him, a pair of glasses I've never seen before pushed to the top of his head. I tend to think of him as stern and authoritarian in our conversations, but here, at the end of a long day, I see a man with a creased shirt and hair slightly out of place, his head tilted as though reading through something important.

His office has pretty abstract art on the walls and gorgeous bookshelves interspersed with books, plants, and small sculptures. Not that I've ever been to college, but it reminds me of a professor's office, and I enjoy that way too much.

"Dr. Barlowe?" I ask, pushing open the door.

"Abe, welcome. I'll be right with—"

The second his eyes meet mine, they narrow, and he tilts his head to the side.

"Nacho? I've got a patient coming."

"I know. I'm your patient."

He covers his eyes with a shaky hand. “No. Nacho, I can’t...not after...”

He can’t seem to finish any of his sentences or even admit what we’ve done. *This is a solid start.*

Ignoring his discomfort, I step into his office and close the door behind me, locking it.

His brow rises. “Why are you locking my door?”

“I want some privacy,” I say, closing the blinds.

“Nachó, not in my place of work. *Please,*” he begs, his eyes filled with conflicting emotions.

Fine.

“I’ll unlock the door, but I still need to talk to you.”

Dropping his chin, he gestures toward the seating arrangement. I drop onto the small couch, leaving ample room for him, but he takes one of the seats across from me.

He supports his elbow on the arm of the chair and leans into his hand, avoiding my eyes. I slouch, unsure what to say now that I’ve got him where I want him. After a few more moments of silence, he straightens his posture, and with a heavy sigh, his eyes finally meet mine.

“What would you like to talk about, Nachó?”

“So, in here, I’m Nachó?”

“It keeps things straight in my head,” he admits, his honesty surprising but not.

“I came because I missed our sessions.”

He snorts, shaking his head, and I can’t tell if he doesn’t believe me or if he thinks I’m referring to the sexual tension we’ve always played off.

“Our *actual* sessions, Bram. You always had good advice.”

“And you need advice?”

“Yeah.”

While he patiently waits for me to continue, I flounder for a second, trying to come up with something to say. I don't have an agenda, maybe because I never believed I'd get this far. I don't want to be disappointed by what he thinks about us, so I start with the thing that made me book the appointment in the first place.

"I sometimes get these racist, homophobic assholes DMing me on social media, and I'm not sure how I'm supposed to take it. Like, in jail, you take that shit seriously if you don't wanna end up dead in the yard. But out here, I'm noticing people talk big shit all the time without backing it up. So am I supposed to prepare for a war? Or am I supposed to laugh at this motherfucker and move on?"

Bram nods along as I'm talking, and if I didn't know better, I'd say he's grateful for the opportunity to put on his therapy hat.

"It is hard to know what to do. Most of the time, you can pretty much ignore every word that comes out of their mouths. A lot of those people are sad little keyboard warriors who will never go beyond their mothers' basements."

We share a dry laugh, but when our eyes meet, his drift off again.

"Do you have a particular message you can show me?" he asks.

I nod, pulling up the screenshots on my phone before pushing it across the desk to him.

He quickly scrolls through the nonsense, shaking his head. "This guy's not making any direct threats. He's making reference to something about the posts, which glorify your deviant lifestyle. Do you know which posts he's referring to?"

The answer isn't going to make him very happy, but I kinda wanna fuck with him at this point. Chuckling, I grab my phone, navigate to my account, and scroll down to a selfie I took with Erik and the two sets of throuples we hung out with once. We're all clothed, but the caption reads *Time to get it on.*

Hah. That post got me a lot of play in my DMs...which is why I posted it. Bram's nostrils flare as he reads the comments. Finally, his eyes lock onto mine.

Score.

"I don't know who these other people are, but that's Oscar from the bar and Warwick, Joaquin, and Colt from Rebel Sky. *And Erik.*"

I bite my fingernail, grinning as confirmation.

"Did you have sex with *all* of them?"

I nod, trying to think back through the night. "Pretty sure I did. I think Oliver and Abel's girlfriend sat on my cock at some point, though I was blindfolded for some of it."

The set of his jaw is giving me life, as is the vein thumping out a rhythm on his forehead.

"Oh!" I say, holding up my finger. "Erik and I had already decided to stop fucking, so we didn't do each other that night."

"Wait," he says, his chest rising and falling so rapidly I wonder if he's about to hyperventilate. "You used to sleep with *Erik*? Like, regularly?"

"Sleep? No," I answer, not bothering to keep the amusement out of my voice. Gesturing with both of my hands, I explain, "He's hung like a moose and has stamina for daysss. I had him on my regular rotation for a few months, but, pfft, that fizzled out before the orgy."

Bram's fists are closed so tightly that his knuckles are turning white.

"And..."—he takes a breath to steady himself—"do you frequently engage in sex with multiple partners at once?"

"Eh. Pretty sure that night—fuck, what was that? Eight people?—was the most at once. But sure. If a threesome or foursome comes up, who am I to say no? I mean...Rick and Martha next door invite me over all the time. I'm probably not into whatever seventies hippie sex they've got going on, but if Rick wanted to exchange blowjobs, I suppose—"

“No,” Bram says, leaning forward to put his finger in my face. “You will *not* participate in that kind of sexual activity ever again.”

Ignoring his rude gesture, I go for practiced cool. “There’s nothing wrong with a healthy sex life, *Bram*.”

“Do you think that’s a healthy sex life?”

“Bram, are you shaming my sexual expression?” I ask, arching my brow.

He catches the smirk I can’t hide and looks off to the side. “Stop it, Nacho.”

Two can play that game, I see.

“Tell you what, *Bram*. Why don’t you look me in the eyes and tell me to stop.”

Slowly, as if it pains him, he brings his eyes to mine. Fuck. That’s like lightning in the vein.

Putting his finger back in my face, he orders, “You are not to get sexual satisfaction from anywhere else.”

“But why?” I ask, shimmying my shoulders, coy in a way that’s making a big vein pop out on his head.

“You know why.”

“And what do you mean by *anywhere else*, Bram? Is there a sanctioned, Dr. Barlowe-approved place from which I can derive my pleasure?” I ask, not-so-innocently.

“You know there is.”

Oh. I wasn’t expecting him to actually say that.

“I do.” I put on a dramatic pout before continuing. “But I wanna hear you say it. Out loud.”

His frustrated exhale becomes more of a growl and... *damn*. I do like spinning him up.

“Ignacio...”

“Dr. Barlowe...” I say, parting my thighs as I give him my best come-fuck-me-against-this-loveseat look.

“You cannot sleep with other people when you are mine.”

Oh...shit. Sitting up, I lean forward.

“Wait. *Am* I yours? Genuine question because I don’t fucking know what I am to you.”

“How could you not know? I think the parking lot made it obvious.”

“Well, it didn’t because I have no idea what the fuck is in your head.” Pointing to my ear, I continue, “I’m gonna need to hear you say the words.”

I fix him with a glare, daring him to back out now. He doesn’t. Shifting in his chair, he tightens his fists, but at least he’s still looking me in the eye.

“You belong to me, Ignacio. All of your orgasms belong to *me*,” he says, his rumbly words vibrating my insides.

I smile, supremely satisfied. “Now, was that so fucking hard?”

BRAM

A *bort, abort, abort. Take it back. Take it all back.*

“I shouldn’t have said that, Nacho.”

“Nah-ah-ah,” he teases, waving his finger in my face. “No takebacks.”

“I have to, Nacho. I should’ve never done any of this. It’s incredibly inappropriate, especially considering our history.”

“Our history? You mean when you had all the power in the world to suggest my freedom or continued incarceration?”

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. I would say I regretted my action, but he’d know I was lying.

“I know. That was inexcusable and so inappropriate.”

His eyes sparkle like he’s enjoying my discomfort. “Inappropriate? Dr. Barlowe, you humped me in the H-E-B parking lot. Hell, you smashed my face into your crotch in our last session together. The inappropriate ship has sailed.”

He’s right. Of course he’s right. It’s killing me not to fuck him against that couch to show him how right he is. Instead, I try to pull it together.

“I’m sorry, Nacho. We are long overdue for a conversation, and that’s my fault. I’ve been putting it off until we could talk privately.”

“Can’t get more private than this,” he says, gesturing to the space around us.

“I...I don’t want to do this where I work. It blurs too many things for me,” I admit.

Blinking widely, he asks, “Why? Because you don’t wanna lose your license?”

I startle at his implication, then sit back, shaking my head. “I wasn’t thinking about that at all. I just...I’ve never done something so awful in my life and—”

His teasing expression gives way to hurt, and he scratches his nose, his eyes going red.

Argh, I’m doing this all wrong.

“I’m sorry. *You* didn’t do anything awful. It was me. It was all me, and even though I still don’t regret it, talking about this in my place of work makes me feel like the biggest asshole.”

Shifting his jaw, Nacho lifts his chin. “Fine. You don’t want to talk in here? Then let’s go for a ride, *asshole*.”

Yeah, I deserve that.

I gather my things and do the final walkthrough, turning off the lights and setting the alarms. The horses have been fed and had their stables cleaned by Ant and a few other volunteers. We walk outside, and Nacho waits for me as I close and lock the big barn doors.

Grabbing his keys, he heads off toward his truck, and I follow him, kinda...helpless to do anything else. He gets in and pushes the start button as I round on the other side.

“Seat belt, Ignacio.”

“Fuck you.”

I curse under my breath. “Sorry. Habit. That’s not an order. I just...me and Levy? Our lives were saved by wearing our seat belts, and I would never let someone I care about ride without one.”

He snorts. “You? Care about me? Doubt it.”

He’s covering up uncertainty—uncertainty I placed there—and it’s like a closed fist around my gut. He would have no doubts had I handled this whole...*thing*...like an adult.

You still can't even call it by its name, Abraham.

"I do," I rush to assure him, ignoring my loud inner critic. "I care about you very much."

"Sure," he says, reaching across his shoulder to pull the belt before snapping it into place.

I grind my back molars as he carefully backs out of the parking space and pulls out of the property. Within seconds, we're on a back road, with nothing around us but dark sky and hills covered with green trees.

Nacho is silent, and I take my fill of him as he drives into the night. He's got his elbow propped on the door, leaning his head onto his fingers as he steers with his right hand. Here, in this atmospheric almost-blue light, he again reminds me of an editorial model, mysterious and brooding, his tattoos lending a sense of danger.

I'm heavily tattooed, yes, but I look like a hipster who wandered into a courtroom. He looks like he's broken laws. Like danger and orgies wrapped in sexy brown skin and impossibly thick black hair.

He glances in my direction with pursed lips and judgment in his dark, knowing eyes. I feel like a kid caught masturbating, shameful with desire.

Refocusing on the view outside, I try to come up with something to say for myself, only to be met with internal silence. I let out a frustrated groan, unaccustomed to this inability to find the right words. Finally, as though we're already halfway into the conversation, I stumble forward with a crude confession through clenched teeth.

"This thing between us turns me on. Not talking about it makes me hard every time I see you."

Met with silence, I glance over as Nacho scrubs his jaw.

"Yeah."

Yeah? What does that even fucking mean? Yeah, he sees it when I get hard? Yeah, he feels it too?

Yeah, *what?*

“Use my name, Ignacio.”

Rolling his eyes toward the ceiling, he starts with the Spanish curses, then ends with, “You are *un-fucking-believable*.”

“Ignacio, please,” I press, needing it more than I can admit.

He sighs. “Yes, Dr. Barlowe. It is a turn-on.”

“It’s not just about the sexual tension,” I admit, finally using the words that describe these last several months since I first saw him at Wild Heart. “It’s about...I see how hard you work. How hard you try. Even with setbacks, it’s like you’ve already got the goal in mind, and you’re not going to let anything stop you. When I see where I can direct you, where I can help you to make better choices...”

My words trail off.

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe?” he nudges, disrespectful even as he gives me a glimmer of hope.

Grinding my jaw, I admit, “It’s very satisfying.”

“Satisfying how, Dr. Barlowe?” Nacho asks, smirking. “Does it satisfy you sexually?”

It would if I let it.

“Maybe, but it’s also fulfilling in a way I don’t often get in my line of work.”

I dart a look in Nacho’s direction just as his brows meet in the middle.

“You don’t find your work fulfilling? I mean, Lyle Underwood is doing some volunteer work with us before school, and they said you helped them understand it was okay to be masc-presenting and yet know oneself to be nonbinary. Hell, they’re out there helping others because you suggested our little community outreach project to them. You’ve changed their whole perspective.”

I shake my head. “At best, it’s half me, half my brother, which is why we work so well together. That part *is* fulfilling.”

I'm thrilled with Lyle's outcome. But for every Lyle, there are, I don't know...fifteen Ants," I say, then curse under my breath. "Please forget I said that."

"What's wrong with Ant? He shows up to work on time, works his ass off, and he's part of our community projects too, you know. He's a good egg."

"He is..." I hesitate. "Good."

"That's a ringing endorsement from someone who can't even get him to go to therapy."

"Shut up," I grumble, unwilling to discuss the troublesome things I see in Ant's eyes.

I've blurred and crossed so many lines it makes me dizzy, but another admission tumbles out of my lips.

"The limitation of therapy is that I can't stitch people back together. At best, I'm the person informing them that, after everything they've been through, they are the ones who have to do all the heavy lifting. I'm not supposed to say this, but I wonder if that's not giving them false hope. Some of these people...I don't know if recovery is fully possible."

My words are greeted by road noise. Shame washes over me, my own words pummeling me for the failure I really am.

Finally, Nacho breaks the silence.

"That's why...everything. Isn't it? You think you can stitch *me* back together."

The neutrality of his statement gives no hint as to his feelings on the matter. Once again, I'm left with a raw truth.

"Yes. And no."

"Explain."

I let the road roll under us for a few moments before answering.

"You respond well to direction. For all the things you won't tell me, I know you're a fighter."

“You know my record, Dr. Barlowe. That Nazi motherfucker was the only fight I ever had on the inside, and he came to me.”

“But you were prepared. You knew exactly what to do. You took him out of the fight before he could do serious damage.”

“I dunno, Doc. Getting stabbed with a shiv felt pretty fucking serious to me.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

We hadn’t gotten very far in our therapy sessions, but I knew the first time I met Ignacio Rivera that he’d kept his sexuality well hidden. It was evident with the way he acted in those few moments before deciding he was interested.

Based on his record of good behavior and lack of violent interactions, I doubt he ever let anyone see his queerness. Not the way he showed me. When I think about how hard he would get for me...fuck. I loved that his arousal was for me and for me alone.

After a few seconds of riding along in silence, Nacho answers, gripping the steering wheel tight, “My father always said, ‘Never start a fight, hijo. But if someone brings the fight to you, make damn sure you finish it.’ Didn’t want to disappoint my old man.”

Sadness, deeper than I thought him capable of, crosses Nacho’s features as he stares out at the road ahead.

“It’s the way you liked being directed,” I explain softly, hoping to bring him back into the now. “That’s why it’s so satisfying. I can tell a brick wall to sit up straight, but what good would that do? To soothe and appease a fighter like yourself, to be the one person you are willing to take direction from...”

I let out a shaky breath as blood pulses in my cock, causing it to swell. Even Nacho shifts in his seat, uncomfortable.

“Yeah, I can see why we never talked about this,” he says, shaking his head. “Not exactly easy to admit how much I like your direction.”

I clear my throat and will the lower half of my body to calm down.

“And do you like that we naturally slipped into this? Or does that bother you?”

His silence makes my stomach drop. We’re already almost to Canyon Lake. He turns onto the next ranch road, going back toward home via a different route.

“Both,” he finally admits, his voice quiet.

I look over, horrified. “Nacho, I am so sorry. I—”

His irreverent eye roll stops me in my tracks.

“I like that you knew what I needed without asking.”

“Okay...”

“But...I’m always a little worried you’ll ask for something I can’t give you, and I don’t know what happens if I say no.”

I slap my hand to my forehead, staring at him. “Nacho, you can *always* say no.”

The withering look he gives me tells me it wasn’t as obvious as I thought. His words seal the deal.

“Well, thank you for letting me know, *Bram*.”

Heat tightens my chest and loosens my hips. Aaaand we’re back to irreverent.

“Okay, okay, okay.” I put my hands up, a gesture of surrender. “We definitely should’ve talked and established some guidelines before today. That is entirely my fault. I am so sorry.”

His eyes widen in surprise. “That’s, like, three times you’ve apologized already. Are you okay?” he asks, adjusting his grip on the wheel to touch the back of his hand to my forehead.

I love it when he does that.

I take his hand and kiss it. “I can admit when I’m wrong.”

“Genuinely didn’t know you were aware you could be wrong. So this is...surprising.”

“Shut up,” I say, glowering at his amused smile.

“Okay, then...what are the rules?”

“Rule number one is, you can say no to *anything*. I’ll never punish you for saying no.”

“You sure? I might like that,” he says, his shit-eating grin brightening the dark space between us.

I know he’s joking to ease the tension, but I can’t quite go there yet. “I’m not going to ignore you or walk away from you because you say no. This only continues because we both want it to.”

There’s a solid ten-count of road noise before he responds.

“So...you *do* want to keep doing this?”

The hint of uncertainty in his voice shames me to no end.

“Very much,” I say, looking out the side window.

He lets out a huff of air.

“Can you please look at me when you say that? Because I don’t... It doesn’t feel good when you look away from me like you’re doing right now.”

I don’t think Nacho likes having to ask for attention, probably because he doesn’t feel he deserves positive attention in the first place. Ignoring him...that’s the punishment.

And it’s not a punishment I’d ever willingly give out.

“I’m sorry,” I say, turning to look at him directly. “You will always have my full attention. Your thoughts are incredibly important to me. The way you feel about this dynamic between us is incredibly important to me.”

“Yeah?”

“If I didn’t think you enjoyed it, it wouldn’t be enjoyable for me. I could tell from the beginning that...”

“In our jail sessions?” he asks, smirking.

“Yes, in our jail sessions. I could tell you liked what I was doing. That you were turned on by what I was doing.”

“And I like that you never said anything about my hard-ons or the fact I sometimes did things just for your attention.”

It’s my turn to smirk. “That was fun for me,” I say. “Highly arousing.”

Nacho chews his bottom lip, thoughtful.

“What’s this look?”

“I want to do the things you ask of me. Really, really want to. I like the way you’re firm with me. But when you walk away, it feels blurry. Like, I don’t want you to be bossy all the time, but you can’t act like there’s not an *us* when we’re not playing. I need to know that we have something outside of the playing.”

Not gonna lie—that’s a gut check I’m not expecting. The clinician in me knows how very *in-the-wrong* I’ve been, not just with that but with all of this. The ex-convict setting the clear boundary is embarrassing but necessary.

“You are right,” I nearly choke out.

He laughs. “Man, that must’ve hurt for you to say.”

“You have no idea. And I very much want an *us* outside of our dynamic.”

“That’s good to hear,” he says, looking relieved. I feel like an ass for not making that clearer sooner.

“It’s just...”—his words drift off, and I wait as he finds them again—“something about you makes me want to spill my guts. Tell you everything about me. But some of my history doesn’t have a statute of limitations. I’d be a real fucking idiot to tell you those things when I’m not even sure you’re all in.”

“So when I pull away, it makes you worry.”

“Of course it does,” he says with a gesture, keeping the truck steady even now. “This isn’t casual for me.”

“I don’t want you to worry, Nacho. This isn’t casual for me either. You can say whatever you need to say. In your own time.”

He grips the steering wheel like he wants to say something but can't quite get there.

"You've said that you have things that don't have a statute of limitations. Maybe if you knew some of my history, you'd know you could talk to me."

He looks over at me. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I don't know if I ever told you, but Levy and I grew up in a tough neighborhood."

He shakes his head.

"It was...I dunno. Rough, but everybody kinda took care of everybody else. Our parents owned a little convenience store that, you know, did okay. But we got robbed a lot, so we took classes at the community center and learned to defend ourselves. Fight back if necessary."

Humming to himself, he responds, "Can't let them think you're an easy target."

"Nope. We were pretty rough around the edges when we were younger. Disciplined enough to stay out of any real trouble, but nobody fucked with us."

I take a deep breath. Only Levy knows this next part about me.

"Anyway, we had a friend, Ria. We'd gone to school together since kindergarten, and she was one of the first people I ever told I was gay. She had shitty parents, but she was always cool to be around." The memories come thick and fast, and I give myself a chance to catch my breath. "But there was this one week where she left school on Friday, chatty and happy, but came back on Monday morning like a ghost of the girl we knew. It didn't take much digging to find out that her stepbrother had moved in over the weekend, and things had gone to hell. Fast."

Nacho, hanging on to every word, curses under his breath.

"Exactly. He'd dropped out of college, moved into the apartment over his dad's garage, and he just...you could tell he was bad news from looking at him. Ria never told anyone else

what he did to her, and she made us swear we wouldn't say anything. I kept my promise, but she didn't say we couldn't go after him."

"Oh shit."

"He came into the corner store the same night she told us what was happening. I was on shift and told him I had some expired beer in the back if he wanted."

"Let me guess: no beer."

"Not a drop. At least not for him. Got him in the alley, and he thought he was so badass, but he didn't know a thing about putting up a fight. It took less than a minute. Broke a lot of the bones in his face with a few quick palm strikes. Kicked his knee so hard it went the wrong way."

Nacho's eyes widen as he looks over at me. I shrug.

"Fuck, Bram. You could've done some serious time for that."

"Nah." I rub my thighs, remembering that night so clearly. "Didn't have a scratch on me. Didn't use a fist, so my knuckles were fine. It would've been his word against mine. Also, I always carried a knife on me, so I held it up to his throat and told him everything I'd do to him if he ever laid another hand on Ria. Called him an ambulance, and he swore up and down he couldn't identify his attacker. Left town as soon as he healed."

Nacho drums his thumbs on the steering wheel, nodding along. We share a few silent moments, and then he begins to speak.

"I...I tried to be the good kid, you know? I didn't want to be in a gang like my cousins. But, you know, shit happens. My mother only took the hard stuff if she needed help making it through a triple shift. Dad died of an accidental overdose when I was fifteen. Mom did the best she could. I still was okay-ish though. You know?"

I bob my head, encouraging him to continue.

“But my cousins would end up in these binds, and I would help because I thought I had to. Anyway, you know that part. The night I got arrested, I knew it was going to happen. Like, I told them it was a bad drop, but they had shit they were holding over my head.”

“The kind of shit that doesn’t have a statute of limitations?”

He nods. “It’s why I followed your advice and got the hell out of there. Didn’t want them coming after me again.”

He lets the road noise take back over for a few miles, and I don’t rush him.

“You know, in our neighborhood, there were these white supremacist wannabes. Why they would choose to live in the neighborhood everyone called Little Mexico, I still don’t get. They always caused trouble, but low level. Until one night, they beat the shit out of this old guy down the street. Robbed his rent money and left him for dead. We all knew who did it, but the cops couldn’t make a case. So they got away with it. And I didn’t want them sniffing around my mom’s house because...yeah, fuck that.”

“So you did what you had to do.”

“Exactly,” he says, gesturing. “I wasn’t going to wait till they showed up. I knew where they lived and had one of my cousins come as backup. Shit got ugly. Me and my cousin made it out. They didn’t. I got one. He got two.”

He swallows uneasily, ticking his jaw.

“You never got over killing someone.”

Nacho shakes his head, tapping his thumb on the steering wheel. “My cousin pounded my back, telling me I was one of them now... I threw up that night when I got back to my mom’s house. Lost a bunch of weight, couldn’t think about what I’d done.”

“Sounds like you and I might be more alike than we think,” I say softly, rubbing his arm. “Thank you for trusting me with your history. I promise it goes nowhere. Not even Levy.”

He swallows thickly, not yet able to look me in the eye. I lean over and kiss his cheek, and his body releases some of the tension he'd been holding.

“You were protecting your mom, Nacho. That was incredibly brave of you.”

A tear rolls down his cheek.

“It’s funny, me crying. My cousin—the one who went with me? He said we had to get the teardrops to let people know not to fuck with us. I never wanted this thing,” he says, gesturing to the tattoo on his face. “And after I was convicted, I decided I’d keep it to look tough in jail, maybe get it lasered off after.”

“And now?”

“It’s a reminder to leave that life in the past.”

“Think you’ll ever get it removed?”

A sexy smile curls his lips. “I don’t know, Dr. Barlowe. What do you think I should do?”

“I think you should do what is right for you, Ignacio. Either way, I’ll be proud of you,” I say, kissing the back of his hand, letting my dominant side purr to life.

“Yeah?” he asks, looking over at me hopefully.

“So very proud.”

The remaining tension leaves his body on a big exhale. “Thank you, Dr. Barlowe.”

I shift in my seat with how good he makes me feel.

“I like it when you call me Dr. Barlowe,” I whisper, leaning over to kiss the outer shell of his ear.

“I know,” he whispers back, glancing at me expectantly before returning his eyes to the road.

“Thank you for setting a boundary. I know that wasn’t easy. I’m still figuring out how comfortable I am with other people knowing. So if you can, I’d like to keep it between us.”

“Of course, Dr. Barlowe,” he says so genuinely it makes my heartbeat speed up.

God, what he does to me.

“I don’t know if that’s fair though,” I admit.

“Why is that?”

“We have been in public, and I have instructed you.”

“Yes, but you are always discreet when you do it. You don’t do it to humiliate me in front of other people. You do it because you want me to be...right.”

I let out a slow hiss. “Yes.”

“Then please keep doing that, Dr. Barlowe.”

“You have no idea how much it pleases me to hear you ask for instruction, Ignacio.”

“And it pleases me to comply. Most of the time.”

I’ve been calling him a brat, but that’s not true. He’s just asserting his boundaries. It’s good. It’s healthy. And I like it very much.

“And do you like it when I call you Ignacio?”

“Yes. But there will be days when I just want to be me—Nacho. And, same as you, I don’t want you to do it around other people. Too many questions.”

“I usually think of you as Nacho, but then I enjoy calling you by your given name.”

“I like that.”

“We’ll keep this private then.”

“Thank you, Dr. Barlowe.”

“Is there anything else you’d like me to do?” I ask, knowing the answer but needing him to say the words.

He smooths his hand over his crotch, and I tsk, shaking my head. He moves his hand back to the wheel, grabbing tightly.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Barlowe. Been kind of a heavy night. Talking about this turns me on.”

“That’s a good, healthy reaction, Ignacio. I like seeing it. I like to reward honesty. But this is about telling our truths,

being open about what we want from each other.”

He nods.

“Ignacio, I need you to hear me when I say this.”

He glances at me, completely trusting.

