



Brutal Heir (Billionaire Heirs #2)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: When your past catches up with you, the billions won't matter...

Sage

Ezequiel Mata, what a piece of work. Every time I have to deal with him, I walk away fuming. But when danger's at hand, he's the one who comes to the rescue, and I have to remind myself to keep my distance...

Ezequiel

In the years I've been at the ranch, no woman has tempted me...until Sage. I've enjoyed pushing her buttons and getting her riled up, but in her moment of weakness, I discover the vulnerability she's been hiding.

Now she's lying there, looking like some beautiful fairy who wandered into my dark world. I want to protect her, to keep her safe, and to make her mine. But a chance encounter brings her world crashing into mine, and all the money in the world may not save us.

****This is a Dark Billionaire Romance containing mature themes, adult situations, violence, and possessive, morally grey characters. If you are not prepared to deal with this, please pass on the opportunity.**

****The story starts with Vindictive Heir, then continues with Brutal Heir, and Crude Heir.**

Total Pages (Source): 35

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Sage

I slide into the 4x4 and check the time as I shut the door. Seven o'clock. I suck in a quick breath and press the button to dial in to the morning conference call.

My phone signals an incoming call then Elena Santos's name flashes on the screen. I wince. She's probably checking to see why I'm running late. Everyone's waiting on me.

Biting my lip, I decline her call. Come on . The call connects to the meeting, leaving me a fraction of a second to take a calming breath before I announce myself.

"This is Sage Donohue, reporting in from Alpha section at La Escuadra Ranch ." A feeling of dread drops into my stomach. Something's wrong. I just know it.

"Go ahead, Sage," Elena says, sounding distracted. "Bill's on the phone."

And there it is. I should have answered . My heart races. The fact he'd take a call while he should be in the morning meeting sets an alarm blaring in the back of my mind.

In the oil and gas industry, there is no such thing as a typical day. Moving a drilling rig from one area to another can cause problems at the best of times. The weather had us at touch and go, but we got the green light to move ahead.

"All the security checks for the rig move are done, with no problems to report."

“No issues with the rain we had earlier in the week?” she asks.

“Not as far as I can tell.” Somehow, I managed to keep my voice from shaking when I said that. “I drove the route we’ll be taking, and the road is stable.”

The one thing in our favor is that the roads at this ranch are well-maintained at the owner’s insistence. Apparently there was an incident that caused problems for the family in the past, so Mr. de Marco included a clause about the maintenance in the contract.

“Any issues from the safety department?”

“None. They’ve signed off on the pre-trip inspection, confirming we’ve taken all the necessary precautions to ensure the safety of the crew and equipment.”

The crews had spent hours loading millions of dollars’ worth of drilling equipment on flatbed trailers using cranes and forklifts. Every piece, from the derrick to the port-a-potties, is held in place by either a strap or a chain, to keep them securely in place for the journey across the ranch.

I glance in the rearview mirror. “I currently have a line of trucks behind me. We’re waiting for the sun to come up in order to pull out.”

“Thank you, Sage. I’ll hand it over to Bill. He’s walking into the conference room.”

I swallow hard, trying to keep my anxiety at bay, but I’m impatient, wanting to hear what happened.

“It’d be too much to expect for the move to go off without a hitch,” Bill states, sounding weary. As the interim area manager, he’s responsible for everything that goes on in the Eagle Ford Shale until Kelly Oil & Gas sells the construction division.

Oh hell. “What happened?” I glance around at the mesquite and brush going on for miles in every direction. Nothing looks out of the ordinary. Every minute the group is on hold costs the company thousands of dollars in equipment cost and headcount.

“A crew from Bagley Services got lost in the dark. They wandered onto the restricted area in Alpha section.”

I let my eyelids drift closed, waiting for the bombshell about to drop.

“They ended up hitting a cow on their way out.”

The groans of disappointment and annoyance around the table make it through the speakers to surround me.

Damn, I almost would have preferred to have the porta potties fall over.

“Okay, so that didn’t cause a problem with the move. Do we start out?” I already know what he’s going to say, but I’m hoping beyond hope I’m wrong.

“Being that you’re closer,” he says with a note of resignation, “I’ll need you to head out there.” Although he’s confirming what I already expected, the words virtually echo in the truck cab, smothering me. “You’ll need to meet with the crew.”