“This thing we’re doing? It’s wrong. It’s been wrong from the beginning. You just shared something very heavy, and that makes you emotionally vulnerable. Which makes this line of conversation...”

Looking over, Nacho licks his lips and finishes for me. “Wrong.”

“Yes. I like that it’s wrong. And even though I never would’ve abused my power over you, I liked that I had power over your freedom.”

“You did?”

“Made me feel like a god,” I confess. “No, not *a* god. *Your* god.”

“And now I’ve given you that same power all over again,” he says thoughtfully, his knuckles turning pale as he continues gripping the steering wheel.

I shiver on an inhale before hissing out, “Yes,” my cock aching against its restraints.

“I like that,” he admits breathlessly, his eyes on the road. “That I can make you feel so powerful.”

“Good,” I say, running my hand over his jeans, enjoying how swollen his cock has become. “Good boy.”

“Thank you, Dr. Barlowe.”

I remove my hand from his thigh, needing to gather myself. Our heavy breaths sync, and we drive through the night, staring out the windshield, knowing Nacho could say the word, and I’d order him to pull over and wrench orgasm after orgasm from his willing body.

The fact that he enjoys me having this much authority over him is heady stuff. But I can’t enjoy that without first

acknowledging some important truths.

“As much as I like how wrong this is...”

His chest rises sharply, and I take another breath to wrangle my impulses.

“As much as I like that, there’s wrong, and then there’s not checking in. If you’re willing to be wrong with me, we’ll be wrong together, but consent is important, and I should have been upfront with you way earlier.”

“I definitely want to be wrong with you.”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, he goes quiet. I raise my chin, silently encouraging him to continue.

“Is it still wrong?” he asks. “I’m not your patient anymore.”

I let out a long breath.

“Legally, we’d have to wait another few months to hit the two-year mark from our last session. But I don’t plan to wait unless you want to.”

He snorts. “Yeah, no. But...what about after the two-year mark?”

“We’re technically in the clear unless someone can prove we had sexual contact prior to that time. However, the power differential that comes with me being your therapist doesn’t go away. The therapeutic community regards any sexual contact with a patient as deeply unethical, regardless of the time passed or the circumstances.”

Worry marks his brow. “Is that...will you being with me fuck up your career?”

Slowly and with absolute certainty, I shake my head.

“I could give a shit about my reputation in the larger therapeutic community. The thing I worry about most, aside from your consent, is Wild Heart’s reputation.”

He nods along. “You love the ranch.”

“I do.”

“But we can keep doing what we’re doing?”

“I’m hoping we can do so much more,” I admit, shocking myself. “That is if you’d like to do more.”

He shifts his hips, looking out the windshield as his chest rises and falls. Finally, I ask the one question a therapist should never ask their patient.

“Will you let me fuck you, Ignacio?”

He nods, gripping the wheel tight.

“I need your words.”

He takes a deep breath and...*fuck*. His cock is so hard underneath those uncomfortable jeans.

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe. I *need* you to fuck me.”

“Good. *Good boy*. That was brave of you to say. It turns me on when you tell me what you want.”

“Thank you, Dr. Barlowe.”

“And to be clear, Ignacio, I like that this is a dynamic we can take in and out of the bedroom, but I don’t want it to always be about the dynamic with you.”

“I’d like that too. It’s a little dirty, but it’s actually... helpful? At the same time? There’s something about knowing you’re looking out for me and wanting the best for me. It helps me make better decisions for myself.”

I curse under my breath, gripping my thighs.

“You want to kiss me now, don’t you?” he teases.

“Boy...”

He grins, proud of himself.

“One of these days, you and I are going to get some real privacy, and I will show you exactly how I feel about all of this,” I say, lowering my voice half an octave to prove how serious I am.

He groans, tilting his hips. “Might’ve fucked myself over on that one.”

“Still, you didn’t know you could say no, which was an unacceptable omission on my part. So let’s talk about how to do that. Most people in a Dom-sub dynamic have a safeword. Do you want that?”

“Not in any place where it would be obvious I’m using a safeword with you. I just wanna be able to say what I said today. No, or that it’s none of your business.”

I narrow my eyes. “None of your business doesn’t sound all that respectful, now does it, Ignacio?”

“Well, demanding something that’s none of your business is also not super respectful, so...you tell me how to handle that, Dr. Barlowe.”

He has a good point.

“Fine. I will take whatever you say at face value when we’re in public.”

“And when it’s private?”

“We can play it by ear, but a safeword might be good for now.”

“I hate lima beans,” he says rather immediately.

“You came up with that pretty quickly. Been thinking about a safeword for long?”

He shakes his head. “I just read somewhere your safeword should be something you don’t like very much, and I hate lima beans.”

“I like it. And is lima beans good as we continue to progress sexually?”

He takes a deep breath. “Yes. But...I doubt I’ll ever use it.”

“It’s not a contest, Nacho. I want you to say it. I want to know when things are too much.”

“I will, Dr. Barlowe. I promise.”

“As you can tell, we’re playing with the dynamic now, Ignacio. Are you aware that talking about consent while we’re

playing is wrong?”

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe,” he admits with zero remorse. “It’s very wrong. That’s why I like it so much.”

“Me too. But that means I have to double-check—do you have anything else you feel uncomfortable about?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

Something in his expression tells me that’s not entirely the truth, so I go quiet until he shifts his eyes to mine. I lift my brows.

After letting out a frustrated sigh, he answers, “Like, I know we have to check in sometimes, but not talking about it turned me the fuck on. Is that weird?”

“No. The not talking made it feel a little more dangerous. Taboo.”

“Yes,” he says, taking my hand.

After sending me a quick look, he sucks my middle finger into his mouth, fellating it. I let him do that for far too long before slowly sliding it from the wet heat.

“I don’t mind not talking about it often, as long as we’re on the same page with how often we *do* talk about it.”

“Once a month should do it for me,” he says confidently.

“Good. Then we never had this conversation, Ignacio.”

“What conversation, Dr. Barlowe?”

I roll my eyes. “Good boy. But I do have one more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“We haven’t progressed sexually because what I want to do with you is wrong too.”

“Oh?”

“I want to fuck you raw. Want to see my cum dripping from your hole. Want to know I’ve marked you as mine and nobody else’s. Do you understand?”

“No hookups? No orgies?” he asks, palming his cock. “Not even if Erik—”

“No,” I growl. “Nonnegotiable. You. Are. Mine. *Say it.*”

I have no right to make this demand, but I need to hear it from his mouth.

With heavy lids, he grabs my hand and places it over his erection. “I’m yours. Only yours.”

“And I want us to go to the clinic next week and get tested for everything. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe.”

“Excellent,” I say, stroking faster, harder over his straining cock. “You don’t mind dropping me off at the ranch?”

“But...”

“Not tonight, Ignacio. Let’s get tested first so I can come inside you.” I let my fingers drift to his undercarriage and back up again.

“Fuck,” he says, throttling the steering wheel.

“Good. Now, let’s try that again. Do you mind dropping me off at the ranch, Ignacio?”

“Not at all, Dr. Barlowe,” he says, nearly breathless as my hand continues to work him over.

“Thank you, Ignacio.”

We spend the rest of the ride in silence, the atmosphere between us tipping back and forth between relief and anticipation as I rub and squeeze and tease him.

I remove my hand when we pull into the ranch.

“Do you have a dildo, Ignacio?” I ask as he parks.

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe. A few.”

“Excellent. You were so brave and honest tonight, Ignacio, and that should be rewarded.”

“It should?”

“Of course. I want you to go home and douche, then set up your phone like you did when you put on your sunscreen. I want you to take a video of you fucking yourself on your biggest dildo and send it to me. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe.”

I get out of the truck, and before I ascend the stairs to the bunkhouse, I meet his eyes through the windshield and mouth *good boy* to him one more time.

However wrong or bad or unethical this is, I refuse to turn back now.

NACHO

My heart pounds and my hands shake as I unlock the door to my trailer. Bram is right up against my back, urging me forward.

It's been a week since our little drive into the country and I fucked myself out on my massive dildo for him. When I sent him the video, he replied with one of his own, jacking off in his bed, coating his abdomen with spurt after spurt of cum before telling me I couldn't touch myself again until we were together.

Bastard.

We both received negative test results, and he's as desperate for me as I am for him. After dropping off Ant, I head out right as Bram walks out the front door, heading for the Wild Heart truck with his overnight bag in hand.

As soon as we're inside my trailer, I turn to kiss him, but he's looking around the space.

"It's amazing what you've done in here, Nacho."

I shrug. "I took classes when I was in jail. I guess I paid attention."

"This is beautiful work. You could almost do these restorations for a living."

I wrinkle my nose and shake my head. "I like doing this for myself, and I would definitely help a friend, but these restorations are so picky... I wouldn't wanna have to deal with other people's opinions. I'll stick to fencing."

“Mmmm,” he rumbles, kissing my nose and lips. Just being able to stand here in my place with Bram is everything.

He pushes me through the kitchen area into the tiny hallway, fumbling for the doors. He finds the small shower closet.

“Damn,” he curses. “I wanted to get naked and wet with you.”

Unfortunately, it’s not possible in the microscopic shower. By way of compromise, he insists I leave the door open as I bathe myself so he can direct me and help me with the more hard-to-reach spots. We splash some water into the hallway, but it’s not too bad. He switches places with me and is efficient in washing off the day. By the time he’s done, I’m waiting by the room for him. His mouth hooks into a grin.

“Is this an actual king-size bed?” he asks, surprised.

It is surprising for such a small space until you realize it takes up the entire footprint of the bedroom, save for a narrow strip on the right to make room for the world’s tiniest bedside table.

“Yep.”

“Why is it so high off the floor?”

I reach over to the side of the bed and press on the drawer, popping it out.

“Storage.”

“Do you have any lotion? Lube?”

Reaching into my micro side table, I grin. “I have both.”

“You keep everything so neat and orderly in your home, Ignacio. Excellent job,” he says, climbing onto the bed and sliding his naked body next to mine.

Now that I can, I lazily take in Bram’s features. He’s the exact halfway point between hairless and fur-bearing mammal. A generous amount of dark hair anoints his chest, trailing down over his belly, up and down his legs, emphasizing every perfect muscle.

I whistle under my breath. “You’ve got one hell of a gym routine.”

“Had to do something with all the sexual frustration,” he admits, his eyes coming to mine. “You’ve bewitched me, body and soul.”

“Okay, Jane Austen.”

Yes, I love Jane Austen. I blame the prison system.

Still, it’s new, Bram letting me see his vulnerability.

Reaching out to squeeze his powerful biceps, I grin. “I must’ve been on your mind an awful lot.”

He answers me with a kiss, snaking his leg around mine. We stay like that for a long moment, wrapped in each other, kissing, sliding against one another, reveling in the freedom—that wasn’t ours to take—to do this. Even though we’re naked and there are hard-ons involved, this isn’t purely sexual. His words come back to me. *This is wrong, and I don’t want it to be right.*

I don’t either.

Our kissing intensifies, and he slowly rolls me onto my back, letting his weight settle on top of me. I groan into the luxury, only now realizing how much I need this from him.

“Let me take care of you,” he whispers feverishly against my lips.

“Please,” I beg. “Please take care of me, Dr. Barlowe.”

Cocooned in our little bubble, he grabs the bottle of lotion and pours a generous amount into his hands, rubbing them together. When his palms land on my chest, they are warm and slick and so fucking sensual.

Methodically, he spreads the lotion across my chest and belly, causing me to arch when his palms glance over my nipples. He then moves to my arms, coating every square inch of skin. Adding more lotion to his hands, he switches things up and starts at my feet, then moves up my calves, pressing at the tender spots on my shins before rubbing circles on my knee and inner thigh.

I'm hard and ready to be touched, but he ignores my insistent hips in favor of flipping me over and repeating the process on my back and ass, up and down my legs.

"The color of your skin is so beautiful," he says, his praise floating like bubbles in my chest. "Also, whoever did these tattoos knew what they were doing."

Unable to stop from having a little fun with him, I admit into the pillow, "I traded blowjobs for every single one of these tattoos."

Smack.

His broad hand lands across my ass.

I look back, grinning. "I was just telling the truth. Are you punishing me for telling the truth?"

Smack.

"We've already established that this is not punishment for you."

Bram quickly moves on from the subject, and his jealousy only spurs me on.

Spreading my cheeks, he slides lotion up and down my channel using his thumb. Everything he does feels like a slow, methodical examination, and he hums and purrs every time he sees something he likes.

"I've counted the tattoos, Ignacio. It's only fair you take my cock for every single one of them."

I rock my hips, shaking my ass at him. "You promise?" I ask, looking over my shoulder.

He leans over, thrusting his bare cock between my cheeks as he whispers, "I always keep my word."

I press up against him, needing him, but he pulls away. Before I can whine, he flips me again, pausing to admire my body, tracing over my tattoos with firm, sensual pressure.

Grabbing my foot, he pushes my knee toward my belly, stretching my hamstrings and exposing my hole to him. He presses his thumb against my rim as he deepens the stretch. I

moan and roll my hips, enjoying the sensation of his thumb tipping in and out of me.

I grumble when he releases the leg, but then he stretches the other in the same way, thumbing me again.

Finally, he pushes both knees back toward my belly. Leaning forward, he runs his hot, thick tongue against my hole before pressing it inside. I shout, completely unconcerned about whether my sex-crazed neighbors can hear me.

As he continues tongue-fucking me, he plays around with my foreskin, pulling it back and over my cockhead, stretching the sensitive skin while pushing his tongue farther inside me.

He continues this fucking torture until I'm a drooling mess, then pulls away, gently letting my feet hit the mattress. Cupping my sides with his large hands, he uses his thumbs to massage the muscles on my belly, moving up to my rib cage, pressing and swirling against my aching nipples.

I'm completely under his power, and I love how he's not just taking over but actually taking care of me. Coming in for a sensual, deep kiss, he shares my intimate scent with me before moving down my neck. He straddles my belly, and I reach for his proud, sharply curving cock, imagining what it'll do to my insides.

He catches my hands, using his thumbs to massage the meaty parts of my palm. Stretching my arms above my head, he noses my armpit, the tickle and the stretch fucking erotic. The sensations are so intense that he has to clamp down with his knees to prevent me from arching up.

Dragging my head between his legs, he angles his cock toward my mouth, pushing it past my lips. He grabs the windowsill above my bed and shifts his hips, stroking himself in and out of my mouth. I greedily take him in, slurping on his fat mushroom head, loving the shape.

All the while praises pour out of his mouth.

“Such a good, beautiful boy.”

“You have the perfect mouth, Ignacio.”

“You’re taking me so well, Ignacio.”

Needing relief, I whimper around his thick, pretty cock.

“Patience, Ignacio. I’m not done with you.”

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe.”

He goes back to fucking my mouth, making me take his cock deeper and deeper.

“Such a good cocksucker, Ignacio,” he grunts, pushing all the way in, then gagging me with short, fast thrusts to the back of my throat.

He pulls back. “Too much?”

I shake my head. “More, please.”

His eyes heat, and he once again feeds me his engorged cock, choking me with it until my eyes water.

“So beautiful,” he whispers, thumbing the tears from my eyes.

He pulls out of my mouth and lets me scoot back up to the pillows, stopping to kiss and praise me as he runs his cock alongside mine.

Shifting back, he grabs the lube from my side table and smooths it over his hard curved cock. He presses my knees toward my chest, smearing lube on my exposed hole, stretching me with one finger, then two.

Setting my right foot over his shoulder, he leans in to cup my jaw, turning my face to his.

“Yes?” he asks softly.

I nod. “*Please.*”

“Still good to go bare?” he asks, notching against me.

“I need it, Dr. Barlowe.”

With his eyes capturing my gaze, my mouth drops open as he slowly, painfully, perfectly stuffs me full of his cock.

“Oh, good boy. Keep taking it, Ignacio. Yes, like that. So, so good.”

Angling my hips, I start babbling about the perfection of his cock. Words like curved, thick, fat, and perfect tumble from my lips.

“Fuck me, Dr. Barlowe. Breed me, mark me. *Please.*”

Nearly pulling out, he snaps his hips forward, over and over.

“So you’re my dirty boy, Ignacio? You want my cum?”

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe,” I pant.

“You like it when I take care of you?”

“Yes. You take such good care of me.”

He growls, taking my mouth again, plunging his tongue deep inside as he snaps his hips, forward and back, forward and back, pressing my knees back, changing the angle on his thrusts until I can’t help the pleased sounds coming from me.

“I’m so close. Can I come, Dr. Barlowe?” I ask, panting, staring into his eyes. He sharpens his jaw and shakes his head.

“Please, Dr. Barlowe?”

“You have to earn it.”

“How do I earn it? I’ll do anything.”

Grabbing my hand, he sinks his mouth onto my middle finger, sucking it, getting it slippery wet.

With that, he leans forward, kissing me deep and long. I reach around, following the unspoken command like I always have.

Swirling the wet finger around his pucker, I push in carefully as he drives his hips back, forcing my finger deeper inside, then snaps his hips forward, fucking deep into me. He continues, back and forth, back and forth, moaning into my ear as I carefully crook my finger just so.

“That’s it. Good boy. Good fucking boy,” he breathes heavily into my ear. “Come for me, Ignacio.”

The idea that I could cause him this much pleasure, that I could somehow coax another *good boy* from his lips? Fuck, that's game over. When his strong hand wraps around my cock, I ignite, shattering as he jacks me.

I can't help the sound coming out of my mouth as the orgasm peaks, and before I think it can't get any better, he begins to moan and grunt, squeezing around my finger. The telltale pulsing is the only warning I get before I'm filled with his hot cum.

"You have the most fucking perfect hole, Ignacio," he says, speeding up through his orgasm.

Fuck, so fast and deep.

He thrusts in one final time, pulsing his hips through the last of it before relaxing his full weight on top of me, cum leaking onto my duvet.

We lie like that for several minutes, catching our breath, hopefully not regretting anything.

He admits he likes doing the wrong thing, so I push it.

"You are so bad, Dr. Barlowe," I whisper breathlessly. "Look at you, fucking your patient. How *could* you?"

He responds by kissing me hard.

I pull away, panting. "It turns you on to be this bad, doesn't it, Dr. Barlowe?"

He takes my mouth again, dominating me, telling me in no uncertain terms how much he wants this. I let myself have an evil little grin, finally truly understanding how this is very much a two-way street. How much I have him in the palm of my hand. How much Bram correcting and praising me is as necessary to him as it is to me.

Finally parting, we clean up quickly, taking turns rinsing off in the little closet shower, never more than a few inches apart the entire time, both of us clingy and desperate.

Following me back to the bed, he playfully tackles me, which makes me laugh.

“Nacho,” he says, saying my real name with so much fucking warmth it threatens to make my chest explode. “I am genuinely, truly sorry I didn’t do a better job of setting the stage for us. Thank you. Thank you for giving this to me.”

Knocked a little speechless by the sincerity in his eyes, I can only whisper *Bram* against his lips before kissing him and pulling him to me.

We nap, and when we wake up a few hours later, he rolls me over, once again ruining my hole for other men with the demanding curve of his cock. He comes inside me, and this time we don’t play doctor and patient.

“Nacho, you are the most beautiful man I’ve ever been with.”

“I’ve never felt as understood as I do with you, Bram.”

It feels so...*natural*.

As we drift off again, Bram’s cell phone goes off.

He pinches his brows together. “That’s Charlie’s ring,” he says, checking the screen.

Nosy, I look over his shoulder.

Charlie: *Emergency situation. Please come back to the ranch.*

“Should I go with you?” I ask, kissing his shoulder. He shakes his head. “This probably has to do with a new guest.”

“Ugh, stupid needy people. I want to be the needy one,” I fake-complain, sending him a pout.

Growling, he takes me in one of his all-consuming kisses.

“*Ignacio*. This is work. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Okay, Dr. Barlowe,” I tease back. “I’ll be here waiting for you.”

BRAM

The trip back to the ranch takes mere minutes, and Levy is on the front porch waiting for me.

“Where have you been?”

I take a deep breath, not wanting to lie to my brother. Thankfully, Charlie and Erik roll up in their truck, cutting short his question.

“I’ll...tell you later.”

His jaw tics, his eyes suspicious. “Yes, you will. We don’t keep secrets from each other.”

I send him a quick nod and grab the kit from my room before running back out to Charlie’s truck.

“What’s going on?” Levy asks as we climb in the back of the cab. “Another missing kid?”

Charlie shakes his head. “You wanted in on the missions? Well, buckle up. Anders’ team out of Wimberley just ran cleanup on a massive domestic trafficking ring in Minneapolis. They were bringing a bunch of people from Guatemala up through the Mexican border, but the Wimberley crew was able to trace the communication that warned the drivers.”

“So what are we doing?”

“One of the trucks that got the message is, according to its GPS location, stopped just south of San Antonio and is awaiting further instructions. If we go now, we only have the driver to deal with, and we can get the people out of there.”

I hesitate. “Are we sure these people want to be rescued? We’re sure they’re not just coming up here for work?”

Erik shakes his head. “This isn’t a coyote situation where they’re being ferried to places of employment. They were lied to. They didn’t realize they were effectively being sold into slavery.”

Charlie continues, “And even though these assholes brand themselves as domestic traffickers, if any of those people are young and pretty, it becomes something else real quick.”

“My cousin and his team would run point for us, but they’re still cleaning up the mess in Minneapolis,” Erik says, answering my next question.

Charlie adds, “Remember, you don’t have to come with us. This is definitely more dangerous than what you saw with the search-and-rescue team.”

Levy speaks for both of us. “We’re in.”

I nod in agreement.

We pack up and are heading out when Charlie gets a call, which he puts on speakerphone.

“Go for Charlie.”

“Hey, Charlie-man. Highway’s been cleared of law enforcement. Feel free to book it.”

“Thanks, Anders. How’re things going with you guys?”

The sound of gunfire fills the cab, and Levy and I exchange a look.

What the fuck?

“Oh, you know”—*rat-tat-tat-tat*—“the usz. Uh...hold up just a sec.”

It sounds like he’s sliding his palm over the phone as he yells off in the distance. “Omar, baby, don’t get shot anywhere important—I’ve got plans for you tonight.”

Erik lowers his chin, his shoulders shaking. Charlie rolls his eyes. “Erik, how the hell are you the *normal* one?”

He shrugs, still laughing. “Parental rejection, dude. Meanwhile, Anders and Odd’s parents took a page out of the Dexter playbook and fucking encouraged that lunacy.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, wondering if Levy and I should’ve asked more questions.

Erik looks back like maybe he forgot we were back here and rubs his jaw. “Sorry, you weren’t meant to hear that. Let’s just say I’m pretty sure my cousin, and probably his twin, were always going to be some level of violently unright in the head. My aunt and uncle decided to redirect it so that if the twins were going to kill people, they would do it for the common good.”

“Kill for the common good,” Levy repeats, raising his brows.

“There’s two of them?” I ask.

“Now, cousin,” Anders’ voice rumbles through the line. “Careful with the unright in the head business. Remember, those tests were never conclusive. Bram and Levy—one of the things you’ll learn—or maybe you already know—is that some people just need killin’ and, well, we’re the killin’ crew. With your clinical and personal backgrounds, you’re perfect for the savin’ crew. See? It all works out.”

“What happens when you need both?” I ask.

Charlie looks at me in the rearview, making a slashing gesture at his throat.

“Ooph,” Anders responds, sounding like a murderous Matthew McConaughey. “Then you’re fucked.”

“Alright, that’s enough,” Charlie says. “Thanks for clearing the road, Anders. We’ll let you know how it goes.”

“You got it, buddy.”

“Do I want to know how Howdy Fucking Manson knows our clinical *and* personal history?” Levy growls.

Erik snorts. “Hey, you got his middle name on the first try.”

Charlie lets out a tired breath and merges on to 281. “You’ve heard us talk about our friends in Wimberley, yes? Anders, his husband Omar, etcetera.”

Levy and I nod. Ant’s also mentioned them a time or two, but we don’t say that.

“To answer your question, when you approached us to go on missions, we reached out to our friends in Wimberley to run background checks on you.”

“You already ran a background check on us when we were hired,” I say with an edge to my voice.

“Yes, a standard employment and criminal history check, the same one that all the employees and volunteers at Wild Heart get. Wimberley’s background check is a bit more... *extensive*,” Charlie says finally.

“More extensive in what way?” Levy asks, looking stressed.

Charlie’s jaw shifts to the side. “In addition to employment, credit, and criminal records, they can search your entire family history, including the accident that killed your parents. Beyond that, every financial statement, every job review, every patient, every dojo, gym, and subscription. You name it, they can find it. Even secret social media accounts.”

When I glance at the rearview mirror, Charlie’s eyes are waiting for me, and his pointed look tells me everything I need to know. I follow only one person with my anonymous social media account, and connecting the dots wouldn’t take much time at all.

“On top of that, one of Anders’ colleagues is a profiler,” Erik says matter-of-factly.

Charlie dips his chin. “Once we got back her report on you, we knew you’d be a good fit.”

I doubt very seriously it’s the death of our parents that makes us a good fit. Our official record is clean, but it wouldn’t be too hard to discover that the reason my parents’ corner store was rarely robbed is because thieves always paid in black eyes and bloody noses. Levy wasn’t shy about

defending himself and always had my back, to be sure, but at the end of the day, I was the one with the bloodiest knuckles. I never had to dole out a lesson more than once.

Levy picks at a hangnail. “Guess you know everything about me then. I’m the free-spirited brother who smokes pot, writes poetry, and is one traffic ticket away from losing my license, and Bram’s the stick-in-the-mud rule-follower.”

With a few notable exceptions.

Charlie and I exchange another look before he answers.

“First of all, Levy, you smoke Delta 8, which is probably still legal in Texas, and according to Hedy, aside from your terrible driving skills, you are the one most apt to follow the rules.”

His head snaps up at that. “Have you not met my brother?”

“I dunno. Have *you*?” he tosses back.

Charlie refocuses on me. “You never really were the rule-follower, were you?”

Levy always thought the accident changed me, and maybe it did, to an extent. But it didn’t change me *that* much. I drop my chin to my chest, wondering if he’s about to tell my brother about Nacho. Thankfully, he goes in another direction.

“During your tenure at the hospital, you facilitated the escape of undocumented workers. You engaged in insurance fraud to ensure coverage for patients who otherwise wouldn’t have qualified. And the night the son of a local state representative was beaten outside of a Baylor dorm, you went to the ER claiming sparring injuries to your knuckles. I could go on about your time in the prison system, Dr. Barlowe, but that should be sufficient.”

Dread pools in my belly as he verifies that he’s definitely aware of Nacho.

While I’m over here wondering if he’s about to blackmail me, Levy is boring holes into the side of my head.