Please stop there . I drop my forehead onto the truck steering wheel. Please don’t say
—

“And the ranch manager,” he concludes, making my stomach twist up like a dirt devil on a windy day. “I just got off the phone with Ezequiel. He’s already on the way, and he’s going to get there well before I can. I’d rather you run interference between him and the driver.”

I drag in a deep breath, feeling a steady pounding behind my eyes. Ranch relations is a touchy subject in the energy business. More so when the manager's an asshole, like this guy. Ezequiel Mata, the ranch manager is one of the main reasons I want nothing to do with the interim security manager title Bill offered.

I force myself to smile so I don't take a surly tone with him in front of the entire team. "Understood." I cross my fingers that I manage to pull it off. I agreed to oversee the day-to-day security detail on Bill's behalf. It got me a significant bump in pay and a company truck. After this incident, I don't know that it's going to be enough.

Lord knows if someone other than Bill had asked me to fill in once Mike left, I would have declined without a second's hesitation. It's not like I'd get a black eye over it. Everyone knows Kelly Oil & Gas is looking to sell the construction division. That means all our jobs will go to the new company, so we don't know if we'll still be employed the day after the sale. And there's no telling if they've had offers or what stage the negotiations might be in.

"Sage?" The question in his voice brings me back to the issue at hand. Did I miss something?

"Sorry Bill," I reply sheepishly. "I'll end the call now, if it's okay, so I can get going."

"Yes, go ahead," he agrees. "I'll head out after the meeting."

"Thanks. I'll see what I can do." I stab at the red button on the phone screen with so much force my fingernail pushes up, making me wince. I stick my fingertip in my mouth, as if that'll help ease the pain.

Great, this day is going from bad to worse. I reach for the radio, hitting the button on

the side. “Come in, Emilio.” The beep announces the end of the connection.

“This is Emilio,” he replies.

“Move up to the lead.” I release the button on the radio, waiting for a reply.

“Roger,” he confirms.

I get out of the truck, slamming the door. The truck driver behind me raises his hands, frowning. I hold my palm out, signaling to wait, and he gives a thumbs up.

I walk behind the truck to the driver’s side and glance down the line. The heat and humidity add another layer of annoyance to my mood. How can it be in the mid-eighties at seven o’clock in the morning? The sun isn’t even fully up yet. The temperature and the snakes are the two things besides the ranch manager I don’t like about South Texas.

Emilio pulls the white security truck up next to me. He brings the window down, releasing a cool gust from the cab. “Hey, Miss Sage. Problem?” he asks, putting the gearshift to park.

“We’ve got a cattle strike in the restricted area.”

“Ooooh.” His eyebrows shoot up past the safety glasses he’s wearing. “That ‘ol’ boy’s gonna have himself a bad day.”

Now, there’s the understatement of the year. “Well, if the guy can’t control his vehicle at twenty miles an hour, he probably deserves it.”

Emilio pushes back his ball cap. “So what happens now?”

“I need to talk to the driver so I can write up an incident report.”

He cocks his head. “That’s not too bad.”

I give him a couple of seconds to see the big picture, then I finally do the big reveal. “And Ezequiel.”

He drops his chin, looking straight down toward the seat. “I’m sorry, Miss Sage,” he says, shaking his head as he straightens out.

I don’t deal with the ranch manager often, but, when I do, I can expect he’s going to be a jerk.

“Thanks.” I let out a breath. “I’m going to need you to take over.”

He gives a quick nod of acknowledgment.

“You know the route.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Call if you need me, or if anything happens.” I tap my hand on the door, feeling the heat of the metal seep into my fingers even though the sun isn’t up yet.

“Will do.” He nods sympathetically. “Good luck,” he adds as he raises the window.

Yeah, I’m going to need it. I turn on a heel, scanning the ground as I go around the truck bed then climb in the cab.

I start the engine, pressing down the gas pedal as a minor retaliation for what I’ll have to deal with for the company. I take a deep breath and shift into gear then head out to

the restricted area.

This is the one time I wish I had to adhere to the twenty-mile-an-hour speed limit. I've avoided having time alone with my thoughts the last couple of years, but if I've ever needed time to think, it's now.

Much too soon, I've left the line of vehicles in the distance. Isn't it supposed to be that time flies when you're having fun? This could never be considered fun.

It's not enough time to figure out the best way to approach the situation—any situation with Ezequiel Mata. He's bound to be angry, which can be as bad as dealing with a grizzly having a bad day. Worse, I need to come up with a way to defuse the situation.

I reach the intersection with the main road and check traffic. To the left, several cows are munching on grass while others are following the road. Hm, I don't think I've ever seen them moving around. But the sheer size of them makes me wonder how the driver could have missed seeing one.

I turn right, heading back toward the highway. Then I book it, which here means hitting forty miles an hour, something only security can do, and only in an emergency. Which may not be the best idea at the moment. I lift my foot off the gas, so I'm not having to explain how I was the next fool to hit a cow.

I reach the turn into one of the restricted areas and go straight through the gate onto a narrow road. The brush isn't cut back here, so the mesquites and grass are only a few yards away.

The crew truck is in the distance, sitting in the middle of the road. I swallow hard, I won't have much time to talk to the driver before Ezequiel shows up. He doesn't have any restriction on how fast he can drive while on-site.

On the heels of that thought, another truck comes around the bend, stopping right behind them.

My stomach drops.

“Oh hell,” I mutter to myself. I’ll be walking into the lion’s den. Sure enough, a lone figure comes around the back of the truck. The dark cowboy hat sits atop a towering frame with broad shoulders, muscled arms, and a stride that leaves no doubt as to the mood he’s in.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Ezequiel

I roar up to the scene of the fucking disaster and throw the gearshift to park. These goddamn oilfield workers think they can run around like they own the place.

I shut the engine off and get out of my truck, slamming the door behind me. I stalk past the work truck, boots crunching on the gravel. Another truck comes barreling down the road toward us as I check the area.

The animal's lying there on the grass, lowing in agony, thrashing and causing itself more pain. She's suffering, her leg crushed from going under the tire.

Ending a life is never easy. I take solace in the fact I'll be putting an end to her misery. With a heavy heart, I draw the gun from the holster, take aim, and squeeze the trigger. The sound of the shot fills the air just as the animal goes still.

I fucking hate having to put an animal down.

The security woman climbs out of the vehicle, letting the door close slowly. Her gaze is focused at my feet; her pretty face has lost all color. What the hell is she doing out here if she knew it was a cattle strike and she can't handle what has to be done?

Meanwhile, the guys have lined up along the side of the work truck. They range from looking uneasy to downright guilty. And they should be—my blood's boiling and these motherfuckers are about to feel my wrath.

“Which one of you sorry sons of bitches was driving?”

From the other side of the truck, a man rises to his feet. He wipes the back of a shaking hand across his mouth. “It was me,” he rasps. His gaze slides to the ground behind me, and he retches. The kid can’t be more than twenty, probably the newest one on the crew. The guys likely made him drive so they could grab another hour’s sleep on the way to the site.

“I’m sorry,” he stammers, looking like he’s about to puke again. “Figured out I was on the wrong road and turned around.” He swallows hard. “The cows, they were everywhere.”

I nod once, my gaze locked to his face. My anger simmers just below the surface. There’s fear in his eyes along with regret.

“They were everywhere, huh?” I sneer. “Well, that’s a hell of an excuse.”

“Ezequiel,” the security interrupts. “I’m sure—”

“You got any idea the damage you’ve caused, boy?” I go on, ignoring her.

“It was an accident,” she finishes.

The other guys are shuffling nervously. They don’t want any part of this.

“I’m sorry, sir. I was going really slow.” He hunches his shoulders. “I thought they all cleared out. I couldn’t see it over the hood of the truck.”

“It? It?” I glare at him.

His eyes go wide. “She,” he switches quickly, realizing how pissed off I am.

Sage, the security lead, steps in front of me, back straight and head held high. Even

then, she barely reaches my chin. Still, now I have little choice but to acknowledge her.

“Ezequiel,” she says, her voice steady. “I understand you’re upset, but we need to handle this properly.” She looks up, her eyes meeting mine.

“Upset.” I scowl down at her. To her credit, she stands her ground despite the fact her face is still pale as hell.

“Bill said—”

I lean toward her. “Nothing Bill said is going to bring back that animal.” She clearly saw me put the animal out of her misery. “And nothing’s going to take away the suffering she endured at the end.”

“I realize that,” she says carefully. “Kelly Oil & Gas will take responsibility for this.” She waves a hand toward the grass. “Let me just get a report down—”

“What the hell good is a report going to do?” I challenge, my stance aggressive.