“Bram?”

I stare out the window, watching the dark countryside fly by. Finally, I explain, “I couldn’t let those people get lost in the shuffle. I couldn’t just check a box and let the system do what it was going to do.”

“But you beat up...that was Matt Greene’s son.”

“He’d brutally raped one of my patients and was a known threat to the campus. Nothing was done about it.”

“You could’ve been caught.”

“I was quick.”

Levy blinks at me like he doesn’t even know me, but Erik snorts into a closed fist.

“*I was quick,*” he repeats, laughing openly. “Your interaction with Mr. Greene lasted less than thirty seconds, and the dude ended up with a cracked orbital bone, a collapsed lung, and a ruptured testicle.”

I swallow thickly, looking down at my hands, feeling Levy’s eyes on me.

“Like you did with Ria’s stepbrother.”

I lift my chin and send him a sharp nod, and understanding fills his eyes.

“So...Bram was the one you wanted for these missions,” Levy says, the hurt impossible to hide in his voice.

Charlie shakes his head, turning to look at Levy directly. “No. Both. According to my contact, you’re better at de-escalation, more about the community involvement, better with technology, and your fighting technique is cleaner.”

He returns his attention to the road, and Erik continues. “It’s the balance between the two of you. I’ve seen it only once before, with my cousins. Anders is the unhinged one, Odd is the reasonable one, but they’re both assassins when it counts.”

“We’re not assassins,” I spit out, wondering if they view me as the unhinged one. Turning to Levy, I grab his wrist. “I’m not a killer. I swear it.”

His eyes hold something I've never seen from him. Distrust.

Charlie speaks up. "He's telling the truth, Levy. When you two approached us about going on missions, my first thought was that I didn't want killers. I wanted guys who could get their hands a little dirty. Who could work with our reintegration teams to figure out how to minimize trauma during this process. Not that we'd intentionally put y'all in a sticky situation, but if you found yourselves in a fight, you'd be able to defend yourselves."

I'm relieved that Charlie seems willing to let the Nacho thing go, at least for now. It also fires up the fucked-up pride I have in making Nacho mine, regardless of the consequences.

Hell, maybe I *am* the unhinged one.

While we go silent, Charlie has Erik give us the rundown. Charlie's South Texas contacts will be waiting for us near the site to help the folks trapped by this circumstance.

Levy and I are to wait in the truck while Charlie and Erik go in to sneak the people out. While I'm itching to get into the thick of it, they want to keep us on comms to provide support and guidance.

Once they have the situation in hand, the people will be transported to a dorm on a piece of property that used to house a convent and will be taken care of there until immigration and reunification can be sorted.

Anders was right—we don't pass a single police vehicle on the road. That Wimberley crew's got some kind of power. Soon enough, we're driving through San Antonio with only big rigs to keep us company. We exit at Von Ormy and spend a few minutes on surface roads before parking in an abandoned strip mall next to an old Walmart.

Erik checks something on his phone, then looks across the dusty, dark space. "Yeah, it's that one over there," he whispers, pointing to an eighteen-wheeler truck parked in the back of the old Walmart lot.

I curse under my breath, whispering, “The people are *in* the trailer?”

Charlie nods. “Looks like the driver’s in his bunk. He’ll be armed, but he won’t put up much resistance.”

“Shit just got real,” Levy says, taking the words right out of my mouth.

Erik turns and grins, giving us a double thumbs-up. He and Charlie exit the truck, guns in hand, and approach the big rig. We listen in as Charlie produces a Slim Jim and quickly gains entry. Disappearing into the cab, all we get is the brief sound of a scuffle and the guy yelling in Spanish. Seconds later, Charlie reappears, holding the disheveled driver by the scruff of his neck, pushing him toward Erik, who pulls a pair of handcuffs from his back pocket.

When the driver, still cursing them out in Spanish, is subdued, Charlie moves to the back of the truck and opens it. Given how warm it is tonight, I can’t imagine how hot it must be in that trailer. People begin pouring out of the back—adults, children, the elderly—and anger flushes my neck as I note their visible fear.

Charlie pulls his phone out and begins speaking into it, then shaking it and trying again. Finally, Erik starts speaking in halting Spanish. The people closest to him shift from wary to fearful and begin moving away from him. Rumbles go through the two dozen or so people.

“Es migra,” one guy says.

“Es ICE,” says another.

“Shit. They think Charlie and Erik are immigration,” Levy says, getting out of the truck and waving his hands.

“No es ICE!” he says, and I follow suit. “Estamos tratando...help you!”

Charlie looks at his phone again and yells, “No eres mala gente!”

I’m pretty sure that’s wrong, based on their reactions.

Fuck.

This whole thing has gone to hell in less time than it takes to unbuckle my seat belt. Charlie keeps trying to speak into the translator, and it looks like he's half about to throw it on the ground. A couple of young guys take off running. The families and older folks stay together but back away from Charlie.

Grabbing my phone, I do the only thing I can think of to save the situation from completely spinning out of control.

"Mm...Bram? Tha' you?" Nacho asks, his voice heavy with sleep.

"Nacho, I need your help."

There's shifting in the background. Nacho getting out of bed.

"I'm here. What's up?"

"Uh, look. I'm going to explain this real fast, and you're gonna hafta get mad at me later, okay?"

"...Okay."

"Levy and I are with Charlie and Erik, helping a group of folks trafficked through the US-Mexico border. They think we're ICE, and they don't trust us. Our translators aren't working, our combined Spanish is not cutting it, and I need your help."

"I thought this was about someone at the ranch."

"I lied," I say bluntly. "We intercepted a tractor-trailer full of people who were going to be trafficked into domestic servitude and migrant work. Charlie's got people coming to support them until they work out the safest way to get them where they need to go."

While Nacho curses me out, Charlie's not faring any better. People are beginning to move pretty quickly.

"Nacho?"

"Fine. Put me on speakerphone."

I approach Charlie and show him the phone. He grinds his jaw but nods.

“Nacho, do you know what’s going on?”

“More or less.”

“Can you tell these folks I’m not ICE?”

Nacho begins translating for Charlie while Erik attaches a portable speaker to my phone. After a long beat of silence, a middle-aged woman ventures back and begins asking questions.

“Uh, Bram? She wants to see my face. Not sure that’ll go well with the tattoos and stuff.”

Looking at the woman he’s speaking to, I answer, “Not sure you have any other choice. Here, I’ll pull up FaceTime.”

When the screen switches to his pillow-creased, slightly disgruntled face, I can’t help but smile.

“El es tu novio?” the lady asks, looking between us.

Nacho chuckles.

“What did she just ask?”

“She wants to know if you’re my boyfriend.”

I rub the back of my neck, my cheeks heating.

She says something else, which makes Nacho laugh even harder, and that sets her off as well. Her laughter draws everyone in, and I decide I’ll wait to get into that tomorrow.

They go back and forth, and it’s clear Nacho is being incredibly kind to the lady. She’s asking Charlie and Erik the kinds of questions that leave no doubt about the nature of what they do. While Nacho’s doing a good job keeping a neutral face with the lady, I can tell he’s not loving the answers he’s translating.

Thankfully, though, he’s able to translate the answers to the woman’s satisfaction, and Charlie is able to call in his volunteers. While we’re waiting for them, Charlie asks us to find out if they encountered any abuses along the way, and a couple of the women point to the driver. Charlie and I spend a few moments with them as Nacho translates, and...it’s bad.

As Nacho illuminates us about their experiences, Charlie's face transforms from concerned seriousness to barely concealed rage.

He waves Erik over.

"Anders is flying back tonight, right?"

Erik nods. "Already on the plane."

"Get him on the phone."

I don't know exactly what it means for the driver that Anders is on his way back, but it isn't good. In the end, the driver ends up hogtied under a tarp in the back of Charlie's truck, and neither Levy nor I have any objections.

Refocusing on the brave women, Levy and I give them a few comforting words to get through these next days and promise to support them while we find counselors who speak Spanish. They hug us and kiss our cheeks and say lovely things to Nacho.

He wipes a tear as they walk away. "Don't think you're getting out of this conversation," he says with more authority than I've ever heard from him.

Watching Nacho listen to these women with such tenderness makes my heart run headlong into feelings I didn't know I was capable of. I wonder if I haven't felt this way about him since the beginning.

I look up, and Levy's doing that thing where he reads my expression and knows too much without me saying a word. He shakes his head, and I know we're way overdue for an awkward—and unavoidable—conversation.

The people are loaded onto school buses to be taken to the old convent, and most of the guys who ran off circle back around and rejoin the group.

On the long drive back to the ranch, Charlie hits every bump and corner at full speed, throwing the driver around in the truck bed. Perhaps if I hadn't heard what he'd done in full detail, I'd complain about the rough ride. But I did, so I don't.

We stop at a private airfield in Wimberly, which appears to be part of a larger property protected by a guarded gate. As my mom would say, betcha a dollar this is the home of the illustrious Wimberley crew.

A sleek jet is pulling off the runway as we enter the property, and Erik's cousin, Anders, deplanes, followed by his gorgeous husband—Omar—and a slightly shorter guy I've never seen before. While all three are tattooed and ripped, this third guy doesn't look like a vigilante. He almost looks... Mafia.

Anders sees us and lights up, jogging over to the truck, followed closely by his friend.

“What's up, y'all? Thanks for coming in clutch. This is my buddy from New York—he was with us in Minneapolis, figured I'd bring him along. Hopper, meet my friends. Friends, Hopper.”

We exit the truck and exchange handshakes, and I need no one to spell out for me that Hopper and Anders are the killers Charlie was referring to. They're both friendly and charming, each in their own ways, but there's death in how they hold themselves.

“Remember that story of...what was the angel's name?” Levy whispers out the side of his mouth.

“Raguel,” I answer, nodding.

“The angel of justice.”

“And vengeance,” I add. “That driver is about to have a very, very bad day.”

Levy's jaw sharpens. “I'm okay with that.”

“Me too, brother. Me too.”

Hopper, as his name implies, nimbly hops into the truck bed and uncovers the driver, who looks a little worse for wear after our trip. Anders joins him, and they both squat to examine the driver more closely.

Hopper pushes his hair off his forehead and straightens his collar.

“Look up at the stars,” he says softly.

Confused, the man looks around. Charlie pulls up the app and, for once, it translates his words.

Arcing his hand in a gesture that follows the brilliant band of stars above, Hopper explains, “Did you know that’s the Milky Way?”

The driver’s answer translates roughly to, “Why are you telling me this?”

“I wanted you to take a look because it’s the last time you’ll ever see the sky.”

Hopper’s grin turns dark as he works with Anders to pick up the driver and take him out of the truck. The man begins to scream in terror, and Hopper sends him a look that freezes the blood in my veins.

The driver’s abrupt silence is loud under the bright stars.

The pilot, a curvy woman with curly hair and sparkling eyes, pulls up with Anders’ husband in a truck. The guys work together to transfer the driver into the bed and then take off through the gate.

“Charlie?” Levy asks. “Have you ever been through that gate?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t need to see what goes on beyond that gate.”

Erik snorts. “Me either.”

We pile back into Charlie’s truck, not exchanging a single word as we pass over the empty roads back to the ranch. Charlie drops us off in front of the bunkhouse in the hazy predawn light. I hesitate as Levy makes his way up the steps, and he turns to me, his eyebrows pinched in confusion.

“You’re going to his house.”

Dropping my eyes to the dirt, I nod.

“Bram...”

“I’m sorry.”

Shaking my head, I pivot toward the truck, unable to rest until I've seen Nacho for myself and thanked him. Rewarded him. Been soothed by him. Things I can't explain to my brother.

NACHO

I'm waiting at my breakfast table, hair still wet from a shower, wearing my favorite silky pajamas with a cup of coffee in hand, when I hear Bram's truck pull up next to mine. His footsteps are heavy as he makes his way up to my door and lets himself in.

He looks mostly normal—handsome and imposing as ever. But his eyes look weary and ancient as if aged by the things we heard on that call.

“There's my badass vigilante,” I crack.

Bram drops his chin to his chest, stuttering to a halt in the middle of what I jokingly call my living room. Setting down my coffee, I stand and wrap him in my arms, relieved when his forehead hits my shoulder.

“We went because we had a very short window of time to save those people.”

“Sounds like it was a successful mission,” I say, slightly rocking him from side to side.

“Yeah, but everything else is fucked up.”

I pull back. “Why are you saying that?”

“I lied to you. And Levy figured us out, and he's looking at me like he doesn't even know who I am.”

“What did he say?”

“We haven't had a chance to talk. I can't imagine it'll go well.”

“His opinion matters to you.”

He nods, touching his forehead to mine. “We’ve always had each other’s backs, even before our parents died. Afterward, it became our biggest priority.”

“How did they die?”

“We’ve never talked about this?”

I shake my head.

“Car accident,” he says matter-of-factly. He clears his throat, and after a moment, he continues, “Levy is only a year younger than me, and we went to the same college, so at the end of every summer, we made it a big family trip. We’d stop somewhere fun along the way, usually camping because we didn’t have a lot of money, and then our parents would drop us off. It was my last year of undergrad. We’d gone to Yosemite and were on the final leg back when an eighteen-wheeler cut us off, then stopped abruptly. I don’t remember anything from the accident, but Levy does. Mom and Dad died right away.”

“Were you and Levy hurt?” I ask, kissing his cheek.

“I had a severe concussion and several stitches,” he says, revealing a scar hidden by his hairline. “But I think I’m the one who got a little lucky. Levy had a bad case of whiplash but never lost consciousness, so he remembers everything. I was unconscious for a long time, and he thought he lost everybody all at once.”

“How did y’all get through that?”

“Together.”

His one-word answer says more than an entire conversation possibly could.

“And he knows about us now?”

He nods. “He guessed where I was going, and I’m pretty sure Charlie and Erik know too.”

“Are you going to lose your job because of me?”

The look he gives me in response...I don’t think I’ve ever seen him like this before. He cradles my face, shaking his

head.

“I don’t know how much Charlie wants me to tell you, but given what you’ve already seen...” He chews the inside of his lip, then continues, “That driver who did all those awful things to the women we rescued tonight? I just saw them hand him off to Anders and a guy named Hopper. They are almost certainly torturing him right now at what looks to probably be a black-ops site, maybe? So, yeah. I suspect fucking an ex-patient isn’t high on their list of things that will get me fired.”

I swallow thickly. Maybe I should be focusing on this whole connection with a black-ops site, but that’s not where my head is at.

“Is that all this is? Fucking?”

Bram’s haunted eyes give me the answer before his words. “No. I know we’re still new to talking about all of this, but please believe me when I tell you this goes way beyond merely *fucking*.”

The intensity of his stare, the crackle of electricity at this moment...I know he’s telling me the truth.

“Then let’s get you in the shower and wash last night off you. I’ll call in, and we’ll spend the day in bed.”

It’s weird and deeply sensual to be the person whose words pull the pin on Bram’s control, letting it bleed out along with the tension in his body. Within seconds, he looks softer, his need allowed to show itself.

“Thank you,” he says softly, following me to the back.

Stepping up to the shower closet, I lay down towels in the hallway, keeping the door open as I wash him thoroughly and gently. After that, I dry him off, and he follows me down the short hall into the big bed. We climb in together, naked, holding one another.

“Do you need anything? My mouth, my ass?”

He shakes his head. “Just you.”

And in this, me taking care of him absent any of our dynamic, just his vulnerability between us...my heart tips over

into words unspoken. Like dipping into a heated pool, warm and comforting.

We wrap ourselves around each other, falling into a deep sleep.



I WAKE TO A THICK, WET SENSATION AGAINST MY HOLE.

“Are you rimming me?” I ask, blinking against the midday sunlight that fills my tiny room.

“Mm-hmm,” Bram growls, pushing me facedown against the pillows as he drags his thick tongue from my cockhead to my rim and back again.

I arch back when he spits on my hole, loving how dirty it feels. After turning me into a boneless mess, Bram swirls a lubed finger around the puckered rim, softening it before sliding inside the tight space.

He’s nearly torturous with the glacial speed he’s going, nipping the shelf of my ass as he adds a second finger, tickling my ribs while he scissors his fingers, stretching me. So carefully.

“Does this feel good, Ignacio?”

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe. It feels so good.”

“Do you know why I’m doing this?”

“Because I’ve been good?”

“Mm-hmm. You’ve been a very good boy, Ignacio. You took care of me when I really needed it. And good boys get rewarded.”

I squeal, grinding my still-sleepy cock into the covers. He taps my hip. “Stop humping the bed. I’ll take care of you. Promise.”

I let out a disgruntled sigh, but I still my hips because he’s asked so nicely. He continues to spear me with his fingers, carefully driving me up the wall with perfect pressure.

“Fuck me, Dr. Barlowe. Please, please fuck me,” I plead, half babbling, half whining.

He makes a sound low in his throat, and I look back. He’s slowly stroking himself, attempting to draw this out despite the desperation in his expression.

Fuck that.

I shift my hips back, bumping his hand.

“I’ve been saving myself for you. Only you. Please...I beg of you...take what’s yours.”

He groans, then pushes inside me without warning.

I moan into my pillow, loving the not-so-gentle stretch, and hump back against him, shoving him deeper and deeper inside me. Grabbing my hips, he snaps forward, and my eyes roll back in pleasure.

Flattening me against the mattress, he blankets me with his powerful weight, covering my entire body with his. The only movement is his hips grinding into me, rocking the mattress up and down from that powerful movement alone.

Suddenly he flips us, him below with me still facing away from him. He brings his knees up, and I set my feet against his thighs as he grabs my hips. I drop down as he punches up, hitting every inch of that sweet spot inside me.

My waking cock flops with the violent movement, smearing my belly with a portent of things to come. Tightening his grip, he fucks into me again and again.

I watch as his curious fingers play with different parts of me. My peaked nipples, my loose sac, the foreskin that captures his attention every time. Tease and stroke, explore and stroke, stretch and stroke.

How I melt and harden at the same time, I’ll never understand. No one ever told me that sex—togetherness—could be like this.

Just as my climax starts to build, he slows us down again. I whine, needy, even though I know he’ll make it worth it. He taps my side.

“Turn to face me,” he commands softly.

Grinning, I comply...eventually. Sitting up, I enjoy the reverse cowboy for a few hip rolls, loving his pleased sounds as his hands land on my hips and help them along. Satisfied that I've given him a bit of his own medicine, I slowly pull away from his hard, curved cock, then spin around and impale myself on him even more slowly. His breath and mine hitch with each new angle until I'm once again fully seated.

Facing him, I lift my brow. *What next, Dr. Barlowe?*

“Fuck me nice and slow, Ignacio.”

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe,” I gasp.

“Look me in the eyes.”

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe,” I say, lifting my eyes to his.

Affection, approval, admiration...his look floors me, and I slow the roll of my hips. Pleasure blooms across his features as his mouth falls open, gasping with each thrust.

“Those people were in such a dangerous spot, Ignacio. Everything was going wrong, and I knew I could call you. Depend on you. I knew you would save them.”

I shake my head, leaning forward as I continue rolling my hips, running my fingers through his chest hair. “I just translated. That's it.”

He thrusts sharply. “Pay attention.”

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe.”

“You didn't *just* translate. You were kind. You treated them like human beings. You were compassionate.”

“Thank you, Dr. Barlowe.”

“You were such a good boy, and...I think you might be a very good boyfriend too.”

He emphasizes this with a scoop of his hips. Fuck. Yes.

“So,” I say, panting from what his dick is doing to me. “You only *think* I *might* be a good boyfriend?”

“I know so, Nacho.”

My eyes snap open again at the use of my name.

“Dr. Barlowe, are you trying to convince me to agree to a significant relationship while I’m emotionally and sexually compromised?”

His features sharpen at the playful words, and he punches his hips, that fucking curve in his cock hitting the right... everything.

“Yes,” he breathes.

“You like compromising me, don’t you?”

Something evil and romantic and fucking perfect flares in his eyes.

“Yes.”

“Then yes, Bram.” I rub my chest, where his words are sending soft, insistent explosions. “I’ll be your boyfriend if you’ll be mine.”

He drags me down to him, pulling me into a perfect kiss. Flipping us again so he’s on top—in more ways than one—he pistons into me, kissing me breathless.

“I love fucking you, Ignacio. So obedient. So compliant. So good for me.”

“I love being your good boy, Dr. Barlowe.”

Angling up, he goes after the bundle of nerves again and again.

“I’m going to come,” I warn.

He goes even faster. “Yes, Ignacio. Come for me. Come for me, pretty boy.”

My face flushes at the compliment, and the orgasm consumes me, making me his. Making me wish for things I shouldn’t but will anyway because that’s how it is between us. Just as I’ve been drained of all fluids, he grunts, slowing his thrusts, deepening our kiss as he fills me.

“Fuck, Nacho,” he breathes into my ear. “You’re so fucking tight. So fucking perfect for me. Thank you. I can’t

tell you how much I needed this,” he confesses, gently stroking the last of his cum into me.

We collapse into a tangle on the bed, holding each other until his cock softens, and we scramble for an old T-shirt to avoid a mess. It’s miraculous seeing him post-sex, relaxed, funny, his hair all over the place.

He’s gentle with me as we clean up, and then we fall into bed again, taking our time with kisses before drifting into a cuddled-up nap that feels like home.

He doesn’t call me Ignacio for the rest of the day, only Nacho. He enters me twice more, with no orders or even good boys. Just sweetness and appreciation, and longing, deep looks that mean something, even if neither of us is able to say it out loud just yet.



“SOMEBODY’S WALKING FUNNY THIS MORNING,” ANT SAYS AS I pick him up.

I woke Bram up with a blowjob, and he fucked me again in appreciation. Something about sneaking in a few extra kisses with him right before I had to let him go was...sigh.

God, I’m a goner.

After that, I got ready and made the lonely drive over, only for this salty twink to give me shit.

“I’m sitting in my truck, dude—you don’t know how I’m walking.”

“Still. You’ve got that freshly fucked look about you.”

“I could just make you walk to this project.”

He rolls his eyes because it’s not that big a threat.

The nice lady from a previous job, the one with the creepy dogs, loved our work ethic and professionalism so much that she recommended us to her dog lady, who owns the property next door to the ranch.

Remembering Bonnie said the lady is a little rough around the edges, I'd asked Charlie if he'd ever met her. He hasn't had a chance to because he's been rebuilding from the fire and the entrance to her property is nearly a mile down the road. He'd been surprised that she trains dogs because they haven't heard much in the way of dogs barking, which I thought was strange, even with the size of the property.

Unfortunately, this means we'll hafta skip the fancy coffee, but at least we'll get a quick start to our day.

Joanna Weber has asked for a twelve-foot chain-link fence with privacy slats and barbed wire across the top. We see this a lot for people trying to secure heavy equipment, and I'm curious about the kind of business she does beyond the dogs. Since I was out yesterday, Justin and one of the other guys set the posts, so Ant and I are just here to put in the slatted chain-link fence and barbed wire.

When we arrive, however, things are just...off. The house is a big ranch that would be pretty if it were better maintained. The property has the kind of neglected details—weeds that need whacking, a listing carport that needs shoring up—you often see out in the country, where there are fewer neighbors to impress.

That, in and of itself, is not unusual. The teeth-baring pack of six German Shepherds greeting us at the gate, however, is. Just like Bonnie's dogs, they're whisper-quiet. Like, deadly quiet. And they look like they'd rip us apart if given half a chance.

From this angle, there's a professional-looking dog run-slash-kennel set up in the backyard, so they definitely aren't pets. She's got six precision-trained guard dogs on a shitty piece of property out in the sticks with no one around.

Curious.

When Bonnie said Joanna was rough around the edges, I anticipated someone who looked hard and prematurely aged with a collection of unfortunate flannels. When Joanna finally comes out, she looks like a soccer mom, and when she softly orders the dogs to their kennels—in German—they comply

immediately, almost like they're afraid of her. She doesn't even close the gate to the backyard.

Beyond that, she's weirdly tense and standoffish. I'd worry it's my tattoos, but honestly, it's not just her attitude that's the problem. The longer we're here, the more I don't like the feel of this place.

I like it even less when she takes us over to the area where the new fence is going up. Already in the space is a prefab metal building, the type of insta-building a qualified crew can put up in a day. Nothing—not a goddamn thing—is sitting right with either Ant or me if his uncomfortable shifting is to be believed.

On top of that, the more we talk about the work we'll be doing, the more her demeanor shifts. She's becoming increasingly agitated with each detail we share. Angry, even.

“Well, I have errands to run. I suppose I can leave you to do this on your own. I usually don't trust Mexicans on my property, but Bonnie seemed to trust you.”

Ant goes to say something, and I shake my head. He glares at me but shuts his mouth, his teeth clacking together.

Thing is, I recognize her move. She's saying something inflammatory to evoke a reaction so she can overreact to the reaction. I don't know why she's trying to start a fight, but she very clearly is, and I don't want any part of it.

I respond with as much charm as I can muster. “We'll get this up real fast for you, ma'am, and then we'll be out of your hair. First, though, I'll need you to secure your dogs.”

“They're secure.”

“Ma'am, my apologies, but the fence is open.”

Rolling her eyes, she stalks toward the fence and closes it with a hateful flourish before stomping over to her truck. After sending another distrustful glower in our direction, she peels out of the property onto the two-lane road.

Ant rounds up on me the second she disappears from view. “She *doesn't usually trust Mexicans*? Why the fuck did you let

her get away with that? Jason and Justin would never want to do business with someone like her.”

I hold up my hands. “She said it on purpose. She was...I don’t know. And I know this sounds weird because I definitely don’t wanna put up her fence, and I absolutely know Jason and Justin would be totally fine with us walking off the job, but... something’s telling me we need to stick around.”

“What could possibly make you want to stay?”

“I’m curious about what we’ll see,” I answer, gesturing to the odd building we’ve been tasked with fencing in. “Ant, do you know why on a property like this, someone would request this kind of privacy fencing?”

He shrugs. “Heavy machinery.”

“Where would they fit heavy machinery in with that building?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s a garage.”

“Then where are the garage doors?”

We walk the circumference of the building.

“No garage doors,” I say, running my hand through my hair.

“And what’s on the windows? It’s like a blackout film. Like something to prevent the sun from getting in.”

“Or to prevent whatever’s inside from being seen by people on the outside.”

Given his history and my far-too-recent experience, I wonder if we’re not just being paranoid. But I’ve gotta check.

“Ant? When you were being passed around from place to place, were you ever kept in a place like this?”

He stops throwing the fencing supplies on the ground, looks at the building, and then up at me.