“It’s standard procedure,” she explains, overly calm.

“And then what?” I spit. “This fucker gets off scot-free?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “But we need to follow proper procedure and make sure everything is documented. Then we can see about getting the ranch compensated for the loss,” she says firmly, her gaze unwavering. “Let me just take some pictures and we’ll get these guys out of here. I’ll work on getting an incident report together.”

“Fine.” I glance over at the crew, my chest heaving with barely contained rage. But as much as I hate to admit it, I know there are rules to follow. I just don’t like that

they're not my rules.

“Thank you.” She nods, quickly turning away and reaching down to stick her hand in her back pocket. She brings out her phone, turns it on its side, and aims at the front of the truck. After several pictures, including some of the crew, she moves into the grass—without even checking the surroundings.

What in the hell ? While I was there a few minutes ago, an animal could have slithered out of a hiding place while we were looking away. Doing my own sweep, I make sure she's relatively safe as she continues to take pictures without looking down around her feet.

I glance at her hip. There's no side arm, only a damn radio. Like that's gonna help when she's out in the middle of nowhere on her own. She heads back to the road. Well, at least she has sense enough to be wearing steel-toe boots.

Turning back to the truck, I check the bumper and headlight. There's no damage. With no sign of an accident, he has to have been going slow, like he said. And yeah, he wouldn't have seen her over the hood of that truck.

My anger dissipates as I stare at the kid again. By the look of him, he's torn up inside with fear and guilt. Okay, I believe him. He isn't doing well with being the reason for a life ending.

Still, he shouldn't have been in this area.

“How did you get in here?” I ask.

The kid swallows. “The guard said it was the first left. The gate was open, so I thought it was here.”

That's not right. "The gate was open?"

"Yes, sir."

Sage lowers her phone. "It was open when I turned in here."

"Damn it." I run my hand over my forehead. It was probably one of the other idiots coming in for the rig move. I bet they came in and realized they were in the wrong place. When they left, they didn't bother to close the gate behind them.

"We can put locks on the gates," Sage suggests.

That annoys me even more. "So I have to lock the gates inside the ranch because one of your people can't leave shit like they found it?"

She inhales deeply. "We'll notify the vendors that they have to close the gates behind them, if they have to open one." Her tongue comes out to wet her bottom lip. "We can also set up some cones in front of the gates when we have these many vendors on the move."

"Hell of a lotta good that'll do me now."

"I'll get these guys going and make sure the driver's escorted off the ranch." She looks over at the kid. His shoulders slump when he hears her.

"Son of a..." I drag in a breath. It almost hurts to have to admit it, but it's not the kid's fault. And I won't take a man's livelihood away from him. "No."

"Ah..." Sage cocks her head.

"This is what's gonna happen." I turn to the kid, whose back straightens as he listens.

“You’re going to get your ass in the truck, but you’re not driving.”

The kid nods, his face pale. “Yes, sir,” he replies.

“And if I ever catch you behind the wheel, I’ll make sure you never set foot on this ranch again. Am I clear?”

He looks from me to Sage then back again. “Yes, sir,” he repeats, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Good,” I growl. “Now get the hell outta my sight.”

He hauls ass back to the safety of the truck, while the others are quick to follow.

“Guys, head to the gate and wait there for me so we can get details for the report.”

The new driver nods as they climb into the truck. “Yes, ma’am.”

Sage reaches to her side, unclipping the two-way radio and bringing it to her lips. Her hand trembles as she clears her throat before speaking. “Gate five, come in.” She releases the button, keeping her gaze unfocused as the crew pulls away.

Seconds tick by with no answer. She sucks in the corner of her lips, wetting them then swallowing nervously. Her gaze goes to the tailgate on the work truck. I bet a month’s pay she wishes she’d cut out along with the crew.

It’s clear she’s not happy to be here. I bet Bill sent her over, since he’s at the office on the other side of the ranch. He’s a wily old buzzard, always trying to keep a step ahead of whatever’s going on.

“Gate five?” she says with concern.

Her pulse is stampeding at her throat. Those few seconds must have felt like a lifetime. Her gaze flashes toward me, one eyebrow twitching in annoyance.

There's a crackle of static. "Gate five," a man's voice comes through the speaker.

She turns her attention to the truck in that way women have when they're done with you.

Hmm. I fold my arms across my chest. She has no idea who she's dealing with.

"I have Bagley Services heading your way," she says. "Park them. I'll be there to take a report."

"Yes, ma'am." She brings the radio down.

"The gate."

She cocks her head, that eyebrow showing how she really feels. "Excuse me?"

"Tell him about the gate that was left open," I instruct, as if she needs to hear it said slowly.

"I'd rather have the conversation face-to-face," she replies, dismissing me.

"I'd rather you do it now."

Her lips go flat. "Do you think I don't know how to do my job?" Her temper's starting to show.

"What I think is that you don't belong out here." I drop it like a hot coal. She sucks in a breath making her chest rise enough to tempt me to look, but that would ruin my

fun. “Not without a weapon. Not with you not watching where you’re going.” She squares her shoulders, the color shooting back into her cheeks. “There’s shit out here that’ll kill you if you’re not careful.”

Her expression sours, then she runs the tip of her tongue along her bottom lip.

Fuck. It’s enough to break my concentration.

“Bill will be by to talk to you.” With that, she all but stomps past me, heading to her truck.

The sight of that plump ass stirs my cock. As much as it annoys her, I want her to stay safe. “The way you’re going, you’re gonna end up on one of your reports.”

She keeps going, ignoring my statement, then climbs in the truck and slams the door.

If I’d known she’d get so damn worked up over this, I would have done it a long time ago.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Sage

You don't belong out here .

My back straightens and my shoulders stiffen as I suck in a breath. The buzzing in my ears increases, drowning out everything else around me.

Wow . How dare he tell me I don't belong here? The gall... Who does this guy think he is?

A retort rushes to the tip of my tongue; somehow I manage to bite it back at the last second. If this was personal, I'd let him have it. But it's not. This is my job, a responsibility entrusted to me. I'll stay true to the badge and uniform, which means I'll remain professional. No matter what, I'm not going to sink to his level.

I take a deep breath and wet my lips. "Bill will be by to talk to you." My tone is steady, emotionless. He can't know how deep he cut.

Gathering the storm of emotions brewing around me, I raise my chin and turn to walk past him, back to my truck.

"The way you're going," he says from behind me, "you're gonna end up on one of your reports."

I tighten the grip on my cell phone and refuse to take the bait. I just need to make it to the safety of the truck and shut him out. Just a few more steps. One, two, three, four, five. The crunch of caliche under my boot signals each step. Urgency builds inside

me, making it feel like I'm rushing, like I should slow down.

Numb, I reach for the handle, yanking the door open. I shove the phone in my back pocket and climb in. Slamming the door behind me, I snatch the seatbelt, drawing it down and across my chest.

I'm not going to look.

I don't care what he's doing.

I don't need to know.

Each of those statements is perfectly reasonable. But as much as I try to convince myself, I know I can't make it happen. Almost without my consent, my gaze flicks back to him. It's as big of a mistake as I figured it would be. The big jerk is standing there, a damn grin across his stupid face.

It's enough to make my blood boil.

I grip the steering wheel so hard my knuckles turn white. It's all I can do not to whip the truck around and kick up mud on the jerk.

I hit reverse, going into the grass, which I know I shouldn't do. Well, it's just one more thing for him to criticize me about, isn't it . He can add it to a damn list if he wants . I put the truck in gear and head out the one-lane road to where I came in.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. I let him get to me.

It hurts that he would go to such lengths to point out my shortcomings. What makes it so much worse is that he's not wrong. That's what irks me. I'm not a damn rookie, I know better.

When I first started working with Kelly Oil & Gas, at another location, I took care of orientation. I stressed the need to be aware of your surroundings as part of the safety course for first timers. Now, here we are, when I should be following my own advice, and I totally blew it.

It's him . Ezequiel. He's the reason I forgot every lick of training I've had and done. Being around the brute throws me off my game. He's always in a dark mood. I'm used to that. But seeing him so angry made it worse than usual. I reacted to him and went totally blank to the point I didn't think to watch where I was stepping.

He used it against me in the worst possible way.

Tears burn behind my eyes.

I get it if it was about me being from the city, because I didn't grow up on a ranch. I've never been on a horse. I'd never been this close to a cow. And I'd never, in my worst nightmares, thought I'd end up seeing an animal killed right in front of me. So no, in that sense, I don't fit in.