“Fuck,” he grits out, giving the place another once-over. “Yes, but I didn’t... The building looks different out in the middle of the country. But out in Baytown, we were in an

industrial area, and this is exactly the kind of building they held us in. Some have loading docks, some don't, but... fucking hell.”

I think about the mission Levy, Bram, Charlie, and Erik just went on. They had to go in at the last minute because they found out about the shipment on a big bust.

“Ant, when did the order for this fence come in?”

“Day before yesterday. She threw all kinds of money at Justin to get him to approve a next-day installation.”

“And Justin worked on this project yesterday, right? Did he say anything about the building? Like, do you think it just went up, or has it been here for a while?”

He shakes his head. “He said something about waiting for some contractors to get out of the way before he could get started. I wonder if they were still putting the finishing touches on it when they showed up yesterday.”

Scanning the building, I curse under my breath.

“What?”

I carefully point out the cameras around the building.

“Do you think they can hear us? Understand us?” Ant asks.

We’ve been speaking in Spanish this whole time, which is as natural as breathing for us, but I shake my head. “If this is who I think it is...I don’t think they’ll understand us at all.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m calling Charlie. Let’s go back to the truck.”

Wrinkling his brow, he follows me, asking, “You think they’re up to something? Shouldn’t we just call Justin? Or Jason?”

I climb into the truck alongside him, considering my words. Tapping the steering wheel, I answer, “I, uh...Charlie and them needed a translator for some people night before last. I sorta got to see one of their operations, I guess you’d call it.”

“Wait. *I* was one of their operations. Why didn’t they ask me to translate?” Ant asks, his brows coming together in an angry stitch.

“Dude. The shit I had to listen to...they would’ve never put you through that. Like, they called in Anders to deal with the driver after everything those women said.”

He lets out a sound of disgust. “If anyone gets to fuck up one of those motherfuckers, it should be me.”

It’s a little hard to take him seriously since he’s so tiny, but then I remember some of the things he’s shared with me, and I stifle my reaction.

“I hear you. They’re just super protective of you, man.”

“Whatever.”

I turn on the truck and fire up the Bluetooth, punching in Charlie’s number.

“Go for Charlie.”

“Charlie, I’m here with Ant, and I’m gonna feel real stupid when I say this to you, but I think this fencing job we’re on is connected to the people you saved outside of San Antonio.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You can check the invoice with Justin, but this was an urgent last-minute request for a fence. Almost as if they hadn’t planned on needing a fence and suddenly did.”

“Okay...”

“When Justin and Chase arrived yesterday morning, I think they were delayed by some contractors. See if those contractors were putting the finishing details on one of those insta-buildings, like a corrugated metal storage facility. I pass this place every day. Two days ago, there was nothing on this land, and now there’s a building with cameras on every corner and blackout film on the windows. Plus, we’re about to put up a twelve-foot privacy fence with barbwire at the top. I bet if you were to get a hold of whoever they bought this building from, they would have a similar story about a last-minute purchase.”

“It’s not a lot to go on, Nacho.”

“I know. It’s just a gut feeling. Like, nothing’s really wrong about this place, but nothing’s right either. Like, even the dogs are kinda scary with how quiet they are. The lady who owns this place...”

I don’t even know how to describe her.

“What’s her name again?”

“Joanna Webber.”

He goes quiet and a tapping sound like keystrokes fills the line.

As I wait for his response, I start wondering if I’m way overthinking this.

“Like I said, maybe I’m just being super paranoid, and she’s just being an ignorant good-old girl out here in the country.”

The keystrokes stop.

“Don’t do that. You know these people better than anyone,” Charlie says as though he knows my history. “I’m going to look into this. I want you and Ant to continue as planned. Put up the fence but leave part of the job undone due to some...I dunno, *materials issue*. Something that’ll force you to go back to finish it tonight. I’ll make it right with Jason and Justin.”

“Got it.”

“Listen, man. Keep your eyes open, and if there’s any hint of trouble, get the fuck out of there.”

I turn to Ant. “What do you think?”

“Whatever it takes.”

“Thanks, Nacho. Best-case scenario is you’re a little paranoid. But I like where your head is at.”

Ant and I exchange a glance as I hang up. Guess I’m in it now.

BRAM

I'd managed to avoid my brother this morning, sneaking in after he started his day, but as I enter my office, I know it won't last long. I'm not surprised when a few minutes later, he comes walking in, closes the door, and sits in front of me.

"Levy."

"Make it make sense, Bram. You're the one who emphasized patient ethics when I decided to follow you into therapy."

I appreciate that he doesn't try to ask me whether or not it's happened. He's not trying to see if I'm going to lie to him. He just wants to understand.

"Do you remember Wayne Doggett?"

"Of course I do. That was awful what happened."

"I found out about his suicide five minutes before I was scheduled to see a new client. I should've cancelled, but this new client had killed another prisoner in self-defense. Prior to that, he was on the list of guys to be released early for good behavior. Warden wanted to know if he was still a good candidate for release."

"And that was Nacho?"

I nod. "He didn't even know he'd killed the guy who attacked. He was so upset when I told him, and there was something about that. He wasn't trying to kill the guy, only

disable him. He was a fighter, but not without a conscience, you know? I just thought...maybe I can save this one.”

Levy’s brow wrinkles in confusion. “Save him how? With sex?”

I take a deep breath and examine my thumbnail.

“No. Sex is only a recent addition. But there was a dynamic between us in our sessions.”

The confusion in his expression intensifies. “Explain.”

“He was angry, he was upset, but when I gave him commands, he would calm down. When I would fuss over him and ensure he was taking care of his physical needs, he... blossomed right in front of me.”

“Commands? Like BDSM commands? What kind of commands were you giving him?”

“Simple things. To drink enough water, to get enough sleep, to sit up straight.”

Levy’s eyes scan my face as he ponders my words. “Were you intentionally doing that in a sexual way?”

I shake my head, not sure how to make him understand.

“Not initially. But he reacted to it sexually, and his reaction, I don’t know, soothed something inside me. Like, if I could tell he was turned on, I had proof that what I was doing was effective.”

Hell, Abraham, how can you make him understand when you still don’t understand it yourself?

“Bram, you have to know that was...”

“Deeply unethical,” I say, answering for him.

“Have you ever done this with other patients?”

I shake my head vehemently. “Absolutely not. I don’t know what it was about Nacho. He’s beautiful, clearly. But from the beginning, there was this *energy* between us I couldn’t put words to. Things were sexual between us, even when they objectively weren’t sexual. I don’t understand why,

and I don't know why I leaned into it. I only know that his early release was on the line, and he seemed to comply better across the board when I took charge. When I was successful, when I was able to show that he was cooperative, the warden released him."

"How did that make you feel?" Levy asks, shifting into a more therapeutic stance.

"I was proud of him, but I missed him so badly it hurt. I didn't know what to do with that feeling or the reality of what I'd done, so I quit."

Levy takes a few steadying breaths, still struggling to understand.

"This dynamic...you've not had it with any other patients. Have you had it with any other people? Is that how you and Louis handled things?"

I shake my head. "No. I've never done anything like this sort of power exchange, ever. I fucked it up actually. Which you'll think is hilarious because he's the one who called me out on it."

"Nacho called you out on fucking it up?"

"Yeah. He looked it up online, and the first element of a positive dynamic is good communication, and we had never talked about what it was we were doing."

"Wait, wait, wait." Levy holds up his hands as if to physically stop me. "You ordered him around, he reacted to it sexually, which did something for you, and neither of you ever talked about it?"

"No."

"Did you know he was out here? Did you know he lived in the area?"

Biting my lip, I nod.

"Did you take this job because you thought you could be near him?"

“Not *consciously*. But I think at some subconscious level, I was hoping I’d run into him. I didn’t know there would be this much of a connection between what we do and what he does.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“Well, I’m falling in love with him, and he’s agreed to be my boyfriend, so...I’m going to keep seeing him as long as he’ll let me.”

Levy’s jaw drops, and he stares at me, confused and maybe even a little hurt.

“You could lose your license.”

I nod. “We’re a few months shy of the two-year cutoff.”

“For the sex, yeah, but...that little dynamic you two had...”

“Nothing they could prove in a court of law.”

He gives me his *c’mon, Bram* look. “You knew what you were doing was wrong when you were doing it.”

“Yes.”

“And that didn’t stop you?”

“I liked it,” I admit. “I liked that it was wrong.”

His jaw drops, and I see his brain recategorizing me as we speak. I wonder where I’ll land with him at the end of it.

“You *liked* that it was wrong?”

“Yes. And I liked the control. Still like it, actually.”

“And he’s...what? Consenting to this?”

“Enthusiastically.”

Shaking his head, still not believing me, he gestures to the man who isn’t here. “Nacho doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who takes to direction very well.”

“Depends on the kind of direction you’re giving,” I say, looking down with a small smile.

“So you really don’t care how unethical this is?” he asks, simply unable to get there.

Honestly, I'm glad he can't fathom it. I've always known he was a better man than me, and this proves it.

"I care deeply about ethics, Levy. I care deeply for the health, well-being, and safety of our patients. I would never ever ever ever ever take advantage of a patient. Ever."

"But you *did*. The power differential between you means that you had control over everything. Hell, even his freedom, Bram."

"I *know*," I snap. "Even though he was into it, it was wrong, and I *liked* that it was wrong."

His silence forces my head up, and his shocked expression both shames and validates the sentiment I haven't been able to shake.

"Do you trust yourself with patients now?"

I nod, absolutely assured of my answer.

"I do. This wasn't the start of some pathology in my thinking. This was a combination of having an extremely emotional event precede finding somebody who is a perfect match for me in an unconventional space. I would've always been attracted to him, though. Normally, I would've shut it down or had him switch therapists. But at that moment, I needed what Nacho was giving me, and he needed what I was giving him."

"Holy shit."

"I know I've disappointed you."

"I don't think I'm disappointed. I just...this makes me realize I don't know you as well as I thought I did. It almost..." Levy stops, running his hand over his beard. "Look, I'm about to say something really fucked up, but I feel like I can because you just admitted how much you get off on the unethical nature of your relationship with Nacho Rivera."

"Okay..." I say, not sure what to expect. "Lay it on me."

He lets his hands work the air as he finds the words. "I dunno, but...you being imperfect kind of helps."

I grin. “Yeah? In what way?”

“Fuck, look at me, then look at you. I’m scruffy. Your hair is always parted perfectly. I’ve got a little bit of belly. You’re jacked, always. I’m wearing a T-shirt, and you’re wearing a starched button-down.”

“You work with horses. Your clothing makes sense for what you do.”

“Yeah, but I’ve never been able to approach things like you do—with logic and reasoning. I’ve always just sort of followed my own flow, like an internal guidance system. Society looks at you, and they look at me, and they think you’re the buttoned-up one. I don’t think I realized how much I just sorta...went along with that thinking. Like, I had no idea ICE was all up in your grill at the hospital or that you’d fudged patient paperwork. Hell, I’ve *definitely* done that. How can we be so close, and I didn’t know that about you?”

“If it makes you feel any better, I didn’t know it about myself either.”

“And now that you do?”

“It’s a lot. This need to be perfect. I didn’t know how heavy it was until I couldn’t help myself. All that stuff with putting the patients over policy came after Nacho. I think I’ll always enjoy dressing like this and doing my hair like this. But I don’t know. Something about Nacho gives me permission to be a little messier than I’ve ever let myself be.”

Levy nods, running his knuckles along his lower lip, tilting his head side to side as the words connect.

“So the guy with the neck tattoos is what you needed?”

I rub my chest thinking about everything he’s given me. Slowly, my eyes meet Levy’s, and I dip my chin.

“He’s perfect for me. He makes me a better therapist. He makes me a better brother and friend.”

“Does he know that?”

“I may not have fully communicated that to him yet. But I will.”

“So this isn’t just some hormone-driven temporary insanity?”

“Oh, hormones are involved,” I say, laughing.

Levy makes a disgusted face. “TMI, Bram. T. M. I.”

“Brother, if you don’t wanna hear about my sex life, don’t ask me questions about my sex life.”

He holds up his hands. “Fair point. I guess I just...I’m trying to consider the long-term happiness of the patient. I don’t want him to be harmed if this ends, and I don’t want him to come back and retaliate with, frankly, the truth.”

“I hear you, but he doesn’t operate with a retaliation mindset. That’s just not who he is.”

“How do you know that?”

“I was his therapist, Lev.”

Levy puts his head in his hands. “That’s really fucked up, Bram.”

“It is. I know it is. But I want you to consider that the guy he killed was trying to rape him. Nacho later admitted it made his stomach hurt. He literally wanted to throw up when he found out he’d killed this man who meant to do him harm. All Nacho ever wanted to do in prison was put his head down, do his time, get out, and try to rebuild his life. He looks forward, Lev. Never back.”

Levy lets out a long breath, scrubbing his forehead. Finally, he says, “That does make a certain kind of sense. I mean...the way he was with those women. Like, he was hearing stuff a seasoned professional would be disturbed by, and he controlled his response so he could be there for them.”

I nod, confessing, “Hell, I had to go to his place yesterday because I didn’t want to sleep alone.”

Levy looks off to the side. “I didn’t sleep at all last night or the night before.”

“Everything I learn about him makes me want to learn more,” I say, picking up a pen and rolling it between my

fingers. “At first, I thought it was just me needing to regain control. But if that were the case, I could’ve gone online, found a sub, scratched the itch. But it wasn’t submission. It was *his* submission. It was *that* man and all the layers that make up *him*. In the thirty seconds I had before I saw him, I was reading the file of a guy who was smart, who’d stayed out of trouble longer than most of the guys in his neighborhood, somebody who had more under the surface, more to give.”

“It must’ve scared you, wanting to control someone but not being able to control your own impulses.”

“It was terrifying,” I admit, somehow feeling freer for saying so. “I couldn’t stop, and it made me question everything about who I was. Then, when he played with me, when he responded in kind, I couldn’t have felt regret for that at all.”

Before Levy can respond, we’re interrupted by a knock at the door. We sort of blink and shift, coming back to the present. Charlie pokes his head in the door, immediately clocking that Levy and I are talking about something serious.

“Gentlemen, my apologies. I don’t mean to interrupt your therapeutic time, but we’ve got a bit of a situation.”

“I think we were just about done here,” Levy says, looking at me.

I stand. “What’s going on?”

He walks in and is followed by Justin, Erik, Ant, and Nacho. Seeing him in my office somehow brings it all back, and my first thought is *I want to bend him over this couch*.

“Fix your face,” Levy whispers.

“Sorry. Thanks,” I whisper back.

Charlie gestures for Nacho to speak. Our eyes meet, and I send him an encouraging smile. After a brief hesitation, he tells us about the client who set off his alarm bells. By the time he finishes describing the project they’ve been hired to do, my alarm bells are going off too.

Ant speaks up, describing the building as the exact kind he'd been kept in before. I exchange a look with Charlie—Nacho's instincts were spot on.

“It was like they were told at the last minute that this shipment was coming because the original mission messed up their plans. By the time Ant and I got to her, the trailer had been taken over, so her plans were doubly fucked.”

“But then she continued with the project?”

Nacho nods. “Makes you think. Charlie takes down one location in a completely different state, and this one pops up two days later. Maybe they've got more coming, maybe they were already going to put something up at the property, and this accelerated those plans. Not that I know anything. It's probably just some wild theory, but...”

Charlie shakes his head and so does Erik. “Not some wild theory. Pretty fucking educated guess. Definitely worth looking into.”

“So there seems to be some urgency to this,” Levy observes.

Erik nods. “It's the property next door.”

“Shit,” I mutter under my breath.

Levy laughs. “They have no idea they just set up shop next to an entire anti-trafficking organization.”

Charlie grimaces. “We still have to be careful how we play this. We thought we'd cut the head off this organization, but they regenerated rather quickly. A little too quickly. The building, the fencing, the fact that it was all expedited... money, money, money.”

As we contemplate the grim reality of the situation, Ant asks the obvious question.

“What are we going to do?”

NACHO

Charlie looks at Ant incredulously. “*You* aren’t going to be doing anything. The rest of us are putting a plan together, and we’ll go from there.”

“Why are you excluding me? You always exclude me!” he shouts, curling his hands into fists.

Charlie lets out a patient breath. “Ant, buddy. You’ve obviously seen the operational side of what we do, and that’s exactly why you can’t be a part of this side.”

“Why not? This affects me directly.”

“We don’t know what we don’t know yet, and I’m not going to include you in a damn thing without first talking to Bram and Levy.”

Ant gestures at the two brothers dismissively. “Why would they know anything about anything?”

Charlie’s look is patient and kind. “They live with you, Ant. They’ll be able to tell us if you can handle this kind of information. The way you’re handling it now makes me think I was right to question it.”

I grimace, thinking about the details I’ve already given him.

“I’m not a kid. I can handle the truth of what you’re doing.”

“Nobody thinks you’re a kid,” Charlie says.

Erik quickly shutters his disbelieving expression, but Ant sees it. Ant's lip curls as he walks up to him, his anger almost making their height difference disappear.

“You *do* know I was made to look younger so the men could pretend they were fucking an underage girl, *right*? You do get that what that does to a person is the *opposite* of whatever a kid is, *right*? That, of everyone here, I'm the only one who's seen and lived through this experience?”

All the guys with advanced degrees and rescue experience go quiet.

“You're right,” I say, touching his shoulder so he'll look me in the eyes.

I continue in Spanish, fast and low so the guys can't pick up what we're saying. “Just a guess here, but they're worried you won't handle this information very well.”

“*Not handle the information very well?*” He switches to English. “Nacho, I know you mean well, but there's a big difference between information and...I don't know, actually living through being fucked by an eighty-year-old man with a doll fetish.”

Bram goes to open his mouth, and I hold up my finger. I continue in Spanish, “They think your history makes you fragile. They think it makes you unreliable. Unstable. Then you have an outburst like this and all but prove their point. Look at Justin, Charlie, and Erik right now. You just said what happened to you and look at their faces.”

He follows my line of sight, and they are, in a word, horrified.

“And while *you* know you survived, they're thinking about how you must've felt in the moment. They're not thinking about how you *knew* how to survive. Because somewhere along the line, you made a decision to survive, didn't you?”

“Fucking right, I did.”

“They would never be able to handle something like that, and they're the guys in charge of everything. They can't even begin to imagine how *you* were able to handle it. I know you

want to be involved, but you have to prove you can handle being involved.”

Frustration hardens Ant’s features, showing more of his real age. “I had *no* say over what happened to me, and now again, I have no say. Why the fuck am I here if they’re just going to ignore me again?”

“They’re not ignoring you. They’re just not *there* yet.”

“Then why are you here? How did they know *you* could handle it when they needed you to translate for them? And what the fuck is Justin doing here?”

I grimace a little, looking around the room before I continue in Spanish, “They were losing control of the situation. Bram called me because I think he knew I’d be able to translate quickly and calm everyone down. Then two women needed me to translate what happened to them. I’m telling you, man, it was some of the most awful shit I’ve ever heard in my whole life. But I did the job, and I made them feel comfortable.”

“See! That’s what I mean! You were at least given a chance to prove yourself.”

“I wouldn’t have if there had been any other way. It was an emergency situation. While you’re not a kid, you’re still very, very young, and you’ve refused therapy. I’m telling you, listening to that shit? I need a therapy session.”

“I know exactly the kind of therapy you and Bram have going on.”

I don’t deny the truth.

“All I’m saying is you have to prove you’re ready, and I’ll help. I think you’re right. This shit that happened to you? They should be listening to what you have to say. But it would kill these men to cause you further harm. They’re not doing it because they don’t respect you. They’re doing it because they love you, and they want you to have the option of a life that has nothing to do with trafficking.”

Ant clenches his jaw, looking like he’s holding back tears. I open my arms, and Ant steps into them, letting me give him a

quick hug.

Stepping back, he takes several deep breaths. I try to imagine the terrible nights he must've had, feeling so fucking alone. I envision a pre-teen Ant squaring his shoulders and deciding, fuck it, he's going to *live*.

As much as I want to encase him in bubble wrap and make sure that fucking life never fucking touches him again, I know that's not the solution. He's like the buffalo that run toward the storm. He wants to confront these people. He wants to make them pay.

Can't say I blame him.

Having calmed himself, Ant turns to Charlie and Erik. "I'm sorry for getting so upset. Can you please at least let me hear what your plan is? I promise, I just...I need to feel like I'm doing something. Even if it's just listening."

There's a moment of silence, with Charlie stroking his chin, appearing to consider Ant's words while Erik shakes his head.

"Okay," Charlie eventually says, even though Erik's jaw practically creaks with disapproval. "The first thing we need is more information. We have to verify Nacho's theory. From there, we need to understand the scope of this thing. If we go after them, does that bring a bigger threat to our door? Do they have people over there? How do we manage this? All we're doing right now is assessing the situation. That's why Justin is here. He's going to help Nacho finish the work."

"I can finish the work," Ant insists, upset all over again. "What experience does he have that I don't?"

Justin's Adam's apple bobs, and he sends Charlie a helpless look. Charlie grabs his hand, kissing his knuckles.

Erik lets out an annoyed sound. "Hey, I get you're not happy about this, but it's not your place to question our decisions."

Ant's eyes go shiny, and Charlie holds up his hands, looking desperate to avoid a meltdown. "Justin's going because he's already been part of two ops. He helped save a

kid during a search and rescue on horseback and then helped me take down one of the guys who sold you. He knows the work. This is nonnegotiable.”

Ant stares at Justin, and I’m guessing this is new information to him. Justin sorta shrugs and nods, which pulls the knot out of the anger building in Ant’s body.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Ant takes a beat, then asks, “Can I ask what you’ll do after that?”

Charlie nods, and Erik rolls his eyes. “Of course. But the answer is...it depends. After we gather what information we can, we’ll first have to look at what we’ve got to determine the next steps.”

“But you will *do* something? Even if you don’t find anything?”

“Absolutely. If we don’t find anything, it’s probably because we’re looking in the wrong place. But that’s when we bring in the big guns. When we were on our own, Erik and I hit a lot of dead ends. But we have better friends now. We come when they call, and they help us when we need it. Nobody wants to see these people get away with it.”

Ant nods and takes a deep breath. He rubs his chest as he blinks away tears, as if relieved to know the extent Charlie is willing to go to save people in his exact previous situation. Even Erik, who’s been annoyed this entire conversation, sees his reaction and stands down.

“Ant,” he says, gentling his voice. “We saved an entire warehouse full of people, which should’ve been enough for anyone. But one person came forward with your name and the vaguest description of where you might be. Charlie and I immediately got in the truck and tracked you down because leaving you behind would have never been acceptable to either of us, okay? We will never not *do* something.”

“Then why won’t you let me help?” he asks, pain visible in his eyes.

“Because we don’t want you to get hurt!” Erik nearly shouts, throwing his hands up. “It would devastate us to rescue

you from those fucking bastards only to lose you to them again. Don't you get that?"

Ant is a small man, but the weight of his experience is enormous. Not being able to help other people going through the same thing...I understand the frustration.

"But I've been where they've been, Erik."

"Do you have psychological training?"

"No."

"Do you have defensive training?"

"I've taken Bram and Levy's classes."

"Do you have conflict resolution and de-escalation training?"

"No, but neither does Nacho, and you used him."

"That was an emergency, Ant," Erik spits out, frustrated. "Nacho is not doing exfil. What we did for you? That was an exfil operation, and he's never gonna be anywhere near that kind of action."

Charlie continues, "We may need Nacho for backup translation and to help people feel safe, but it will only ever be done from a distance."

"I can do translation," he says, stamping his feet.

"Cálmate, hermano," I whisper. *Brother, calm yourself.*

Ant fists his hands but steps back.

Charlie is patient with his explanation. "Look, we got to see Nacho handle an incredibly difficult translation in the middle of an op. Doesn't mean you can't do it. It's just that, with this, I need to go with somebody I've already seen in action. You say you want to help, so I need to think through how you can help. You and I will have a conversation. I promise."

Erik gets a notification on his phone, which he reads, his shoulders tensing.

Ant grinds his jaw. “Fine. I still don’t understand why I can’t at least finish the fencing job.”

Justin and Charlie exchange a worried glance, then Charlie turns to Erik. “What’s going on?”

“Missing hiker around Enchanted Rock. Diabetic, insulin reliant. He was hiking by himself. Wife says he missed the check-in time twice now. They’ve done an initial scan of the walking paths but haven’t seen anything. County’s asking if we can bring in Moose to track him.”

Charlie rubs his forehead. “Okay, fine. We need to split this up. I can’t let the hiker stay out in the elements if he’s going through diabetic shock or whatever, and we need to move quickly on this thing with the property next door. Erik, can you handle that while we take care of surveillance?”

“Sure. I’ll grab Moose right now.”

Bram, who’s been silent this whole time, speaks up, “Charlie, if you’re serious about letting Ant help where he can, maybe he can go with Erik.” Turning to Ant directly, he asks, “Would you like to go with him? You’ll genuinely be helpful, but in a way that feels safe for everyone.”

“I can see what you’re doing,” Ant says, rubbing his arms. “Trying to give me the scraps while you do the real work.”

“I don’t do scrap work,” Erik grouses. “Saving a hiker is really fucking important. Besides, you’ve done excellent work with the horses, and we don’t have a lot of time. It would help to have another set of eyes up on horseback.”

Erik’s praise seems to have a spell-like quality on Ant’s entire attitude. Every bit of fight leaves his body, and he pulls his ponytail forward, playing with the hair.

“Okay. I guess.” He shifts on his feet.

Erik pats his head. “See? You’re helping.”

I share a look with Bram and stifle a groan. That is the way, *way* wrong thing to do to Ant at this moment, and the crestfallen look on his face pretty much squares it. They leave the room with Ant looking defeated.

Yeah...that's a problem for a different day.

Once he's convinced Ant is well out of earshot, Charlie turns to Bram and shares with him what we're going to do next.

"I had Nacho and Ant act like they'd run out of supplies and would be back this evening to complete the job. I'll go in with Nacho and Justin. Bram and Levy, I'd like to have you two here, monitoring the situation as backup."

"No," Bram says, his face resolute.

"No, you don't want to listen in on comms?" Charlie asks, confused.

"No, you're not taking Nacho in on a mission unarmed, untrained, not knowing what might happen."

"Bram, all I'll be doing is my job," I say, standing in front of him, smoothing my hands over his upper arms. "That's it. Easy. It won't take Justin and me that long to complete, and if something goes down, I'm sure Charlie will have it covered."

Charlie nods, but Bram's scowl tells me he's not satisfied.

"What about visuals?" he asks.

"Other than our eyes?" Charlie asks, frustration finally creeping into his voice.

"You're telling me you don't have body cams or something?"