Only he was referring to my job.

I'm damn good at what I do. I'm always on time. Never miss a day. I take emergency calls at any hour. The schedules are done and posted for the guards. I make sure all the shifts are covered, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, even holidays. My paperwork is in order, with all the detail to tell the full story. And I don't leave anyone in the dark.

I damn well deserve to be here as much, if not more, than anyone else.

So, why is it that a few minutes with Ezequiel Mata make me feel so inadequate?

I blink rapidly, trying to keep tears at bay. There's no crying when you're on the job. Safety, security, and law enforcement don't allow for weakness. The bad guys will jump on it and exploit it.

Yet, a sole tear escapes, racing over my cheek. I dash it away with the back of my hand. Oh God, at least this didn't happen in front of him. It would just be one more reason for him to think I'm a screwup.

Every time I think I've gotten my life in order, something happens, and I slide back into the darkness. This little incident reminds me that I have to work hard at dealing with life and everything it brings.

I take a calming breath and glance into the rearview mirror. Ezequiel is standing by his truck, watching me drive away. Even at this distance, I can feel his anger. I swear I could feel the heat of it when I was standing next to him. He was that furious.

He's a tough man to deal with, but I never expected him to be such an ass. Ugh, that just gets me riled up all over again.

I can't stop the anger flowing through me. I can't help the frustration welling up inside me. One at a time, I can handle, but both... I hate it. I hate feeling like I'm inadequate, like I can't do better than a half-ass job.

He doesn't know me, doesn't understand what I've been through. What I've overcome. Yet he went for the jugular, finding what hurts most. And he got the best of me.

What's worse, Bill wanted me to defuse the situation, but I didn't do a damn thing. So, what now?

I try to shake off the anger he's left me with.

My thoughts are racing, my chest feels tight, and my breathing is shallow. My heartbeat's pounding in my ears, a physical manifestation of the frustration coursing through me.

As I drive down the dusty road, I can't help but replay our interaction in my mind. The way he towered over me, his posture aggressive, voice laced with disdain. The way he made me feel small and insignificant.

I take a deep breath and try to focus on the road ahead, but my mind keeps drifting back to Ezequiel's words. You don't belong here. It's not the first time he's made me feel like I have no business being here, but today it felt different. It felt personal.

I know I shouldn't let him get to me, but it's hard not to take it personally. I've worked hard to get to where I am, to earn the respect of my colleagues and the trust of the man in charge. And yet, in Ezequiel's eyes, it all means nothing.

I shake my head, trying to clear my mind. I can't let his words get to me. I have a job to do, my way, and I need to focus on that. But, as I glance in the rearview mirror, I see him standing by his truck watching me drive away.

A sense of disappointment wells up inside me, followed by frustration. I'll have to figure out a way to deal with Ezequiel. If I'm going to continue working here, I'll have to deal with him. There's no two ways about it.

Reaching the intersection, I stop and check the road. The convoy hasn't made it out of the area. They won't have, not when they have to keep it to twenty miles per hour, but it shouldn't be much longer. Meanwhile, the cows have ventured farther out. Only two are still by the road, munching on the grass along the fence.

Blowing out a breath, I pull out, turn, and stop. Glancing around me, to make sure I'm alone, I jump down and backtrack to the gate. I keep my attention on the ground,

ignoring the truck and the man who ruined my morning.

With a final snake-check, I pull the gate closed and drop the latch. Sigh. It would have taken two minutes to avoid this entire problem. Why don't these guys have a lick of sense? I turn, catching sight of the cows, and come to a realization. I didn't think twice about the open gate when I came through because I'm a city girl.

All right, so it's about education. Telling these guys why to keep the gate closed, instead of just the fact they should. I swallow my pride and pull the radio from my hip as I walk back to the truck. "Gate five, come in." I may as well do this over the radio so all the gates are aware—even though it's what he suggested I do.

"Gate five," the guard replies as I climb into the cab.

"Start advising the crews to make sure that if they open a gate, they close it behind them so we don't have cattle escape."

"Yes, ma'am," he replies. "Ranch manager called a couple of minutes ago."

That insufferable—

"We have to tell all visitors to leave the gate like they found it. If they open a gate, they have to close it behind them."