Charlie takes a centering breath. "If it will make you feel better, we have a few body cameras we can set up."

"It would," Bram says, his eyes drifting to mine as his body loses some of its tension.

"Goddammit," Justin curses, startling me.

"What?" I ask, lifting my chin at him.

"I owe Charlie five dollars," he says, reaching for his wallet.

"Why?" I ask, looking over at Charlie, who has a suspiciously wide grin.

“You two are fucking, right?” Justin doesn’t wait for our response before thumbing a gesture at his husband. “Charlie thought he saw something, and I told him Bram’d be crazy to put his career on the line. But that look he just gave you? *Damn.*”

I try to stifle my laughter, which makes it come out as a snort-hiccup. Bram lets out a deep put-upon sigh while dragging me to his side and snaking his hand around my waist.

“Yes, Nacho and I are in a relationship,” he says as if begrudgingly announcing a change in the weather.

I wipe my mouth to hide my smile, and Charlie notices the gesture.

“So...you two aren’t *just* fucking.”

“Correct,” Bram says, nuzzling the side of my head.

He has to know I love the authority in his voice and this possessive little display of affection. We exchange a glance, and the lift of his eyebrow means I’ll be seeing a little more of Dr. Barlowe as soon as this is all done.

Charlie looks between the two of us. “*Seriously?*”

I crack up, planting a wet kiss on Bram’s cheek. “What can I say? I broke down my prison therapist.”

I emphasize this by buffing my nails on my shoulder and blowing the imaginary dust off them.

Levy barely holds back a laugh.

“You’re okay with this?” Charlie asks him, incredulous.

“I just found out myself, but...they seem pretty fucking happy.”

Charlie lets out an ancient sigh. “I don’t suppose people think Justin and I make very much sense either.”

Justin pulls him into a hug and kisses the side of his head, grinning.

“Y’all do know this is serious, right?” Charlie asks. “People’s lives are on the line, and if this relationship goes

south, it's mutually assured destruction if either of you speaks. Fuck, and Nacho hasn't even signed an NDA."

"I'll sign it, but you don't need one."

"I have no intention of letting anything go south," Bram says, looking directly at me.

I suck in my bottom lip. "Same."

"Fine. Justin? You okay doing this with Nacho, and I'll hang back in my truck?"

"I'll wait in the truck with you," Bram insists.

"With Bram, it seems," Charlie amends, losing a tiny bit of his chill edge.

"Sure. This is what Nacho and I do all the time. In fact, we haven't been able to work together in a while, so I'm looking forward to it."

Justin and I bump fists. Then get ready to spy on a human trafficker.

BRAM

Charlie and I are in his truck, watching the video feed through an app on Charlie's phone, as Nacho and Justin pull up.

"Y'all are *late*," the lady—Joanna—barks out.

Stretching my neck, I remind myself that Nacho knows how to handle rude people and I don't need to go over there and correct her manners for her.

Justin answers, "Yes, ma'am. Apologies for the delay, but we'll have you squared away by sundown."

"Fine. I've got some permit issues to deal with. Can't even build on my own fucking land without the county halfway up my ass. Are y'all actually going to get this done today?"

One of Charlie's contacts is good with hacking systems and did a solid for us. That little permit situation she's having to deal with is totally our fault and should keep her busy for at least an hour.

"Yes, ma'am. Me and Nacho are the fastest guys on the crew, and we'll have this done in under an hour."

"What happened to the other guy?" she asks, venom in her voice as she looks past them to the partially fenced-in building. "The little gay boy."

Fuck this bitch.

"Well, ma'am, it was his error that led to the delay," Justin explains. Nacho's cam picks up Justin's sincere expression, and I'm glad they sent him instead of Ant because Ant has

zero poker face. “Unfortunately, it wasn’t his first issue with this kind of job, so we had to let him go.”

Her sigh is long-suffering and irritates my sinuses.

“Can’t trust those Mexicans to do anything right anyway,” she says a little too comfortably.

Nacho’s camera angles off as though he’s stepped away. Charlie and I catch a few colorful words uttered under his breath.

“Like I said, ma’am, won’t ever happen again. Me and Nacho will have your fence up in no time flat.”

“Fine. Just get it done. And what kind of name is Nacho, anyway?” she asks, mocking him. “What was your mother thinking?”

“Well, I was a crack baby, ma’am,” he answers completely deadpan. “So I doubt good ole Mom was thinking very much of anything.”

Charlie and I know that’s a complete fabrication, and we stifle our laughter.

“Of course. You people can’t even take care of your own babies.”

From the challenge in her voice and the downturn of her lips, I can tell how desperately she wants to start a fight, but Nacho is smooth as silk.

“And see, ma’am, I’m gay. Don’t have to worry about no unwanted babies from me. Now, if we can, we’d like to finish this job for you.”

He ignores her disgusted look and doesn’t respond to whatever she’s muttered under her breath.

Charlie chuckles. “He’s enjoying himself.”

“If he decides he doesn’t like someone, he’s rather adept at getting under their skin.”

Rubbing the back of his neck, Charlie asks, “What happens if he *does* like someone?”

My lips twitch. “He’s even worse.”

That might be a little more information than totally necessary, but the fact Charlie is stifling a laugh rather than handing me a pink slip settles some of the angst I’ve had about the possible fallout around our relationship.

The client continues to mutter something we can’t quite pick up on the feed, but I can’t imagine it’s tasteful or kind. Justin and Nacho head toward the impressively tall fence and prepare for the work. A few moments later, the lady tears ass out of her property, scowling.

“She’s clear of the property,” Charlie says. “Anyone else we need to worry about?”

Nacho answers, “Nope. We’re the only ones here now.”

“What about the dogs?”

“They’re in the backyard,” Justin answers.

“Don’t forget, there is a set of cameras around the building,” Nacho warns.

“Erik and I already identified blind spots we can take advantage of,” Charlie explains.

Charlie turns to me. “My plan was to let you stay in the truck while I did reconnaissance, but since she took the bait, it’s a little safer. Would you like to come with me to see what this part looks like?”

“You know I would,” I say, dead serious.

“Gentlemen,” Charlie announces. “Bram and I are going in. We’re looking for evidence and will be in and out before you know it. Just finish the job and leave as quickly as you can.”

“No problem, baby,” Justin says. “I wasn’t lying. This project will go quick.”

Pulling the truck up to the carport—directly in a blind spot—Charlie hands me a balaclava and a pair of black nitrile gloves.

“Damn,” I say, pulling the balaclava over my head. “As Levy would say, shit just got real.”

“What just got real, brother?” Levy asks.

I forgot Levy’s listening in back at the ranch.

“I look like a cat burglar, if that tells you anything,” I say.

Levy whistles across the line. “Jealous.”

Charlie cracks a smile, then goes absolutely serious as he dons his mask.

“I don’t know what kind of recording devices they have, so keep talking to a minimum. We’re looking for documents, ledgers, anything that indicates what their business is and what they have planned next. Most importantly, we can’t leave any trace of our presence here.”

“Do you know whether or not they have a security system?”

“They do. But it’s controlled by Wi-Fi, and one of our friends has already hacked it. We’ll be able to get in. We just don’t know what they have on the inside.”

With that, we exit the vehicle and enter the carport. I’m creeped out by the shadows and the dogs watching us silently from behind the backyard fence, but we ignore them and walk straight to the side door. Charlie points at a camera above the door, and he makes a slashing sound at his throat, meaning it’s dead.

He points to another camera in the window, and its light is red.

“Wi-Fi?” I ask.

He nods, sending off a quick message. By the time he gets the door unlocked, the red light on that camera is also out.

We walk in through the cluttered kitchen and scan the equally cluttered front of the house. The living room and dining area are on the left side of the house, and the living quarters are on the right. The dining area is more of an office, with multiple desks and monitors, like a command center.

I check with Charlie, and the set of his jaw tells me we're thinking the same thing. He pulls out his phone again, gesturing for me to do the same.

Charlie: Take pictures of everything.

I send him a thumbs-up, and we split, him on one side of the room, me on the other. The first desk is fairly clean, save for a notebook filled with some kind of code—a series of letters and numbers that don't make much sense. I flip through the notebook, taking pictures of any pages with writing. There's definitely a pattern, but now is not the time to try and decipher it.

I move the mouse, grateful Charlie brought gloves for me.

The screen comes up and is password-protected. These are older computers, so I hit the enter button to see if they actually used a password, which they did. Not going to try and crack it myself, so I move on to the next desk. This is just as clean as the other, again with a notebook that contains the mysterious pattern of letters and numbers. I take pictures of all those as well.

To the side of that desk are a printer and a wastebasket. Nothing's in the printer drawer, but a few crumpled pieces of paper are in the basket. I grab them and flatten them on the desk, taking pictures of everything before recrumpling them and tossing them back in the basket. I'm pretty much done, but jiggle the mouse on this computer as well, just in case. Another lock screen. I hit enter, not expecting anything and... shit.

"That actually worked," I say, probably a little too loudly.

Charlie turns toward me, questions in his eyes.

I point at the monitor and shrug. His eyes are wide, and he sits in front of it, pulling up document after document. At some point, he pulls up a spreadsheet, and red splotches appear on his cheeks.

He points out a Minneapolis address at the top of the screen. Damn, Nacho was right. They are connected to the earlier rescue mission.

Charlie then points to the bottom of the screen, noting all the tabs. They disappear to the right, and as he clicks over, there are at least two dozen.

“None of these computers are connected—no Wi-Fi signals, no ethernet cables, nothing.”

Cursing, he pulls out his phone and connects it to the computer with a USB cord. He pulls up an app on his phone, types in a code, and it connects to the computer, pulling up a finder window for the phone.

Working quickly, he highlights and drags all the documents he can into the folder. We wait as the bar across the screen slowly creeps over.

“Sit here. I’m going to check the rest of the rooms.”

It’s a little nerve-racking, being left alone in a room while breaking and entering to possibly stop a human-trafficking ring, but I do as asked, my eyes never leaving the screen.

A few moments into watching the bar creep across the screen, I sense the presence of something else in the room.

Chills crawl across my skin as I slowly spin in the chair. One of the property’s enormous German Shepherds has crept up and is staring me down. He’s so tall that he and I are face to face. Letting out a low, quiet growl, he bares his teeth.

“Shit,” I whisper under my breath.

“Brother? Something wrong?”

My brother’s voice in my ear startles me, but I lock it down because I don’t want to give this dog a reason to attack.

“The biggest fucking German Shepherd I’ve ever seen in my life is standing right in front of me.”

Nacho’s voice comes over the line, smooth and oddly comforting. “Just act bossy with him. Works for me.”

I ignore the muffled snickers across the line and sit up straight.

“Sit,” I command in my most commanding voice.

The dog ignores the command and moves closer, unimpressed with my presence.

“Say it in German,” Nacho suggests.

“Sitz,” I command, my voice shaking. “Platz.”

Sit and down. Ask me how I know those.

For one terrifying second, the shepherd pauses, then puts his butt on the ground and slides onto his belly, sticking his tongue out and panting.

Fucking hell.

Just as one tragedy is averted, the sound of Charlie softly cursing filters across the line.

“You okay?” I ask, avoiding his name.

Before he can answer, Levy’s voice comes across the line, urgent. “Just got an update on her truck’s location. She’s two minutes out.”

That should have taken her much longer.

“Fuck,” Charlie mutters. “There’s a kid back here.”

“Can he see you?” I ask.

“No. He’s got on headphones and is playing a game.”

“How old is he?”

“Ten, maybe.”

“Does he look like he belongs here?”

“No. He’s Latino, and he’s underweight.”

“What do we do about him?” Justin asks.

“Can’t take him with us. Don’t have time, don’t know the situation. No proof he’s in imminent danger other than the fact he’s skinny. We need to fall back, look at the info we grabbed, and figure out what all this means.”

Charlie walks back into the room and stops short, seeing the dog on the floor.

“Not bad.”

The bar finally disappears from the screen, and I close the window and disconnect Charlie's phone, sleeping the computer before we race through the back of the house. Jumping into the truck, we get to the end of the driveway when she turns in.

"Fuck," Charlie says.

She comes up around us, suspicion in her eyes until she takes one look at Charlie.

"Well, hey there. You lost, sugar?"

Charlie slaps on a serene smile. "I own the fencing company and heard we had an incident today. I just stopped by to ensure my guys are doing a good job for you. Looks like they're almost done."

"Oh," she says, drifting her fingers across her mottled, sunburnt décolletage. "Well, what excellent customer service. Thank you."

"You are most welcome," he says, piling on the charm. "And, of course, we'll be giving a heavy discount since you had to deal with a delay."

"I *so* appreciate that," she says, smiling wide. She leans out the window, which serves to push up her breasts, and cups her hand around her mouth like she's telling a salacious secret. "And maybe next time, make sure you hire the right people to get the job done."

Charlie's Adam's apple bobs, and he white-knuckles the steering wheel.

"Ma'am, you can bet we will."

Looking satisfied with herself, she pulls around us and goes up the drive just as Justin and Nacho begin loading their truck.

"Fuck, that was close," I breathe as Charlie turns onto the highway. When he doesn't respond, I look over, and his brows are stitched together in concentration.

"Hey, Charlie—you okay?"

He shakes his head. “I’ve never left a kid behind before. I just more or less told Ant I’d never do that, and not even an hour later...*fuck*,” he shouts, banging the steering wheel.

“Hey, now. We didn’t have enough information to remove a child from their home.”

“I should have talked to him.”

“You didn’t have time.”

“I know that,” he says, grinding his molars. “Doesn’t make it any easier.”

“True. But that’s why you’re so good at this. You’re willing to do the hard things.”

He takes a deep breath. “Thanks, Bram. Now that we have the documents, I can hand them over to our friends, who can go over it with pattern-recognition technology. They should be able to figure out what all these marks mean pretty quickly.”

“Excellent.”

We pull into Wild Heart and park in front of the bunkhouse. A few minutes later, Justin and Nacho join us. Justin and Charlie immediately go to one another, embracing as they murmur in each other’s ears.

I walk over to the truck and get in next to Nacho.

“Don’t forget to take your comms out,” he says, grinning.

“Good call,” Levy says over the comms. “And don’t forget those cameras either.”

He appears on the porch a second later and walks up to the window, holding out his palm. Nacho and I deliver our surveillance equipment to him, waving as we take off.

As we head down the road, Nacho turns to me. “How do you feel?”

“Like I got lucky,” I say, scrunching my nose as we pass the property we just infiltrated.

“You’re telling me. I was worried the German thing wouldn’t work with that dog.”

“Yeah, but that was only kinda lucky.” Tapping my lip, I continue, “I actually feel lucky about something else.”

“Yeah? What do you feel lucky about?”

I hesitate, but Nacho’s sincere interest makes me plow forward. “I feel kind of like this is the thing that’s been missing from my professional life.”

“What? You mean the breaking and entering?” he asks, laughing at me.

“Ha-ha, no. But maybe also yes. Actually getting in and finding out information that will probably lead us where we need to go, having to pivot in the moment, keeping calm while doing so...I think I’m meant to do more with that.”

Nacho catches my eye, pride shining in his.

“It was sexy hearing you work through the problem.”

“I’m glad I can turn you on, Ignacio. If you’re up for it, some time with you would make me feel so much better.”

His smile breaks like a sunrise. “Yes, Dr. Barlowe. I would like that very much.”

NACHO

It's been a week since Justin, Charlie, Bram, and I went to the property next door. Charlie explained he and Erik work with a team in Wimberley—Erik's cousin Anders is on this team, apparently—and they have people who were able to tap into the property's Wi-Fi and security cams. Unfortunately, they later discovered that the cameras around the instabuilding aren't attached to a power source, and only one of the house cams has a partial view of the fenced-in area. Wimberley remotely adjusted the camera a little, but the angle still isn't great.

Another perk of working with Wimberley is that they upgraded all our comms equipment, including providing sleek, powerful body cameras for everyone. Erik is grumbling about nosy geek squads and corporate overreach, but Bram seems relieved. He's not thrilled I'm on this operation, but he feels better knowing he'll be able to see what's happening around me.

Wimberley also ran the weird code Bram took pictures of. Best they can tell, the numbers and letters refer to at least three dozen different people and their ovulation cycles. Nothing good comes from these assholes having that kind of information, but we didn't have enough to go on until two nights ago when our one useful security camera on the main house picked up a couple of panel vans entering the fenced-in area.

Charlie included me in the meeting with Erik, Bram, and Levy when he told us the Wimberley crew took out the main

trafficking organization responsible for all of this and badly crippled it. I took from that meeting that several enterprising offshoots are scrambling for their piece of the pie. Since Charlie's neighbor is one of the scattered pieces Wimberley is going after, we had to wait to coordinate with them and the logs Charlie found.

During this time, we discover what makes Charlie lose his chill: sitting on his hands while the enemy is literally next door. The upshot? The barn is pristine, and there's new shrubbery along the path between the houses and the barn.

According to the intelligence, this is the best night to go in because Joanna and her team are doing an overnight in Laredo on the Texas-Mexico border, where members of the Wimberley crew will be there to greet them.

So I wait in the shadows with Anders and his buddy, Hopper, while Erik and Charlie secure the building and Bram and Levy wait in the Wild Heart Ranch truck just outside the gate.

I've been to a few more of the Sunday dinners now and heard more than saw that Anders is a little...how should I say? *Not quite sane*. Seeing it up front and personal, though? *Yikes*.

Then add in Hopper, who is even less sane? *Double yikes*.

As I sit in the weeds in the dark, flanked by Killer Number One and Killer Number Two, I'm starting to wonder if maybe you gotta be a little bit nuts to make this your life's purpose.

"House is clear," Erik's voice comes over the line. He and Charlie went in first and verified everyone was gone, save for one very unfortunate low-level grunt who's been handcuffed to something sturdy. They also set it up so we could switch from body to exterior cams on the app Wimberley had us download on our phones.

Here's hoping they don't judge my porn choices.

Charlie's voice is the next to come over the comms. "The little boy isn't here," he says, his voice heavy with regret.

"We'll track him down," Anders says in a weirdly soothing tone.

“And if they hurt him, we’ll make them pay,” Hopper adds, equally gentle in his delivery.

Honestly, it’s off-putting. Worse, earlier, as we were getting into position, Hopper casually mentioned that he’s asked to be included on these missions because hurting traffickers makes him feel all warm and bubbly inside.

“Like a bottle of champagne left out in the sun,” he said, bouncing on his toes and delightedly clapping his hands.

“But...there’s only the one guy,” I point out. “The guard. And he’s already been captured.”

Hopper shrugs. “Good enough.”

So...yeah. Sucks to be that guy.

Charlie and Erik make their way over to the tall fence surrounding the insta-building, slipping through the subtle cut in the chain-link fence I left on our last visit. Their fancy new body cams are set to night vision and everything looks alien and green but crisp as fuck.

They methodically make their way around the building, checking each door, verifying all are locked. More importantly, the sounds of people on the other side of those doors come through loud and clear on the brand-new comms.

While that makes my gut churn, Hopper seems a little less bouncy, which I find fascinating. Obviously, I should leave well enough alone, but...I gotta know what it’s like in his head.

“You seem pretty focused.”

He grins broadly. “When it’s go time, my head gets real quiet.” He stares off a bit, rubbing his thumb against the pads of his fingers. “It’s like that first skate on freshly resurfaced ice at Rockefeller. Fast and quiet.”

I’ve never been ice skating, and I’ve never been to New York City. But I still understand exactly what he means, and it sends a shiver up my spine. First, warm bubbles. Then, blades on ice. Got it.

I could start a podcast.

I set aside the fact I'm squeezed between two serial killers and refocus on the phone in Anders' hand. We watch as Erik produces a set of picks and makes quick work of the simple lock. It takes a moment for us to understand the scene, but then Charlie and Erik switch the cameras to full-light mode. The room they enter is set up like a baby ward, and young women in various stages of pregnancy and postpartum fill the space.

"What the fuck is this?" Levy hisses over the line.

Nobody answers because we all know his question is rhetorical. We know exactly what we're looking at. A real live baby mill.

Cries come in from a room off to the side, and the guys go barging in as a young woman, looking barely of age, is handed a brand-new baby, still covered in afterbirth. She's being assisted by two terrified medical personnel, and all four of them are screaming.

Given how our guys look in head-to-toe black tactical gear, it's a reasonable response. Erik, who's at least six and a half feet tall, looks especially intimidating.

"Well, that's something you don't see every day," Hopper whispers. "Women are so badass."

True. But not really the point.

Charlie and Erik back out of the room with their hands up, trying to show they mean no harm. They scope out the rest of the place, and every new thing we see chills me to the bone. The worst is the—thankfully empty—room with shackles built into the wall.

"The place is clear, y'all. Bring in Nacho."

Anders turns to me. "You ready for this?"

I let out a long breath. "Probably not. But let's do it anyway."

In a general sense, Charlie is talking about using me remotely when their Spanglish won't cut it. I, however, asked

to come on this one since it's literally right next door and seemed like a simple op. Heh.

God, I'm hilarious.

Anders stands and reaches out his hand to me. I take it and let him help me up. This time, his eyes hold a depth of sincerity that genuinely makes me question reality.

“Hey, man. The fact you're doing this for folks is super amazing. I know this is your first time working with people face to face, but I saw what you did in that last op. You'll be great. I promise.”

Wow, okay.

He's still fucking crazy, but he's sorta nice about it. I think I can hang with that.

“Thanks, Anders. That actually helps. A lot.”

He pounds my back, nearly knocking me to the ground, then he and Hopper escort me to the fence, letting me go through the slit first.

“Hold up,” Anders says, walking to the gate.

Pulling bolt cutters from his pack, he snips the lock keeping these people in.

“What if they run before we can help them?” I ask, wondering if Charlie is aware of the lock situation.

Anders tilts his head. “Buddy, that's the one thing we'll never do. We don't force innocent people to go with our interventions. If they want to leave, they have every fucking right.”

Huh.

“You're right, and, uh, I'm glad you're on our side.”

He slings his arm around my shoulders as we walk toward the building. “You have no idea how glad you should be.”

Hopper giggles, and I wonder how I ended up here. Oh yeah. Right. My boyfriend needed my help. Despite the *everything* going on, that puts a smile on my face.

Walking into the insta-building, however, silences the three of us. It is a very different experience than watching it from a distance on Charlie's and Erik's body cams. The bleakness captured in the video is ten times more intense in real life. The industrial new-building smell, the harsh lights, the lack of color...this is not a good place. No child should be born in a place like this.

And the young women look desperate. Terrorized.

What's weird is that, save for worried glances, the rest of the women barely react to Erik's and Charlie's presence, which leads me to believe they must be used to armed men waltzing through their space. The three of us receive a similar non-greeting, and the women seem to be avoiding our eyes, some of them stepping in front of their babies.

I start in Spanish. "Does everybody here speak Spanish?"

They all freeze, then send me hesitant nods.

"Are you immigration?" one bold young woman asks.

I shake my head and explain that we're a group that works outside of the law to help people who have been taken in by human traffickers. That they would not have to give up their babies.

"But the only way we get the papers is if we give up our babies."

I translate that to Charlie, who shakes his head. We work in tandem to explain.

"You will not have to give up your babies if you don't want to, and we work with various groups who can help you. If you want to go home and need help getting there, we will help you. If you want to stay here legally, we will help you with that as well."

"How much?" the bold one asks.

"We don't charge. We just don't want those people to win."

"What about my baby?" asks a woman whose sagging belly makes me think she only recently gave birth.

“Was your baby taken?” Charlie asks through me.

Her face crumples and she begins to cry.

I turn to Charlie and Erik, explaining what she’s crying about. An unfamiliar voice comes in over the comms, one of the Wimberley guys. “Get her name. I think we can track her baby.”

“And my son. They’re holding my son until I give them my baby,” another woman says, heavy with child.

Charlie sends her a guilt-stricken look. “We’ll track him down as well.”

Levy’s voice comes over the comms. “We need to rethink moving them from this location. The timing’s too dangerous for a lot of them.”

As much as I’m on board with the notion, anxiety creeps into my chest. How the hell do we keep them here *and* keep them safe? What if the people Wimberley grabs at the border aren’t the whole crew?

Charlie, his jaw resolute, agrees. Turning to Anders, he asks, “Think we can take over this property tonight? How certain are we that the op in Laredo is taking out all the people associated with this place?”

Anders shrugs, unconcerned. “Pretty certain. And hell, you know Hopper and I will take care of any stragglers,” he says with a confidence that settles my growing nerves. “I can work up a team, and we’ll make sure these folks have the supplies they—”

“Shit,” Bram curses over the line. “They were driving a pair of black trucks, right?”

“Yes,” Charlie confirms, checking his weapons.

“Two black extended cabs crammed full of people just passed us. Thirty seconds out.”

“Incoming intelligence,” says the disembodied voice of Wimberley on the line. “Looks like they were warned about Laredo and turned around. Our team is scrambling back to the plane, but it’ll take an hour to get here.”

Erik's jaw tightens. "Yeah, well, this is going down right now."

Everybody begins talking at once, and I hold up my hands, speaking in Spanish, "We need to stay quiet. They don't know we're here."

The women go silent, their eyes filled with fear and distrust.

I turn to Charlie. "I take it we're trying to keep them out of here, correct?"

"Correct. We'll try to draw them away from this building. Can you stay here with them?"

"Absolutely."

"You understand, this is now a very different kind of op, and I have no idea what their plans are. If they overrun us, they'll come straight for this building, and they'll try to hurt these women."

"Not if I can help it," I say, setting my lips in a thin line.

Charlie bends down, retrieving a gun from his ankle holster. "You know what to do with this?" he asks, putting it in my hands.

"All too well," I answer roughly, accepting it with dread and certainty.

"It's like a fucking clown car over here. A dozen people exiting the trucks, heading into the house," Bram warns. "Ten—no, eleven—men, a woman, and..."—he lets out a breath—"a small child. Something tells me they're not going to stay in the house once they find the guy they left behind."

"Agreed," Anders says. "We have to assume they're grabbing additional weapons. We need to move now before they get into an unmanageable position."

Charlie sends me a sharp nod, which I return. He, Erik, Hopper, and Anders jog to the back of the building, filing out in military precision. I pull up my phone as they switch their cams back to night vision, the four of them slipping out through the cut part of the fence.

“Fuck.” Levy’s voice comes back on the line, edged in panic. “Guys, they’re exiting the house. They’re headed right to you.”

As soon as our guys clear the fence, they’re met by a circle of enormous men, all of whom look like they’ve seen the inside of a prison. Fuck.

Anders pulls a gun and a knife—*shit*. Anders shoots one guy in the head, and then...holy fuck. These cameras pick up every damn detail, even in the dark.

Charlie and Erik are in hand-to-hand combat, and I’d forgotten how deadly they could be. Charlie’s got a worthy opponent, but my money is still on the laid-back warrior. And Erik just—holy shit—broke his guy’s neck.

Meanwhile, Hopper grins as he slices a man’s throat. I initially think he’s missed the jugular because the guy keeps going, but after a moment, blood begins to pour like a curtain down his neck, and he drops in place. Hopper then shoots a second man before the guy with the slit neck even knows he’s dead.

From Anders’ camera, I see the front door opening on the house. It’s Joanna, and she’s leaving with a skinny kid.

“Fuck, guys, I think she’s leaving with that woman’s kid,” I murmur quickly through the comms.

“On it,” Bram says. “Nacho, take over on exterior cams.”

“Got it,” I whisper-shout, thumbing to the live shot.

Jesucristo. Our guys by the fence are outnumbered, and the remaining bad guys are proving a lot more difficult to kill. That Joanna chick shoves the kid in the rear truck and begins to back out. As she reaches the end of the driveway, Bram and Levy pull up, blocking her exit. I let out a relieved breath and then realize what they’ve done.

They’ve put themselves directly in the fight.

Getting out of the truck, they don’t have a second to think before Joanna pulls a gun, shooting wildly. Levy pushes Bram aside and jerks right as the camera catches what I think is

blood spray from his side. Bram's head whips around. Seeing Levy holding his side, Bram pulls his gun. Taking aim, he pulls the trigger as Levy grabs the kid.

That's...definitely blood spray. From Joanna's head. She drops to the ground like a broken doll.

The exterior cams aren't as high res as the body ones, but I can make out Bram checking in with Levy and Levy waving him off. Right then, shadows begin swarming in from behind the house. They don't make much sense. Until they do.

"Guys, the dogs. She must've let the dogs loose," I say into the comms, my voice far steadier than I feel.

Blocked off from their truck, Bram and Levy boost the kid into the back of Joanna's truck before climbing in themselves, barely avoiding the snarling jaws of about a dozen German Shepherds. The dogs are jumping on the bumper, determined to get into the bed of the truck but unable to get purchase on the shiny chrome.

Bram curses, pulling out his gun again.

"Sitz! Platz!" he shouts, and Levy joins in, but the dogs aren't responding to their commands.

Hopper starts racing toward them. "I've got the dogs, don't shoot!"

A huge guy with snapped handcuffs tries to pull him into a fight, but Hopper pulls his knife and...ouch. Another guy dead before he hits the ground, and Hopper resumes his race toward the truck.

The dogs are scrambling, one finding a way into the truck bed. Bram has his gun out, ready to shoot, while Levy hunkers around the kid behind him. Hopper runs up to them while waving his hands, and all the dogs stop, assessing the new threat.

The footage is grainy, but I'm pretty sure Hopper pats his thigh. I switch to his cam. His voice is friendly and playful as he asks the universal question. "Hey! Who's a good doggy? Huh? Are you a good doggy?"

The dogs abandon the back of the truck and surround Hopper, tails wagging. I don't know how the hell he turned that around.

Bram turns to his brother and the kid. "Levy, you're hurt. The kid is the priority. Take him and hide in the house."

"It's just a graze. What are you doing?" Levy asks, grunting as he helps the kid down from the truck bed.

"Helping where I can."

Hopper lies on the ground, getting licked to death by dogs, while Bram crosses the yard. I switch to the exterior cam again when someone small darts out of the shadows. He's got something big in his hand...a knife, maybe? He's catching up to Bram awfully fast.

"Bram! Behind you!" I shout into the comms. "Armed. Might be another kid!"

The ladies behind me stir, and Bram spins, his gun pointed down.

"Oh my God," he chokes. "Ant, you can't be here!"

"Yes, I can!" he shouts, pushing past Bram straight toward the fight.

Holy. Shit.

My stomach bottoms out, but I refocus on the fight. They managed to kill another guy, and Anders, Charlie, and Erik are down to a single opponent each. Shit, there's another one.

"Erik—behind you!"

I look on, helpless, as the man takes aim at Erik when Ant slides in behind him, slashing his Achilles. The guy falls like a sack of potatoes. Ant's less than half the size of this guy, but he leaps onto him, knocking away his gun. Before the guy can regroup, Ant raises his arms above his head and brings the knife down with such violence that the man stills instantly.

Ant shifts, and...shit. The knife is sticking out of the guy's temple.

More bodies are on the ground, and Anders and Charlie are taking care of the last two guys, but Erik, with a fresh kill on his hands, turns. I can't see his expression very well from here, but I'm sure it's something along the lines of shock.

"Holy shit," he says, quickly closing the distance between him and Ant.

Holy *fuck* is more like it. The man beneath Ant is *dead* dead, but Ant is not done. Yanking the knife from the man's head, he begins stabbing the man's face and neck.

Charlie appears to disarm his guy, killing him with his own weapon, then turns to the scene in front of him. Taking a chance, I switch from the exterior cams back to his body cam.

Ant looks like a feral beast, and even Anders whistles under his breath. "That's fucked up."

Erik is yelling for Ant to stop, but Ant is not listening. Finally, he catches Ant on the upswing, wrenching the knife from his bloody hands.

Stripped of his weapon, Ant forms his hands into sharp fists and begins beating the dead man.

"Ant! He's dead! Stop...Ant!"

Ant, however, seems to be in a trance, and Erik's words still aren't getting through.

Finally, Erik wraps his arms around Ant and pulls him, still twisting and punching, from the man's body. Even free of the body, Ant continues to fight against him, but Erik only holds him tighter. Everyone else is silent on comms while we listen to the tremor in Erik's voice as he tries to talk Ant down.

"Ant, you got him," Erik says, dropping his voice to a soothing tone. "Ant, please. I need you to stop now. Take a breath with me."

That finally gets Ant's attention.

Slowly, with a few more kicks and shoves for good measure, Ant gives up the fight and goes limp against Erik's body.

Erik holds him for a few more moments before whispering in his ear, “I’m trusting you not to try to run or kill me when I let go.”

Ant takes two shuddering breaths before nodding. Erik sets his feet on the ground and gently turns Ant to face him. I switch to Erik’s body cam and...oh fuck. The way Ant looks up at Erik tightens my chest.

Sorrow, love, and rage are at war in his bloody expression.

I’m so enthralled with what’s happening on my screen that I don’t realize there’s a problem inside until one of the women screams.

Dropping the phone, I spin just in time to catch a huge guy cocking back for a vicious uppercut aimed right at me. He’s real-world fast, but I’m prison-yard fast and shift just enough out of the way for it to glance off my jaw.

Had I been just a bit slower, I would have been lights out. Even now, I’m seeing stars. There’s no time for pretty lights, though, and I gather my wits around me. As with all the other overgrown assholes, this one towers over me.

Bram spits out curses over the comms. “I’m coming, baby.”

I’m not shocked that he’s keeping tabs on my body cam.

“Hop, leave the dogs and go with him,” Anders orders.

Knowing I’ve got backup on the way, I decide to poke the bear. “What? Did that Joanna bitch put in an order for roided-out Neanderthals?”

He smiles and lunges at me with a haymaker. He may have gotten the drop on me with that uppercut, but I read this one from a mile away. I lean back, feeling the breeze as his ham hock-sized fist passes right by my face.

In the distance, a door slams open, and I can’t help my self-satisfied grin. This guy’s night—and life—is about to end very soon.

Dodging another poorly executed swing, I stumble back, landing on my ass as Bram walks up behind the man, gun out,

his face entirely devoid of expression. Putting the gun to the back of the asshole's head, Bram pulls the trigger. This time I see the spray of blood in full color.

Hopper looks disappointed though. Surreally, one of the vicious-looking German Shepherds is sitting at attention next to him, head tilted, ears casually flopped to the side. Despite the screaming going on around us, Bram is a beacon of peace. He reaches out his hand, helping me up from the floor.

“You shot him,” I say, pointing out the obvious yet still unable to comprehend what just happened. “You shot two people.”

“Yes, I did. Are you okay?” he asks, cupping my jaw.

I wince at the bruise forming just underneath his fingertips. Bram, seeing the damage, flares his nostrils, takes aim at the dead man, and puts another bullet in his skull.

“Stop shooting near the infants!” one of the nurses screams, and I translate for Bram.

I translate his apologies, and he wraps a protective arm around me, kissing my head.

“No one touches you but me,” he growls.

Before I can, I dunno, ask him to fuck me up against this empty incubator, Charlie runs in with a worried look.

“What's wrong?” Bram asks.

“It's Levy.”

BRAM

Fuck. Levy stepped in front of that bullet for me. He said it was just a graze, but I should have known better. I race to the house, Nacho, Hopper, and Charlie hot on my heels. We pass Anders and Erik, who now seems to be arguing with Ant.

Not wanting any part of that, I bang through the front door, panicking when I don't see Levy right away. He's not in the dining room-slash-office or the kitchen. Charlie calmly points me over to the living room. Pivoting, I enter the dimly lit space to find Levy on the floor, set up against the couch, holding his side.

My hands start to shake, and the smell of disinfectant fills my nose. *The beep of my heart monitor. The foggy realization that Levy and I are all alone in this world.*

"It's not that bad, promise," he says, his voice weak.

Ignoring him, I pull away his hand. It's a narrow gash but bloody as hell. Turning gray, Levy looks off to the side, pressing his mouth against his shoulder.

Anders saunters in and kneels next to me, examining the cut. Whistling through his teeth, he observes, "There's a thin line between a bullet graze and gut shot, and your brother's just on the right side of things. I've definitely seen worse."

Anders turns to Charlie. "Have we done a full blood panel on the therapy brothers?"

Charlie shakes his head.

Anders scowls, unhappy with this information. Up-nodding me, he asks, “You have cancer in your family history?”

I answer, not sure what the hell is going on. “Grandfather on Mom’s side died of pancreatic cancer. Mom had breast cancer but survived.”

“Is she still alive? Was there a reoccurrence of her cancer?”

I shake my head. “She died two years into remission.”

“Cause of death?”

I look at my brother on the floor, helpless.

“Car accident.”

He scowls. “Shit, that’s right. Guess we’re doing this the old-fashioned way. Charlie, I need a needle and thread. Since the house is so close, see if we can get someone to bring my bag.”

“Need me to go?” Hopper offers, one of the dogs sitting peacefully at his feet.

Anders shakes his head. “Someone from there will bring it over right away.”

Charlie sends him a small salute and grabs his phone, walking into the other room.

I turn to Anders, confused and a little fucking agitated. “Why would anybody bring you a needle and thread?”

“I’m a surgeon,” he says, pulling a silver case from his pocket.

I snort, waiting for a punchline that doesn’t come.

“Bullshit.”

Charlie dips his head back into the room, the phone to his ear. “He’s not lying. I’ve seen his work. Which is good because we need to try to avoid hospitals. We show up with a guy with a bullet wound, and it’ll cause some serious issues.”

Anders shrugs. “Eh. I have privileges in Fredericksburg, and we could have our folks work their magic, make the record disappear. But I’m telling you, this is not that bad.”

Turning back to the guy I just saw kill a whole bunch of people, I ask what I think is a pretty obvious question.

“How are *you* a surgeon? *Where* are you a surgeon?”

Anders shakes his head, laughing. “I could tell you, but then I’d hafta kill you.”

Hopper snorts, and I purse my lips, willing myself not to punch either of them in the mouth.

Nacho touches my arm. “Hey, Bram. It’s gonna be okay. He had to give Ant stitches when he ripped his thumb open on a nail. He’s good.”

I pull away from his touch, shaking my head. “Yeah, no. He’s not touching my brother.”

Nacho puts up his hands and steps back.

Anders’ jaw drops, completely offended.

“Don’t look at me like that. I don’t know you.”

Meanwhile, Charlie walks in. “Bag’s on its way.”

“Outstanding.”

“Hey, Bram...” Levy says, his voice thin.

“Yeah, buddy?” I ask, hovering over him.

He looks down at himself and dry heaves. “I don’t feel so ___”

Levy’s chin hits his chest, and he begins to drift forward. Hopper and I catch him, and my hands shake as we lean him against the sofa. Anders pushes us out of the way, pressing his fingers against Levy’s neck.

“He’s got a good pulse. Can somebody get me more light?”

Nacho pulls out his phone and turns on the light, focusing it on the wound. Fuck. It looks like my brother’s been split in two.

Talking over my shoulder, I say, “Charlie, I’m sorry, man. We need to take him to a hospital.”

Anders shakes his head. “Nah. I got him, I promise. They got a big table somewhere?”

“There’s a table in the breakfast nook,” Charlie volunteers.

“Works for me.”

Nacho, still giving me a wide berth, follows Charlie into the kitchen, where they each grab an edge of the table.

“Excuse me, guys, what the fuck is going on?”

I feel like I’m going out of my mind as I watch them pull the table into the middle of the kitchen.

“You know what? Fuck this, I’m taking him myself,” I say, stomping back toward the living room.

“Bram?” Charlie’s voice is calm, but that makes it worse.

I round back on him. “*What?*”

“We’re taking care of Levy. He’ll be okay,” he says, his eyes sincere. “I promise.”

Anders comes in, carrying my brother like he’s nothing, and Hopper’s holding his silver case while the damn dog trails behind him. I curse under my breath.

“Give me those scissors,” he says as he carefully sets Levy down.

Nacho grabs the heavy shears from the knife block and puts them in his hand. Anders works quickly, zipping through the fabric, removing all of Levy’s clothes within seconds, revealing his extensive tattoo work. Anders holds out his hand, and Charlie passes a paper towel to him, which he uses to cover my brother’s personal business.

“Case?”

Hopper places it in his hand, and Anders flicks it open, revealing several syringes filled with colorful liquids.

“What the fuck is that?”

“Sedatives and heartstoppers, among other things,” he says, pulling out a syringe.

“How do you know that’s not the heartstopper?” I ask, unable to hide the edge of hysteria that’s crept into my voice. There are too many fucking people in this kitchen.

“They’re color-coded.”

I bring my hands to my head, then gesture to the gaping wound in Levy’s side. “That bullet practically split him in two. He’s bleeding out, and I’m supposed to...what? Trust you?”

Anders turns to me, his lips sucked in as though he’s trying to hold in a laugh, and it’s agitating my very soul.

“What about any of this is funny, motherfucker?”

He schools his face, trying to approximate...I dunno, professionalism?

“Bram, he’s fine. It’s a serious wound that needs to be addressed, but your brother isn’t unconscious from blood loss.”

I point to my pale, naked brother on the kitchen table as evidence of Anders’ complete break from reality.

“Seriously, are you a Fisher-Price doctor? Because you know that doesn’t count, right?”

Anders stops his prep work and turns to me as he knots his hair at the base of his neck.

I’m about to go in on Mr. Man Bun when he raises his brows at me. I stop in my tracks, caught in his crosshairs. I just saw him kill multiple men, sure, but he’s never leveled that look at me before.

I step back.

Shaking his head, Anders says, “His blood loss is minimal, I promise. Has your brother ever passed out from the sight of blood?”

“Like a paper cut? No.”

“Does he have any trauma around a large loss of blood? Say, maybe around the car accident that killed your mother and your father and gave you that scar?”

“Oh,” I say, stopped in my tracks. “Yes.”

“It’s called vasovagal syncope. Happens when something triggers a severe emotional response, and for some people, their trigger is blood,” he explains, his voice measured and absent any of the usual Anders charm.

“Oh,” I repeat dumbly.

“And you just killed two people, which is why your hands are shaking and you’re kind of being an asshole right now. Totally understandable, but not the time. I’m going to ask you to please shove that shit down and put a lock on it so I can take care of your brother. Sound good?”

Fuck, my hands really are shaking pretty badly.

Feeling like I’ve had the air punched out of me, I catch Nacho’s eye. He takes a breath, and I follow him. It doesn’t help.

Anders turns, then spins back around, holding up his finger. “Also? If he were *split in two*, you’d know because you’d be smelling his guts right now. You’d think someone who worked at a hospital would know that.”

Just as he turns around to focus on my brother, there’s a knock on the door. Charlie walks over and opens it, revealing a familiar face.

“Mama Bash?” I ask, so confused, as Hopper bounds past me to wrap her in a sweet hug.

Staring at Charlie, I gesture incredulously at the Mother of Serial Killers standing in the foyer with a black leather bag in her hands.

“It’s okay, Bram. Anja brought Anders his supplies.”

She points at my nearly naked brother. “I was told there was a medical emergency.”

Anders comes over and gives her a bloody half-hug, grabbing the bag from her. “Thanks, Mama.”

Just as the fight goes out of me, Ant bursts through the front door, yelling at Erik.

“Stop following me, you big oaf!” he yells, ineffectively shoving Erik away.

“You just killed a man, Ant. I’m not letting you out of my sight,” Erik responds, unmoved in more ways than one.

Erik looks to Charlie, who holds up a hand, patiently shaking his head.

“He deserved to die! Did you see those women? These assholes were treating them like a puppy mill, Erik!” Ant shouts, getting wound up all over again.

“I know, buddy, that’s why we do what we do. But you can’t just come in and randomly kill someone. What if he’d been an ally?” Erik asks, grabbing his shoulder.

Ant yanks away from him. “It wasn’t random, and he wasn’t an ally! He had his gun to the back of your head! Should I have let him kill you?”

Erik’s eyes go wide. “He did?”

“Yes, you fucking nopal!” Ant yells, whacking Erik’s arm. Cursing, he pulls his hand back, wincing.

“Shit, are you okay? Also...did you just call me a cactus?”

Ant turns away from him. “No, idiot! I called you a *nopal*. A bigfoot!”

Hopper snorts, and I wonder if this isn’t some elaborate stress dream.

“Well, shit, buddy.” Erik looks to Charlie, who nods. Ant really did save his life. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Guys?” I finally say, finally snapping out of the drama-induced hypnosis. “My brother is on the table with a huge gash up his side and is about to get worked on by an insane person. Can you two take all your unresolved sexual tension and *deal with it anywhere else?*”

I may have yelled that last bit.

Erik looks confused, Ant looks hurt, and Anders may have had a point about my mental state.

God, I feel ill.

Charlie puts himself between us. “Erik—take Ant to the bathroom and get him cleaned up, then take the big truck back to the ranch and sit with him until I get there.”

Looking like a couple of chastised puppies, they head off to the bathroom, and I finally remember to check on my brother, who has regained consciousness.

Blinking against the overhead light, he asks, “Why is Bram yelling?”

Knowing I’m going to have to find a way to make it up to Ant, I try to calm my voice for my brother. “I’m okay, Lev. Shit just got intense.”

“Oh, okay. Why is Mama Bash here?”

“Hi, Levy,” she says softly. “I brought Anders his medical bag. He’s trying to keep you out of the hospital.”

“Oh, that’s good. Why am I only wearing a paper towel?”

“Sorry about that, dude,” Anders says. “The location of the wound makes it hard to stitch up with clothes on. Now, aside from being naked in front of a lot of people, where’s your pain level?”

He laughs, then winces. “Uh...it’s not too bad. I mean, it hurts, but I’m not dying. Except for this table. This shit’s fucking uncomfortable.”

I go to the living room and grab a throw pillow, then push past Anders to set the pillow under Levy’s head. He tries to reach out for me, but Anders grabs his arm.

“No moving, Levy-man. It’s not too deep a wound, but let’s not make it worse, okay?”

“Okay,” Levy says, slow-blinking. “Hey, where’d that kid go...?”

“He’s losing consciousness again,” I say, panic rising in my chest.

Anders holds up a syringe and points to Levy’s rising and falling chest. “He’s fine. I made extra sure he got the right meds.”

Nacho, who’s been quiet this whole time, heads toward the back of the house. “I’ll look for the kid.”

Hopper and his dog follow. “I’ll go with you.”

“Sweet,” Anders declares. “Bram, come over here and help me wash my hands.”

I watch Nacho walk off as I turn on the hot water and grab the dish soap. I snapped at him, and he was just trying to help. I’m gonna need to make that up to him. Fuck this night.

Quickly washing my hands first, I squirt a generous amount into Anders’ waiting palms. He proceeds to do a surgery-type scrub up to his elbows, then rinses his hands under the scalding water.

When he’s finished, he turns to me with kind eyes. For the record, that’s more disturbing than his murder face.

“Everything in that bag is vacuum sealed and labeled. Grab me one of the surgical towels. It’ll be blue.”

I do as asked, opening the plastic wrapping without touching the small flat towel.

“Nice technique,” he says, pinching the towel from its packaging.

“Please don’t compliment me. Just try not to kill my brother.”

“You got it.”

Once he’s dried his hands, I help him into gloves.

Ant and Erik appear, looking like they bathed with their clothes on. Nacho comes in from the back with the kid under his arm.

“Hopper’s outside playing with the dogs. I’m taking this little one to the maternity ward. Y’all need anything?” Nacho asks, avoiding my eyes.

“A stiff drink,” I mutter before realizing who I’m talking to. “Uh...sorry, Ignacio.”

His eyes finally make their way to mine. I mouth *I’m so sorry* at him, and his warm chuckle is the small bit of magic I need in that moment.

“Don’t worry about it...*Dr. Barlowe.*”

I breathe a little easier.

Ant looks between the two of us, rolling his eyes. “Those are your sex names for each other. That’s gross.”

I raise my brow at him, and he mirrors the gesture.

Erik places his hand on Ant’s shoulder. “Hey, why don’t we get out of here and leave them to it?”

Ant looks at Erik’s hand and takes a deep, shuddering breath. “Oh—okay.”

I flick a look over to Charlie, and he’s shaking his head. This whole night has been a fucking disaster from top to bottom.

Anders, ignoring everyone, begins to examine the wound, which...okay, actually isn’t all that bad.

“Hm. He got lucky with this tiny bit of extra padding. It prevented the bullet from getting too far into the muscle. I’d’ve been dead on the spot.” He laughs, twisting his hips to show off his trim waist.

Pushing my tongue against my bottom lip, I shoot him a look that melts the smile right off his face.

“Damn. Tough room.” Moving on, he points to the bag with his elbow. “I need the curved sixteen-millimeter needle, and there are two types of thread. I’ll need both of them.”

“You thinking two layers, dissolving and non?” I ask, having spent a fair amount of time around an ER.

I'm briefly reminded of all the times I was called to help with a hysterical family member and wonder if Anders has any Valium in that bag of his. I probably could've used some a few minutes ago.

"Yeah. It's deep in a couple of spots, but not too bad."

"But he's going to be okay?"

"Absolutely."

You know what? I believe him this time.

"Don't fuck up his tattoo," I say, unable to leave well enough alone.

Anders' jaw tightens.

"Sorry," I mumble, then step back.

Anders goes to work on my brother, cleaning the wound before going in with the needle and thread. I watch, fascinated by his layers of quick, precise stitches. He's finished in no time, and the complex geometric patterns that converge on Levy's torso are perfectly aligned. I mumble another quick apology.

"No worries, man. If you think you're bad when your brother gets hurt, you've got nothing on me. I've been known to go ham on people who've hurt Odd, and if I didn't know how to fix him myself, I'd be an absolute nightmare for medical personnel."

"Thanks, Anders. Even if you're just saying that to make me feel better."

He chuckles and pats my shoulder. "We're good, dude."

We let Levy rest on the table while Charlie calls in arrangements for the women in the warehouse. It all feels very Margaret Atwood.

While we had originally planned to bring whoever we found to the convent with the other people who were caught up in this ring, the pregnancies change everything.

Three are days away from giving birth, and one lady gave birth mid-transport to this location. The last thing we want is a

repeat of that, or to chance getting busted and having them put in some holding facility, removed from their babies.

The insta-building, however unwelcoming, has the best setup until we figure out how to take care of them.

Knowing the environment is critical for the health of the mothers and the babies, I go with Nacho to talk to the mothers to find out what they need. We'll order better beds and softer bedding, along with tables and chairs and comfortable couches for a common area. I might also toss some flowering plants into the order to give the place a more welcome feel.

I return to the house where Anders and Hopper are shooting the shit while Levy is still sedated and only wearing a paper towel. After Anders assures me Levy's resting comfortably and should rouse soon, I head into the dark living room and drop onto the old, musty couch. Charlie sits down next to me, equally exhausted.

"The Wimberley crew will take care of the bodies and work with Hop to take care of the dogs. Erik says Ant passed out as soon as they got to the bunkhouse, so now he's stuck with Ant sleeping on his lap."

I chuckle. "What are the odds Ant's actually awake and just taking advantage of the opportunity to lie on Erik's lap?"

"Gotta be at least fifty-fifty," Charlie jokes back, then goes serious. "Shit. What the hell are we going to do with him? The way he kept going after that guy..."

"Normally, I would want to have him admitted for evaluation and perhaps a stay at a trusted facility. However, given what he knows and what he's been through, a standard mental healthcare facility probably isn't the right choice."

"That's what I thought you'd say."

"That said, even with the ethical complications of our living arrangement, Levy and I are probably the best qualified to work with him."

Charlie chews on a thumbnail, considering. "There is a criminal psychologist who works with Anders who might also be a good fit."

“Why doesn’t it shock me that Anders sees a criminal psychologist?”

“Because who else would have me?” he says, walking into the living room.

I groan in response, even though I appreciate him more than I did before.

He sends me finger guns. “Hedy will love working with Ant.”

“What do you know about her?”

“Pretty sure she got her doctorate from Stanford in criminal psychology. She’s legit—a criminal profiler by trade, but she wears multiple hats in our organization. She profiles our new agents and counsels anyone who needs it.”

“You need a criminal profiler to identify good candidates for your organization?”

Anders chuckles. “You know she’s the one who profiled you and Levy before Charlie let you join in on these missions, right?”

I look over at Charlie, who confirms it with a grimace.

Ah, hell.

“I think, as you have discovered for yourself, that in order for anything good to get done, you gotta be willing to get dirty.” Anders says this with a shrug, then explains, “Hedy does a great job of identifying people willing to break the law but not actual criminals, and she’s a damn fine therapist. Also, she gives *great* head.”

Aaaand now he’s laughing at his own joke. Fan-fucking-tastic.

“You slept with your therapist?” I ask, sounding supremely judgmental as Nacho walks into the living room.

Anders snorts into his fist, looking pointedly between the two of us. “That happened before she was my therapist, and... you were saying?”

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

“Fuck off,” I mutter, pulling Nacho onto my lap.

Nacho puts his hand on my throat and nips at my ear as if knowing exactly what I need to ground myself and maybe stop taking myself so seriously.

Anders disappears to check on Levy again as Justin walks in the door. Justin, who is a bit tall and gangly, focuses his luminous, worried eyes on his husband.

“You ready to go?” he asks, helping Charlie stand from the lumpy couch.

He nods slowly. “Yeah, you got the blowup mattress?”

He holds up the bag.

“You two okay to sleep with the moms?” I ask. “Should more of us stay here?”

“We’re good,” Charlie assures me, sounding exhausted.

“You know Levy and I are here to help where we can.”

“Tell you what, we’ll give him a few days to recover first.”

I snort, grateful that I can. “Good call.”

Nacho and I wave as Charlie and Justin head out the door.

“Tonight sucked,” Nacho says, touching his forehead to mine, his weight on my lap a comfort.

“Yes, it did.”

“You killed two people. Are you okay?”

“Nope, though I kinda regret losing my cool more than killing them. Does that make me a bad person?”

Nacho laughs and adjusts on top of me.

“Dr. Barlowe, you’re fucking a former patient. If anything, *that’s* what makes you a bad person. Killing a pregnancy trafficker...I think you’re in the clear.”

“It’s a little thing I like to call balance,” I say, my attempt at humor falling flat.

Nacho trails his fingertips over my worried brows. “You got a halfway decent shower back at the bunkhouse?”

“Big enough for both of us,” I answer, running my fingers through his hair.

“Just make sure not to fuck too loudly because that *will* put me in therapy for the rest of my life,” Levy cracks, gingerly making his way into the living room, flanked by Hopper and Anders.

“Should you be up and walking?” I ask, checking with Anders.

Levy nods. “It’s fine. I’m fine. I just wanna go home, crawl into my bed with one of the painkillers Anders tucked into my pocket, and sleep until the day after tomorrow.”

“Truth,” Anders says, carefully low-fiving my brother.

“By the way, Levy?” Nacho says with an evil gleam in his eye. “I couldn’t possibly think about sex tonight. I don’t know about your brother, but what I really need right now is a good cuddle.”

“Yes, Ignacio,” I say, kissing his nose, ignoring Levy’s pained groan. “I would love a cuddle.”

“Ugh, do you see this, Hop? People in love are so disgusting.”

Hop shakes his head, laughing. “Then call me disgusting because I love my husband like crazy.”

“Like crazy sounds about right,” Nacho cracks, ignoring the weight of Levy’s words.

Levy’s right, of course. I’ve absolutely fallen in love with Nacho and am a fucking helpless case at this point.

Nacho and I disentangle ourselves, getting up from the couch.

“Shit, we don’t have a ride,” Levy says, his voice heavy with painkillers.

“That’s okay,” I respond, looking outside. “We’ll take one of the trafficker’s trucks.”

“Murder, breaking and entering, and theft? Our parents would be so proud.”

I have to laugh along with him. “You know what? I think they would be.”

NACHO

It's nice waking up in Bram's arms in a room that isn't the exact size of our bed. I could get used to it.

When we got to the bunkhouse last night, Ant was still passed out on Erik's lap in the living room. Erik's large hand rested on Ant's shoulder like he was trying to protect him from the things we'd been too late to stop. He had a thousand-yard stare going that neither Bram nor I dared interrupt.

We weren't in much better shape, truth be told. Bram only made it halfway through our shower before he lost it. I held him as he sobbed, then held him some more as he tossed and turned through the night.

I saw both of his kills, and he was decisive in the moment. Ruthless. But in retrospect, it's a terrible thing to take a life. Even if he wouldn't change it.

We haven't slept much when morning light filters through the blinds. He, Charlie, and Erik have a brief conversation about what to do with Ant. They decide he needs to stay busy for the time being and ask if I'll go to work with him today.

So, despite being a big damn hero yesterday—Bram's words—I'll be spending today building fences and making sure Ant doesn't...actually, they wouldn't specifically say what they're worried he'll do.

Thankfully, he seems like himself when he busts me creeping out of Bram's room at the ass-crack of dawn in borrowed sweatpants and Bram's well-worn college T-shirt.

“Shut up.”

“Didn’t say anything,” he says, sipping his coffee.

“Yeah, well. Your eyeballs are *loud*.”

He lifts his chin at me as I make my way through the living room. “You going in to work?”

“Yeah. Something about making sure you don’t go on some mass killing spree.”

“Drama queens,” he says, rolling his eyes.

“You know, just because you’re more or less a Bash doesn’t mean you have to kill people.”

“Fuck off,” he grumps into his coffee.

“Fine. I’ll go get changed and be back in thirty.”

“Slut,” he cracks.

“You would know,” I shoot back, then grimace. “Sorry, that probably wasn’t—”

He snorts into his coffee and sends me off with a middle finger.

The day goes pretty well. I don’t fall asleep at the wheel, Ant doesn’t brutally stab anyone, and we both manage to avoid getting hate-crimed, so there’s that.

Midway through the day, we get texts from Charlie, calling us in for a meeting at the bunkhouse after work. When we arrive, Bram, Levy, and Erik are already sitting around the coffee table.

Tired and a little full of myself, I walk right up to Bram and sit on his lap. Rather than push me off and tell me to shower, which I was sure he’d do, Bram pulls me in close, nuzzling against my neck.

“I love the smell of your sweat,” he whispers. “Have I ever told you that?”

“Ugh. Gross,” Ant says, standing a little closer than either of us realized. “I’m going to sit next to Erik.”

Laughing and not at all fooled by his little maneuver, I take the empty space next to Bram and snuggle in against him.

Charlie and Justin walk in a few minutes later, grabbing additional chairs from the kitchen.

“Thanks for joining us today, especially Nacho and Ant, since you’ve already put in a full day.”

“I have a feeling regular work hours don’t apply here,” I answer, thrilled when Bram grabs my hand.

Sitting on the chair like he’s about a hundred years old, Charlie nods. “That’s probably accurate, but let’s get right into it so everyone can get on with their evenings.”

We lean in, curious about what he has to say.

“Alright, quick update on the state of things. First, the ranch has been cleaned up, all the bodies dumped, and most of the dogs are on their way to a breed-specific rescue organization. They’ll need a massive amount of retraining, but the organization feels positive it can be done. Probably not as family dogs, but many show potential for K-9 units domestically and in military operations.”

Erik smiles. “I took one to retrain for the search-and-rescue missions, and Hopper took the one following him around. He said his Great Dane, Zoe, needs a friend.”

Charlie face-palms. “*Erik*. Did you warn Liam?”

Erik laughs and holds up his phone.

Liam: *Why did my husband come home with a creepy German Shepherd?*

Erik: *You’re just lucky he didn’t show up with the whole pack.*

Charlie, clearly exhausted, snorts. “True enough. Any questions?”

We all shake our heads.

Justin is the next to speak. “Charlie has an idea about the fencing company that he brought to me and my brother, and I think it’s a good one. Regarding the trailer full of people we helped, a number of them qualify for a trafficking visa, and

they'll need employment. Of those, a few showed interest in the fencing, but they'll need to be trained."

Turning to Ant and me, Justin continues, "In order to say yes, I need to make sure you two are comfortable with handling most of that since it will need to be done in Spanish. We'll adjust your salaries accordingly."

Ant and I look at each other and shrug.

"Sure," I say, answering for the two of us. "Just checking...you're not using them for cheap labor, are you?"

To his credit, Justin doesn't look offended.

"They'll be on the same pay grade as everyone else."

Charlie grabs his hand. "My hubby is too pure to do anything unethical."

I chuckle to myself, and Ant makes a disgusted sound at the back of his throat while sticking out his tongue.

"Guys," he moans, bored already. "Can we not talk about how *in love* y'all are? Like, focus please."

Charlie smiles warmly, but there's hesitation there. "Of course. But then that does bring us to you."

Ant shifts uncomfortably.

"What about me?" he asks as though he thinks we wouldn't be discussing his whole sneaking-into-the-mission-and-stabbing-a-guy-in-the-face-until-he-didn't-have-a-face *thing*.

I'd given him a few opportunities to talk about it while we were working, but he was having none of it. He can slip that maneuver past me, but he won't be so lucky with the rest of them.

"You followed us to the property even though we made it clear you were not to be a part of the mission," Charlie says, his voice even and kind. "You endangered the entire team."

Ant throws his hands up. "I saved Erik's life."

“I hear you. But we can’t operate if we can’t trust you to follow the mission parameters. That’s job one. Anybody on a team who’ll go off like that isn’t someone the rest of us can depend on. If you wanted to show us you’re ready for this, you did the exact opposite.”

Scrunching his nose, Ant responds, “Well, I guess I’m just not on your team then, am I?”

“If you’re not on our team, you’re a liability. And I do want you on the team, Ant. In some capacity. Eventually. But until you go to therapy...” Charlie opens his hands, silently asking Ant to see reason.

Eh. I think he’s going to be disappointed.

“I don’t feel bad about killing him, Charlie.” Ant crosses his arms over his chest and lets out a huff. “He was going to kill Erik.”

It’s our turn to shift uncomfortably. He’s not wrong.

Bram holds up his finger. “Can I say something about that?”

Charlie gestures for him to take the floor.

“Ant, I killed two people last night, and I didn’t sleep a wink. When I found out we have access to an excellent therapist, I called her this morning, and I’ll be getting on calls with her once a week for at least the next month. I think it’s a mistake to assume that lack of guilt equals zero trauma.”

“Oh my God-d-d-d,” he exaggerates, rolling his eyes. “So dramatic with the *trauma*. Believe me, I know trauma, and that wasn’t it. I feel fine. Y’all can’t force me to do something I don’t want to do.”

“I hear you, Ant. Really, I do,” Bram says, readying himself for the larger point. “But while you feel fine with what happened, none of the rest of us do.”

Ant’s disbelief is like its own presence in the room. “Not even the fact that I saved Erik’s life?”

“Of course we’re grateful for that, but that’s not what I’m talking about. Once it was clear the man was dead, you

continued to mutilate him. While we would never force you to do anything, we have decided as a group that you cannot join us on any missions, even search-and-rescue missions, until you see a therapist.”

“Do you think I’m crazy?”

Everyone else shakes their heads, but they’re lying, and he knows it. They’re scared of him and for him, and having worked closely with him these last several months, I don’t think that’s the way to approach this.

Instead of going along with everyone else, I nod in response to his question, cracking a smile. “Dude didn’t have a face after you were done with him. That’s, like, the *opposite* of sane.”

He sticks his tongue out at me, amusement returning to his eyes. He knows I have his back, even when that means telling him the truth he doesn’t want to hear.

Dropping his eyes to his hands in his lap, he squares his jaw.

“I know I went a little overboard. But you can’t keep me from helping. You don’t know what those people did to me. The sex was the least awful part of that life. I was made to feel so worthless all the time. Mine wasn’t some extreme, horrible, rare case. There are thousands, millions, of people, mostly kids, being forced into the worst-case scenarios possible, again and again. If you...”

We’re all frozen, quiet as he clenches his fists, finding the rest of his words.

Finally, shaking his head and pulling his shoulders up around his ears, he spits out, “*I can’t stand the thought of them getting away with it.* I have to do *something*. If you don’t let me do something with you, I *will* do something on my own.” Pinning a look on Charlie and Erik, he continues, “And you won’t be able to stop me.”

A chilled quiet follows his declaration. I don’t think a single one of us doubts his intentions.

Charlie, in his gentle, calm way, is the first to break the silence.

“Ant, your history makes you both the best and worst candidate for the things we want to do. You understand the victims—the survivors—in a way that none of us ever can. But you lack the objectivity and good decision-making skills required in these ops. You have not shown even the slightest bit of remorse for taking a life. Even when it’s necessary, most people feel remorse about that sort of thing.”

“Well, maybe remorse is one of those things that got beat out of me.”

Another uncomfortable silence.

Erik leans forward, supporting his forearms on his knees. “My cousins, Anders and Odd, don’t have your background, but they don’t feel remorse when they kill someone either. Hell, if it’s someone particularly bad, Anders enjoys it.”

“See? Y’all work with him all the time.”

“But he was raised in a healthy, loving home. Anja and Georg always knew exactly who he and Odd were, and they didn’t want them institutionalized, so they trained them and set strong boundaries with them. You have had none of those things.”

“That’s not my fault!” Ant says, getting more upset.

Erik is careful with his next words. “We know, Ant. We’re not blaming you. You can’t know what you don’t know. It’s just...you scare the hell out of us.”

“Why are you picking on me? Is it because I look so young?”

“No,” we all say, though Erik is slower to join in.

“Whatever,” Ant says, getting up and stomping to the kitchen. “Everyone here has killed someone.”

I raise my hand. “I’ve killed two men in self-defense, and I haven’t ever recovered from that, and I doubt I ever will.”

“Well, I guess that makes you better than me,” he says, yanking on the junk drawer.

I let out a frustrated breath and join him in the kitchen. “No. It means they’re never going to make me the pointy end of the stick. But whoever is at that pointy end? They need to have their head on straight, at least enough to work with the team. Anders, whatever else he is, works with the team.”

Ignoring me, he finally wrangles open the drawer and grabs a pair of scissors. I hold up my hands and step back. Erik jumps up, and Ant points the scissors at him. “Stay back.”

“Dude, what are you doing?” I ask in Spanish, wondering if he’s actually going to get violent.

He grabs his ponytail and starts violently hacking at it right above the elastic. His hair is thick, so if he thought he could do it in one dramatic snip, that’s not happening. Still, we’re frozen all over again as he chops through the hair.

“*Ya,*” he barks, eyeing Erik as he holds up the decapitated ponytail. *It’s done.*

I don’t know what, exactly, is done, but I’ve always suspected he’s kept the long hair for a reason. Whatever that reason is, he’s over it. Walking to the garbage can, he stomps on the pedal, dropping the thick hank of hair into the bag.

Catching our concerned looks, he asks, “Why are you looking at me like this? All of you have been acting like I am this little broken boy since you brought me here. So I’m cutting off the last part of that life. That’s not me anymore.”

None of the professionals have any words, so I go in again in Spanish, speaking low and fast. “You dramatic asshole. It’s official. You look like a crazy person now.”

“I’m. Not. Crazy.” His eyes blaze as he defiantly pushes the choppy strands behind his ears. “*So stop calling me that.*”

I hold up my hands. “You’re right. But we’re not lying when we say you’re worrying the hell out of us. Seriously. The hair is nothing. *You snuck onto a mission.* We were in the middle of everything fucking going wrong, and there you were. What if that guy had gotten the drop on you? He was

easily twice your size. What if he'd fallen on you when you took out his Achilles? What if you hadn't been able to take his gun? You got so lucky, and you don't seem to understand how bad that is."

"Why is it bad that I got lucky?"

"Because if you can get lucky, you can get *unlucky*. Even as crazy as he is, Anders is focused. When he's in the middle of an op, he is working for the good of everyone. You were completely on your own, and you do not realize how dangerous that made the situation for everyone else."

"Again, I saved Erik's life. How did I make it worse?"

"Because the people here love you, and if anything had gone wrong with that, they would have sacrificed themselves to save you."

Looking over at Erik, he snarls again. "Yeah, they love me. Like a brother, remember?"

"Some people don't even get that in a lifetime. Fuck, I know this thing with Erik is hard for you..."

"Don't fucking say it. I don't want to hear it."

"Okay, but you can break your own heart and keep making shitty decisions based on all the shit you survived, or you can face your past and make something amazing of your future. I know which one I'm rooting for."

His eyes finally meet mine, and...shit. His feisty attitude does a damn good job of covering up the reality of how much pain he's been in this whole time. But now it's sitting there right behind his eyes.

"You say that, Nacho, but you don't have any idea of the things I have to face. You want me to talk to a therapist to dredge up all this bullshit. Brother, I can't," he says, grabbing my wrist, his voice cracking. "It's too much."

I pull him into a hug, whispering in his hair, "The therapist isn't gonna make you talk about anything you don't want to. Everything they've said sounds like she knows how to help."

Just tell her what you told me. Hell, she's Anders' therapist—she's probably heard way worse.”

He buries his face in my chest, laughing and crying as he shakes his head, hugging me back. I shed a few tears for my friend, but if there's anything this life has taught me, it's that people are pretty fucking resilient.

I choose to believe that about Ant. Hell, I choose to believe it about myself too.

“So, uh, did y'all finish making plans for world domination?” Charlie asks, joining us in the kitchen.

“Not before he's at least had a chat with Hedy,” I answer, squeezing him close.

Ant pushes away from me, but he does it affectionately. “Ugh. Fine. I'll see her, but that doesn't mean I'm going to cooperate.”

“Don't worry, Ant,” Bram says with a smirk. “Us therapists have a way of getting our patients to cooperate.”

I turn to him, open-mouthed. “Did you really just go there?”

“I'm the guy fucking his patient. What makes you think I wouldn't go there?”

His joke, so completely inappropriate, puts a huge crack in the tension in the room, and the air fills with groans and laughter.

“Now, if you all don't mind, I'm going to fix this hair,” Ant says, turning toward the hallway.

“But you're not gonna hurt yourself, are you?” Erik asks, worry lines creasing his forehead.

With a deep, put-upon sigh, Ant shakes his head. “I want *bad* people to die. Not myself. I've survived too much to give up now.”

Hesitating, Erik walks up to Ant and yanks him into a rough hug, kissing the top of his head. I feel terrible for my friend, knowing that this kind of affection is the worst.

Ant pats Erik's chest, stepping away from him. Sending us a small wave, he heads down the hall, disappearing into the bathroom.

Charlie shakes his head. "I don't know what you said to get him to cooperate, Nacho, but thank you. He worries the hell out of me."

Justin and Charlie share a look. Both of them made attempts on their life, so the fear is reasonable.

"He worries me too, but...I believe him when he says he's not gonna hurt himself. I think living is a form of revenge for him."

Charlie shrugs. "After I survived my attempt, I definitely had a *living well is the best revenge* attitude. I'll take it."

Justin grins, wrapping himself around his husband. "Ah, see. That's where you failed. You fell in love with me anyway."

Charlie kisses him with a smile. "That's completely the fault of your *I'll follow him out to the parking lot and get him to fuck me against his truck* attitude."

Holding up his hands in a mockery of innocence, Justin fires back, "It worked, didn't it?"

Charlie kisses him again, this time lingering.

Levy clears his throat. "Don't know if y'all remember, but I was shot in the abdomen yesterday, so if we could move this meeting along, I'd appreciate it."

It's Bram's turn to roll his eyes. "You were barely grazed. Don't be dramatic."

"Dramatic?" Levy laughs, then winces as he holds his side. "Says the guy who lost his shit at the doctor trying to put me together."

"The *doctor*? Do you mean *Anders*? I was looking out for your well-being. *You're welcome*."

They go back and forth for a few more minutes until Levy reaches out and grabs his brother's hand. "Thank you. Really. I

know I scared the shit out of you.”

“Only because you fainted at the sight of a little blood,” Bram fires back, then looks instantly regretful.

Shaking his head, Levy kisses Bram’s temple. “It’s okay. We can make jokes about the fact I saw our parents die.”

“Fuck you,” Bram grumps, patting Levy’s cheek.

“Ant was right,” I say, gesturing to the lot of them. “Y’all are dramatic as fuck.”

Charlie waves his hands, trying to get us back on track. “Okay, Nacho, point taken. I do want to get this last part out of the way while Ant is out of the room and my husband still feels super loving toward me.”

Justin narrows his eyes as Charlie faces me.

“Nacho, you’ve been clutch in these last two ops. You’ve shown quick thinking and leadership, and you’re exactly the kind of guy we would like to bring on.”

“Wait,” Justin protests. “You can’t take him from the fencing company!”

“I’m not trying to do that. But if we have a rescue where he’d be valuable, I’m going to pull the husband card. That is if Nacho agrees to help.”

Justin thins his lips, even as his eyes sparkle with mischief. “When do you *not* pull the husband card?”

“You like it when I pull the husband card.”

“Guys,” Levy says, comically gripping his side.

“Excuse me. You will *not* be putting Ignacio in danger like you did last night,” Bram says, his voice meant to broach no argument.

That sets off another round of bickering, this time between Justin, Bram, and Charlie.

Having not been asked my opinion, I finally lean in close to Bram’s ear and whisper, “You do know the bossy thing only

works when we're playing, right? That doesn't actually work out here in the real world."

His jaw drops as I kiss his cheek.

"No, Nacho. Absolutely not," he says, even though he has to know he's already lost the fight.

"Won't you be going on some of these operations?" I ask, thinking I've made a very solid point.

"Sure. But...I have multiple black belts. I can handle myself."

"Yeah, well, I'm a black belt in keeping my brown ass out of trouble. Also, you can't tell me what to do."

Everyone else is looking back and forth between us, like it's a verbal tennis match, waiting to see what the other has to say. Bram, noticing the attention, takes a deep breath. "We will discuss this later."

"Can we be naked when we do?"

Something about that must tickle Erik because he begins to laugh. Hard. In fact, he's laughing so hard that when his laugh cuts off abruptly, we all follow his line of sight.

"Ant, holy shit, dude," I say. "You just did that in the bathroom? Right now?"

"Yeah," he says self-consciously, running his fingers through his hair. "I'd already watched a bunch of TikToks on how to do it, and I was mad, so...yeah."

"Dude. Maybe you should be a hairstylist."

"Shut the fuck up," he says, shooting me the double bird. Shaking out his hair, he raises his chin at me. "You really like it?"

"You look amazing," I say, hopping off Bram's lap to get a closer look.

It's on the longer side of a shorter haircut—like a modern shag that could probably use a bit of a cleanup—but it's perfect for him. Better yet, he actually looks closer to his age now.

He shrugs. “It didn’t take long.”

I give him a double thumbs-up. “I approve. Hedy will love it.”

He grumbles under his breath, saying, “I already promised I would go.”

Grinning broadly, I fire back, “I know. I’m just making sure you follow through on your promise.”

He scrunches his nose. “I hate you.”

I drag him into a hug. “I love you too, bro.”

Just as I’m declaring my eternal affection for Ant, I catch Bram’s eyes. They flick away briefly, then come back to mine with all the weight of a sledgehammer.

Oh fuck. I felt that in my chest. We’ll definitely be talking about my role at Wild Heart later tonight.

Ant looks between the two of us and shakes his head. “Ah shit. It’s on now.”

Ignoring Ant’s commentary, Bram gets up and prowls toward me. “Levy, I assume you’re okay for the evening?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Excellent.” Pausing to possessively wrap his arm around my waist, Bram sends everyone a quick salute. “Then goodnight, y’all. I’m taking Nacho home now.”

Jeers and whistles spin up, and I laugh, pulling him in for a kiss. Grabbing my hand, he marches me out of the house with a proud smile.

BRAM

Despite our dramatic exit, Nacho and I approach the truck quietly. We get in, and I turn on the engine, then reach over to turn off the music, driving in silence to the tiny mobile home park. I have loftier goals in store for him, but I've come to appreciate this place that gave him a home and a space to rebuild.

After parking, I quickly make my way around the front end, opening the passenger door for him. He seems surprised by the gesture but goes along with it, grabbing my hand as he exits the truck. Walking up the steps, he opens the door and lets me into his cozy living space. Locking the door behind us, I pull him into a deep, searching kiss.

It's not as though I've done anything to hide my feelings, but the way he returns the kiss, the way his body melts into mine, I know I'm not alone. We part, and I drift my lips across the tip of his nose, then run my cheek against his.

"I love you, Nacho," I whisper into his ear.

He inhales sharply and I lose myself in the rise and fall of his chest.

Looking up at me with a tear streaking down his cheek, he replies, "I love you too, Bram."

We fall into the kind of endless kiss that feels like a promise for the future. When we pull apart, it's only enough to search each other's eyes for the truths they hold. More tears adorn our faces, which leads to a shared self-conscious chuckling as we wipe each other's cheeks.

“I’m so fucking proud of you,” I say, my throat contracting around the words. “You are brilliant and brave and earnest. The way you let me see even the softest parts of you...”

My words drift off in wonderment as I touch the painted teardrop on his cheek.

“You risked your entire career for me,” Nacho responds, carefully tracing my lower lip with his thumb. “Even after our time together. I mean, Charlie’s a chill guy, but I doubt you knew he’d be *that* chill.”

“As it happens, the fact that I play fast and dirty with some of the rules is a plus in his eyes.”

“Who would’ve guessed that you were the bad boy and I was the one let out for good behavior?”

“You’re gonna use that against me forever, aren’t you?”

“Eh. Just to tease you. You’re exactly the kind of guy Charlie needs.” He pauses, pinching his lower lip with his artful fingers. “Exactly the kind of guy I need too.”

Responding in the only way I can, I undo his work shirt and flip open his belt. Nacho reaches down to untie his boots, pulling them off as I remove his shirt, inhaling deeply at his chest and armpits.

“I love the smell of your sweat,” I say, my voice gravelly with need.

Nacho’s sweat smells vital, somehow, and it makes me think of all the ways he is brave and hardworking and strong.

“That’s nice,” he says, popping his brows, “but we’re not fucking on my expensive sheets like this.”

I respect his love of cleanliness and nice things, but one of these days, I’m going to take him filthy and unprepared, fuck the expensive sheets. Pulling him in for another kiss, I nose his armpit before running my tongue up his sweaty neck.

“It’s a good thing I also like how you smell freshly showered.”

He shoves off the rest of his clothes as I remove mine and follow him to the tiny shower closet. His eyes never leave me, even as he turns on the water. Taking in his perfect body, loving his attention, I stroke my cock. Grinning, he steps into the hallway to plant a kiss on my mouth while knocking away my hand.

Testing the water with one hand, he strokes me with the other, taking me apart in more ways than one. When his wet fingers land on my nipple, delicately teasing and pulling, I declare my love again.

I whimper as he ends the kiss to step into the steaming shower.

“This won’t take long, Dr. Barlowe.”

“Bram,” I say, reaching in to steal his washcloth, anxious to be the one to clean him, serve him. “It’s just Bram tonight.”

He silently acknowledges me, allowing me to wash him, one foot in the shower, one foot in the hall. I’m thorough, especially with his pits and groin, loving the smell of his sweat and soap infusing the steam wafting into the tiny hallway. My eyes never leave his as my cock bobs and drips.

“Turn,” I demand, my voice wavering as he presents his back and ass.

Covering every inch of skin in bubbles, I pull aside one cheek, cleaning him until he moans, pushing back as my fingers find his hole.

I edge him, stroking his soaped-up cock while stretching him with one, then two fingers.

His breathy “*Close,*” is everything.

I pull away to curses, then make sure he utters it two more times before I’m done edging him. The aggravation and passion in his eyes make me hate this fucking shower closet. One of these days, we’ll have an enormous shower of our own, and I will have him in every way possible.

Satisfied that I’ve cleaned him good and proper, I pull down the sprayer, rinsing him thoroughly, front and back,

spending a little extra time on his hole and foreskin, grinning as he desperately tries to hump the water itself.

Dragging him into the hallway, I switch places with him as I push a clean towel against his chest. I'm quick about soaping up, but meticulous. He's quick to aid me in washing my cock and balls, a delicious payback for edging him so mercilessly.

It's a good thing I'm not Dr. Barlowe tonight, or he'd pay for that.

Taking a second to clean up the water in the hallway, we toss the wet towels in the shower and then race to the bedroom. Nacho jumps onto the bed just ahead of me, landing on his side, his cock flopping about as his tattooed body stands out against the pristine white sheets.

I use the steps and crawl over his body to get to his lips, which I take as mine. Suspending my body over his, I deepen the kiss as I sway my hips, letting my cock glance against his.

I hope Nacho's little gasps against my lips always make my heart race as they do tonight. Drawing back, I need to see his face, his body underneath mine.

"I love you," he whispers, looking like a dream and a nightmare wrapped in a perfect package, ready and willing to challenge me. Forever, I hope.

"Even if I'm bossy?" I ask, needing reassurance.

"Especially when you're bossy."

"Then grab the lube and dock me," I beg him, breathless.

Licking his lips, he's lewd in the way he ogles my cock, planning, enjoying my desperation. He reaches beneath his pillow and pulls out a bottle, wiggling it at me before pouring the slick liquid into his palm. Rubbing it onto both hands, he strokes us, one cock per hand, before touching the tips together.

I lift my hips for a better angle, and he is mercifully quick about slipping his foreskin over my leaking cockhead, pushing our slits together as his silken skin glides against mine in an iron grip.

Slick and tight, I nearly falter in my hold as he strokes his skin back and forth. Even as my arms ache from holding myself up, I grit my teeth and endure it, needing this intimacy more than comfort.

I let him go on for a while, like a game to see which of us has the harder time holding back. When I refocus on his face, it's his grin that catches my eye, like he knows what I'm doing and is determined to win.

Something about this moment, with my arms starting to shake and his eyes rolling back in his head...I don't just love Nacho. I adore and worship him. I need him more than my next breath.

"Close," I say, admitting both defeat and victory.

"Good boy," Nacho purrs with a wink, slowing down the strokes, nearly tipping me over before stopping, entirely too pleased with himself.

I release my arms, sinking onto him, whispering feverishly in his ear, "You are mine, you are mine, you are mine. I love you with every cell in my body. I love you."

His arms surround me in a fierce hug, pulling me even tighter against his body. Our words only say so much, so we hold this position for several deep breaths, letting our bodies tell each other the rest of the story.

Kissing his forehead, I grab the lube, stroking myself as he widens his legs, scooping his hips. With the flats of my fingertips I push between his cheeks, smoothing the lube across his sensitive skin.

I enter him with two fingers, pleased he's still slightly stretched from the shower. Notching my cock against him, I slip forward, drinking in his moans, turned on by the tattoos following the curve of his arched neck.

Fully seated, I watch and wait, loving how his body relaxes everywhere for me. Knowing we're not in any hurry, I take him slow and steady.

"Nacho, look at me," I ask, wanting—craving—to know I'm as much his as he is mine.

His eyelids flutter, then open to my future. That's what I see deep in his chocolate eyes. Us, together.

"Always," he says, his confidence and boldness a reassurance I never knew I always needed.

He wraps his legs around my waist, locking me deep inside his tight heat as he undulates his hips, up and down, side to side, dancing with me, making love back to me. Not just receiving but *giving*.

Entranced, I begin to move with him, matching the rise and fall and sway of his hips, our eyes fixed on only each other. I see the moment the slow swell of need crests, his pupils expanding in a pool of cinnamon and umber as light from the fading day stripes across his face.

Panting, I thrust harder, faster, as he tightens his legs around me. My orgasm hits as he pulses on my cock, finally breaking eye contact when he throws his head back in rapture. I thrust through the peak, giving him all my power, everything in me as I empty into his body.

Shivering from coming so hard, I fall slack against him, crushing him into the bed below us. He breathes in as I breathe out, both of us needing the length of a song to recover. Amused by the thought, several songs flit through my brain until I land on the one that feels like this.

"Something just made you smile," he says, groaning as I slip out of him.

I widen his legs, needing to see my cum seep from his body.

Ah. There. Clinging to his stretched-out rim before dribbling over. Reaching into one of the built-in drawers, I pull out one of his work bandannas, old and soft from multiple washings, catching the spill just before it hits the bed.

He nudges me with his thighs. "What made you smile like that?"

My smile broadens, heat touching my cheeks. I thumb his hole, pushing inside him as I stretch for a kiss.

“Thinking of a song,” I mumble.

“Mm? What song?”

I hum a few bars, absentmindedly stroking in and out of him with my thumb.

“That’s k.d. lang,” he says, inhaling sharply when I glance a sensitive area.

I nod, humming as I kiss him.

“Doesn’t she say something about being a *Daddy* in that song?”

“Not this again,” I groan, entirely faking my displeasure.

“I’m just saying, the lyric is right there.”

“Yes, but there are other lyrics besides that one. Deeper, more meaningful lyrics I now feel stupid about because you’re teasing me.”

He laughs, tightening around my thumb with a sigh. “It’s a good song. Makes me wonder if you’re secretly a massive romantic.”

“Literally no one has called me a romantic before.”

“Have you ever hummed ‘I Confess’ to anyone before? Or is that your move?”

I press farther inside him, getting him to arch off the bed. “Ahhh, fuck you,” he says, his cock reviving.

I lean in, sucking him into my mouth. I go after the trapped bit of brine in his foreskin with my tongue, attacking his slit, the nervy bit of frenulum, sucking on the loose skin until his cock swells, exposing his glans to the rough and smooth sides of my tongue.

More of my cum works past my thumb, dripping down my palm. When he’s fully hard, I pull my mouth away to the musical sound of him cursing in Spanish.

“No,” I say, finally answering him, still slow-fucking him with my thumb. “That is not my move, nor have I ever hummed a romantic song to a lover before.”

“But you have edged people to the point of insanity, right?” he asks, grabbing for his cock before I slap his hand away.

“Of course. But only because it heightened my pleasure. When I edge you, I do it because it heightens your pleasure.”

“Bastard,” he whispers.

“Partner,” I correct.

His eyes fly open. “So...we’re already past boyfriends then?”

“I said I love you, and now I’ve *hummed* to you in bed. You’re mine. Madly, completely mine. Boyfriend just doesn’t cut it.”

He pants, twisting his hips, trying to get more out of my thumb.

I start to pull away. “Unless you don’t feel the same...”

His glare says it all, but my heart rate speeds up when he uses his words.

“You know I feel the same, *pendejo*. Now stop teasing me and put me out of my misery.”

A large pearl of precum slips from his slit, dripping down the length of him as his cock bobs. God, I love it when he gets needy for me.

“Please, Dr. Barlowe,” he begs. “Please.”

“Fine, Ignacio. But only because you were such a good boy yesterday.”

“Ah fuck,” he says, his eyes rolling back before I even touch him.

This time, I do not tease as I feed his length into my mouth. I take him to the hilt, swallowing around him before pulling back to suck his swollen head. Switching from my thumb to my two middle fingers, already glazed in my cum, I press inside, crooking them at the height of suction, reveling in his strangled cries.

He pulses strongly against my palm, spilling the very last of his seed on my tongue.

“Fuck, Bram. I love you so much,” he says on a whimper. “I could love you forever.”

“Me too, baby. Me too,” I whisper back. A promise. A vow.

I keep my fingers inside him until his muscles remember how to move. After wiping him down, we again take turns in the ridiculously tiny shower, then fall back into bed, clinging to one another.

Even though the days ahead of us are more dangerous than the ones behind us, sleep comes quickly because we belong to one another.

EPILOGUE

“**W**hat’s she doing here?” Ant asks, glaring at the photographer for the local free paper.

Glaring is something he’s been doing a lot lately. Not to mention staying out late and coming in early the morning after. After what, I don’t want to know. Still, he’s just started talking to me again after finding out that Erik has a roster of fuck buddies and that I used to be on it, so I go easy on him.

“Ant, the Community Cleanup is a big deal.”

“It’s the same thing as the Christmas Cleanup, only hotter,” he grumps. “The high is ninety-seven degrees today.”

“I know.” I pinch the bridge of my nose and take a deep breath. He’s been testing my patience lately, which Hedy says is to be expected. “We’re doing a good thing. You know that, right?”

“But does there need to be a goddamn social media post or whatever every time somebody picks up a shovel to help someone else out?”

“Fair point. But this isn’t going up on her Instagram.”

Ant nails me with a *look*.

“Fine. It’s not *just* going up on her Instagram. It’s going in the paper. It’s going on their website. It’s a way to show the people in our community how they can help. It’s about generating publicity for something that isn’t a mass shooting or a roadside bomb. Forgive us for trying to be a little bit positive out here.”

“I know, I know,” Ant grumps, tying up an overfull trash bag like it insulted him.

He tosses it into the back of the truck, on top of the growing pile of trash bags of junk we’ve taken out of Mr. Sinclair’s house. He was practically a shut-in for a very long time. Bram suspects undiagnosed depression and has gotten him to agree to come by the therapy center.

Today’s actually pretty fucking monumental because it’s the first time he’s let anyone in his house since his wife died. I turn to tell Ant this very thing, but he’s yawning and rubbing the side of his head.

“Maybe you would be in a better mood if you’d gotten more than three hours of sleep last night. Seriously—where did you go?”

Wow. I am bad about letting things go.

“You don’t need to know anything about that,” he says, sending me a leer. “And I’m fine now. Just a little tired.”

I take a deep breath. “Fine. Please just...be careful.”

“Yes, *Dad*.”

He rolls his eyes but rests his head against my shoulder, and I’m so relieved by the show of affection that I leave the subject. For now.

I follow him back into the house, and we spend the rest of the morning sweeping, mopping, and vacuuming. Ant finds a couple of spots in Mr. Sinclair’s fence that could use a little help, so we grab our tools and fix that as well.

When we break for lunch, he and I get into the truck, and I make the mistake of asking him how therapy is going.

“It’s exactly as awful as I said it would be.”

“I’m sorry, Ant. I’m sorry I didn’t take you seriously when you said this would be hard.”

Peeling back the top part of the foil wrapped around his burrito, Ant shakes his head, biting the inside of his lip. That’s

his tell that he's going to start talking, so I stay quiet and let him work through his thoughts as he takes his first few bites.

Like Bram, he often begins like we're already in the middle of a conversation.

“Hedy says I'm going through the defiant stage I never had a chance to experience when I was a teenager. She calls it delayed adolescence. Though...I'm pretty sure that's just another way for someone to say I'm too childlike or... whatever.”

He peels away another bit of foil, focusing on the food while avoiding my eyes. There's defeat in his rounded posture, another tell that he's been confronting heavy issues. Soon enough, he'll be back to himself, only put together a little stronger, another layer reclaimed.

But damn, it's one hell of a recovery cycle. Even as he gets better, I feel bad for having pushed so hard.

“Anyway,” he continues. “Hedy knows what I get up to. She and I have discussed how to make that as safe as possible. I know what it looks like, but I am being safe. Text check-ins, condoms, nerds over dude-bros.”

“You text her when you're hooking up?”

He shrugs, then looks over as if he's worried about my opinion. “Is that weird?”

“You text your therapist when you're going to hook up with someone? Yeah, that's weird.”

He looks out the window right as Bram and Erik approach, and a grin threatens the corner of his mouth. He turns back to me, nailing me with an arched eyebrow.

“You were saying? I'm not the only one with weird shit going on with my therapist.”

“Jackass,” I say, laughing as I pull a bit of wilted lettuce from my burrito and toss it at him.

He tosses it back at me. “Whatever. You love me.”

I go serious for a moment so he can see I mean it. “Yeah, Ant. I do. I’m glad you’re being safe. Even if it is a little weird.”

“What’s weird?” Bram asks, getting in behind me while Erik gets in behind Ant.

Silently he gestures for the water bottle, and I hold it up. He mouths *good boy* at me in the mirror. Ant holds out his palm to me, then turns around to face Bram.

“Your *boy* doesn’t approve of my slutty ways. I was explaining to him that I’m a safe slut and reminding him I do know how to take care of myself.” Turning to me, he grins. “But I’ll text you too if that would make you feel better.”

“It would. Thank you.”

Erik snorts, and I swear I wanna bean his head. Ant, frustrated, his jaw bunched up tight, drops back into his seat with a huff. Thinking better of it, he gets back on his knees and turns around so he can look right at Erik.

“Did you ever go back over the video from that night?” he asks, not needing to clarify which night he’s talking about. “Did you ever see the guy I killed? I know I got a little stab-happy for your delicate sensitivities, but as you like to point out, he was twice my size, and I brought him down. I promise the DND nerd I’m meeting up with tonight has nothing on me.”

It’s Erik’s turn to look disgruntled. “What is it with these hookups? I’ve tried to convince Charlie you need a fucking curfew, and he won’t hear it. This is insanity.”

Ant slides a look my way, and...yeah, I know.

Thankfully, Bram takes over.

“Erik, he’s twenty years old. He’ll be twenty-one soon enough. He’s under the care of a highly qualified therapist, and he is in the middle of reintegrating into ‘normal’ life after living a nightmare for years. You and I don’t get to say how he does that. That is between him and his therapist.”

“I can worry about the little dude, can’t I?” Erik asks, disgruntled.

I go to say something, knowing Ant doesn’t like to be treated like a *little dude*, but Bram’s got it covered.

“The problem here is that you keep seeing him as he was the night you rescued him, and that’s not fair. He wasn’t even himself that night. He was an avatar for a young, underage prostitute. So, as a mental health professional, I’m telling you that you need to respect the very brave, very headstrong man he is.”

Ant looks shocked by Bram’s words, but I’m not. I’ve been going to him more and more to make sure I’m doing and saying the right things with Ant. He’s the one who pointed out his recovery patterns.

“Thank you, Bram,” he says quietly.

“You’re welcome, Ant. But maybe have a little respect for the people who love you and worry about you, okay? Nobody’s trying to hold you back, at least not purposefully.”

Ant makes a disgruntled sound at the back of his throat and tosses his thumb back at Erik. “He is.”

“You’ve got me there, but we’re working on him too.”

Now it’s Erik’s turn to make a disgruntled sound. Bram and I exchange a quick smile in the rearview mirror. *These guys*.

Bram and I drop off Erik and Ant at the bunkhouse, then head next door. We discovered that one of the ways Charlie and Erik make money is that Wimberley takes over the holdings of whoever they take down. It’s a neat trick, and when they sell off those holdings, whoever was on that op gets a cut.

In this case, Charlie, Erik, and Anders refused their cuts, instead having Wimberley split the large property three ways between me, Bram, and Levy.

Bram and I got the front half with the trafficker’s house, and Levy got the back half with the wooded area and creek

access. He's staying in the bunkhouse for now, but we recently moved my Airstream onto his part of the property. As soon as he figures out the utilities, he'll move in.

Sorting out the issues with the newly postpartum and pregnant survivors was difficult and emotional but ultimately very satisfying. All the babies were placed in the situation best for them, the person who carried them, and the potential adoptive couples, who were devastated to find out they'd been working with a surrogacy front and not a legitimate business.

We've since taken down the security fence and the insta-building, donating them to two local businesses.

"Home sweet home," Bram says as I pull into the driveway.

He and I have spent the better part of the last two months renovating the house together before moving in last week. You learn a lot when you work on a big project with someone, and it turns out Bram has a bit of a competency kink. He fucked me against the reupholstered chair in my living room when he found out I'd done it myself, and since then, I've enjoyed showing off everything I learned in prison.

What can I say? He's really good at showing appreciation for a job well done.

Now that the house is mostly done, we've started going to used furniture shops. We find a good piece with great bones, make it ours, then christen it however Dr. Barlowe sees fit.

Which reminds me...

"Oh, Dr. Barlowe. I forgot to tell you," I say, getting down from the truck. "I finished that settee last night."

"Did you now?" he asks, coming around the truck to put his hand on my waist. I automatically straighten my posture.

"Good boy," he whispers, nuzzling into my neck.

"Yes," I choke out as he pulls me into the house. "I used that green velvet upholstery fabric we picked out."

He takes me by the hand, leading me to the piece in question. Palming his growing cock, he lets out an uneven

breath.

“This is exquisite, Ignacio.”

“Thank you, Dr. Barlowe.”

Thumbing his belt open, he orders, “Kneel in front of it, please.”

“Yes, Dr. Barlowe.”



BRAM

One of the first things we updated in this house was the bathroom. We ripped out the nasty tub-shower combo and installed a spa shower. Anders mentioned that a couple of his friends use a fancy set of showerheads, but we kept it simple with a large, powerful rainfall showerhead installed in the ceiling and a handheld sprayer on the wall.

It comes in handy because cleaning up Nacho after defiling him on the beautiful pieces of furniture he upgrades is one of my favorite things. Watching the water trail down his wet, tattooed skin is a religious experience, and I worship frequently.

Right now, he’s leaning on his forearms against the wall, patiently letting me wash his body.

One of my favorite small upgrades is a push-button shower dispenser for shampoo, conditioner, and body wash. Only... we’ve switched out the conditioner for shower-safe lube. It was one of Nacho’s better ideas.

Now that he’s completely clean, I pull aside one of his ass cheeks, admiring the puffy ring of abused flesh, still a little stretched from my appreciation. I can’t help my cock’s reaction to such a pretty sight, and I press the button on the lube dispenser. He moans when I slip inside him again, rolling his hips, squeezing me tight.

The more we explore BDSM, the more we understand that most of it isn’t for us. There are a few things that intrigue us,

and now that we know how to approach new kinks, we've been exploring them.

One thing we learned is that Nacho doesn't go into subspace, but he enjoys reconnecting in a non-play interaction, and I find it helps to ground both of us.

"God, I love you," I say, gently stroking into him.

"Love you too, Bram," he says sleepily, shifting his hips from side to side.

Even though we don't come, we stay in this position for as long as my cock is able, then clean up again and head toward the bedroom, where an enormous king-size bed waits for us.

We meet in the middle, facing each other, our noses touching, satisfied, sleepy grins on our faces.

As we slide and fit our limbs together for a night of snuggling, I ask the question I've had ever since I saw him talking to Ant.

"Do you think Ant is going to be okay?"

Running inked fingers through my chest hair, he nods. "I have faith in him."

"Good. Me too."

Tracing the beautifully tattooed rose on his neck, I leave my concerns for Ant for another day.

"Ignacio?"

"Yes, Dr. Barlowe?" Nacho asks, adding a bit of defiance back into his tone.

"How attached are you to your last name?"

His eyes meet mine, riveted.

"Dr. Barlowe, you do know it's inappropriate to request major life changes while in a power exchange, right?"

"Yes, I do. But I also know you like it when I'm inappropriate, Ignacio. Now, answer the question."

"Well, I'm pretty attached to Rivera when my only other option is *Nacho Barlowe*," he says, laughing and shuddering at

the thought.

“So Barlowe is your only other option then?” I ask, my heart pumping hard at how his eyes sparkle with mischief and affection.

He bites his lower lip, tightening his leg around mine, smelling like soap and sex.

“It’s the only one I’d ever consider.”

“Ignacio Barlowe has a nice ring to it, though, don’t you think?” I ask, making what I believe is a very good point.

“Ignacio Barlowe,” he repeats, tapping his inked fingers on his plush lips. “Sounds awfully...*possessive*.”

“It is,” I growl, thumbing his bare hip as he takes his sweet time.

“I don’t have a middle name, so I suppose we can move Rivera to the middle and put Barlowe at the end. That wouldn’t be too bad.” He bites his lower lip, thinking. “I would have to see the ring though. Just to be sure it’s worth it.”

Stifling my grin, I reach beneath his pillow and pull out the elegant platinum ring I found last week. I wasn’t looking for it, but I saw it in the window and just...knew. He plucks the ring from my hand and examines it, trying to act cool. The way his chest is rapidly rising and falling gives him away, and I know he’s as affected as I am.

After a few seconds, his eyes flick to mine, shiny with joy.

“*Bram*,” he says, emotion coloring my name so beautifully I can’t stop the hitch in my chest.

“Nacho?” I ask, needing to hear him say it.

“Yes. Forever and always, yes.”



THANK YOU FOR READING GOOD BEHAVIOR. LEVY AND Javier’s book, [Savior Complex](#), is up next. Keep scrolling for a

sneak peek!

WANT TO KNOW ABOUT ANDERS AND HIS CREW? CHECK OUT
the [Guardians!](#)

SAVIOR COMPLEX - SNEAK PEEK

Sunday dinner at Rebel Sky is, as always, a delicious, hilarious, slightly unhinged affair. Anders has shown up with his buddy, Hopper, and they make a beeline for Ant. Bram and I share a look because that's definitely going to be trouble.

With any luck, it'll be the good kind of trouble.

By the time we get back on the road, we are full, happy, and looking forward to next Sunday. We've agreed our Friday dinner tradition should stay small, but that doesn't mean we can't invite one or two extra to enjoy the start of the weekend.

Pulling into Wild Heart, I puzzle at the banged-up compact Toyota truck with Mexican license plates.

"Whose truck is that?" I ask, right about the same time a handsome, salt-and-pepper-haired gentleman with a trim, mostly white beard comes into view. He's sitting on the front porch, and when he sees us, he stands.

"Oh shit," I breathe out. "*Hello.*"

Talk about a silver fox.

Bram and I look at each other and shrug. Given what we do with our free time, we're all a bit apprehensive as we exit the truck.

"I'm tempted to make Nacho and Ant stay back," Bram whispers.

I give him my *brother, please* look. "I doubt they actually would."

“Agreed.” Especially since Ant is put out about not being allowed to go on the Llano trip. Or any trip for that matter.

Bram and I manage to take the lead, making sure they’re behind us as we approach the handsome gentleman. He’s Latiné, maybe late forties, a little taller, broader, and trimmer than me, with sharp cheekbones and eyes sexily creased by the sun.

Sexily creased? God, I need to get laid.

I stroke my beard, feeling a little scraggly in his presence.

“Can I help you?” Bram asks, keeping his face neutral, as always.

Man, I wish I knew how to do that.

The guy looks behind us. “Antonio?” he asks, his voice trembling.

Ant steps forward before I can stop him. “Who the fuck are you?”

Blinking at the harsh language, he reaches for his back pocket.

“Hey!” I shout, moving in on him.

People tend to be intimidated by my tattoos and piercings, and the guy immediately holds up his hands.

“I apologize,” he says, his accent heavy. “I need to show you something.”

“Do it slowly,” I say, raising my brow.

His eyes lock on mine as he nods and carefully reaches back, pulling a folded piece of regular office paper from his back pocket.

Hell, why does he smell so damn good?

For fuck’s sake, Lev—focus.

Darting a look at Ant, the stranger hands a piece of paper to me. I clear my throat and unfold it, quickly scanning it.

“It’s a printout of the article about the cleanup,” I say, showing it to Bram.

In the article is a picture of Nacho and Ant carrying large bags of trash, smiling at the camera. Well, Nacho is smiling. Ant looks like he's been told to smile. Both are identified by their full names: Ignacio Rivera and Antonio Allende. Ant is circled in the picture, and his name is underlined.

The man keeps staring at Ant, seemingly unable to look away.

"Who are you?" Ant repeats.

"My name is Javier Hernández. I think I may be your uncle," he says, a tear tracking down his cheek.

"What?" Ant spits out, incredulous. "How?"

"Because you look just like your mother," he replies, his voice cracking. He looks at me and points to his other back pocket. "I have a picture. In my wallet."

"Okay," I say, touching his arm. "Just go slow."

The man blinks at me. "Si, si. Uh, yes. Of course."

Slowly he retrieves his wallet and flips it open. Pulling out an old photograph, he holds it out to Ant. Before Ant can touch it—who the fuck knows what kind of picture we're talking about here—I intercept it, showing it to Bram first.

It's the photograph of a young woman, maybe in her mid-twenties, holding a kid in her lap, maybe seven or eight years old. Despite the years that've passed, there's no doubt in my mind who that little boy is. Carefully, I hand the picture to Ant.

He takes it and scans it, tears forming almost instantly.

"How do you have this picture?" he asks, holding it up like an accusation. "They...the traffickers. They took it from me."

The handsome man leans forward as though he's been punched in the stomach. I know that look. It's the look a parent gets when I have to explain to them that something terrible has happened in their child's past.

It's one of my least favorite parts of my job.

At the same moment, Charlie, Justin, and Erik drive in through the gate, then course correct straight for us.

Erik is the first out of the truck and strides up to Ant. “Who is this?” he asks, glaring at our visitor.

Ant looks up at him, holding the picture in his hand. “He says he’s my uncle. This is my mom.”

Erik takes the picture and looks between it and Ant. “This is you?”

Ant nods, more tears falling.

Erik steps in front of him, facing the man, his voice like a thunderclap. “Are you the *fuck* who sold him?”

The man straightens from his bent-over stance, swaying as he shakes his head. “No! God no.”

“Are you related to the fuck who sold him?”

He shakes his head vehemently.

“That was his grandfather. On his father’s side,” he explains, practically pleading for us to believe him. “She was estranged from us, his mother. His father’s family was...bad news. Always bad news. We didn’t know she’d died for several months, and when we asked about Antonio, all we got were lies.”

“What was my mother’s name?” Ant asks, his voice strong even as it shakes.

“Gabriela, the youngest,” he says automatically. Running his hand over his beard, the sadness in his eyes softens. “But she was so small we called her Gigi.”

Ant’s hand goes to his mouth as he lists to the side. Erik grabs him, crushing the photograph as he steadies him.

“Please,” the man says. “The picture.”

Erik, still holding Ant, extends the picture to the man, who tucks it into his wallet, then approaches Ant.

Ant’s chest hitches. “Wh-where did you get that picture?” he repeats.

“I—she bought a set,” he says, talking with his hands. “It was in a sheet. We all carry that picture. It’s the only one we have of you two together.”

“We?”

“Antonio, you have a whole family who loves and misses you. We have been looking for you for years.”



READ [SAVIOR COMPLEX](#) FOR THE REST OF THE STORY.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi there! I write contemporary gay romance, which is to say I curse way too much, drink exactly the right amount of red wine, and sleep far too little. I'm also lucky enough to live in Central Texas with my wife and our dogs, where the astonishing diversity of humans and landscapes and tattoo shops serve as my muse.

Check out my Facebook reader group, [The Fox Den](#), for giveaways, first-look cover reveals, and more, and follow me on Amazon to be notified of new releases by email.



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