And just like that, my moment of peace is shattered.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Sage

The two-way radio beeps at my waist. The sound irritates me enough to send my hands hovering above the keyboard as I press my eyes closed. Somehow, I know the call is for me, and I'm not going to like the result. It's been like that since my run-in with Ezequiel, at the beginning of the week.

"Come in, Sage," Ramos calls from the front gate.

I curl my fingers into my palms, the pressure forcing my arms to tremble. After a couple of seconds, I blow out a breath and pull the radio from the clip. "This is Sage."

"The jet landed in Delta section a few minutes ago," he reports. "Took me a few to log a crew coming in."

At least it wasn't bad news. "Roger that."

I clip the radio to my waist and sit back. For some odd reason, knowing Addler de Marco is home makes me smile. Not sure why—the owner is far removed from anyone at Kelly Oil this has to be one hell of a story. Why didn't she tell me something was up? "I didn't realize he stepped out." I glance from one to another and still unsure of how to proceed.

"You lost Bill?" he says, distracting me from my speculation.

"I...uh..." I swallow hard, clenching my fingers against my palm. Heat rushes across my face.

“He had an emergency,” Elena explains, drawing his attention back to her.

Tension’s in the air. Whatever is between them is beyond me. “I’ll leave you two, then.” I turn on my heel and head back to my office. It’s not until I’m safely behind my desk that I can actually take a breath.

Despite a few unexpected visitors, I make it through to the end of the day.

“He bought the company,” Elena says from the door.

I stop, mid-keystroke. “What?” Although I’d been expecting to hear about the company finding a buyer, her statement still catches me by surprise.

“Addler de Marco bought the construction division.”

“I see.”

She looks exhausted. I can’t say I blame her since she spent all day with Mr. de Marco. “Bill got a call about it before he had to leave. We’re getting a visit on Monday for the official announcement.”

I nod, a little numb. Where will we be at this time on Monday? Bill and Elena will probably still have a job. Which reminds me... “What happened to Bill? Is everything okay?” It’s not like him to disappear in the middle of the day without telling anyone.

“Isabela.”

The single word says more than anyone would be prepared for. His wife has been on a waiting list for a kidney. “How bad?”

“He didn’t say,” she replies quietly.

I flop back in my chair, wrung out. That's it. I'm taking the weekend off and heading to Laredo. Since most people are gone, I should be able to handle anything over the phone. After the week I've had, I can use a break.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Ezequiel

I'm coming off the highway when my cell phone rings. Annoyed, I pull my phone from the cup holder to find Addler's name flashing across the screen. What's this all about? He's been at the office since he got in from Houston yesterday. Curious, I press the button, answering the call.

"Yeah," I say in greeting.

"I'm going to send you an inventory list," Addler replies, sounding distracted.

"An inventory list?" I repeat. Did he mean to call someone else? He was heading in the direction of the Kelly office this morning. Maybe he got my number confused with Bill's.

"Grab the security lead and check out the locations listed so we can account for everything," he continues.

Okay, so he did mean to talk to me. Guess things aren't going good at that new business he bought.

If he wants me to make this run with Mike, Kelly Oil & Gas's security manager, he's shit out of luck. Mike went on vacation and decided not to come back. While I haven't heard the reason, I figure he got another job offer and took it. "The guy left a couple of weeks back."

"So, who's in charge of security?" he asks, frustration in his voice.

Pressure builds up in my chest as the answer runs through my mind. Sage. I take my foot off the gas pedal.

No, don't tell me he's gonna go there. As it is, I spent too long thinking about how the color rushed back to her face. How she stood there, chest rising as she pressed her lips together tight. That woman claims too much of my damn time. And it pisses me off that she can do it without even trying.

I swallow hard and try to buy some time. "Bill said they were looking."

Maybe he'll drop it there. Because, I don't think Bill or Kelly Oil & Gas have been looking too hard. The company knew they were about to sell. I bet they figured they could leave the hiring to the new owner. That way, they'd have one less problem to deal with. Since the new owner is Addler, that may have just become my problem.

Addler blows out a frustrated breath. "Then, get the admin to go with you."

I let my eyelids drop as I mouth the only word that fills my mind: Fuck . Is he actually going to pull this shit on me? I can still picture the way her back straightened and her expression changed. That button on her shirt was struggling to keep it together.

"The woman?" I ask, trying to buy time to come up with a good reason not to have her tagging along.

"Yeah. That way, it looks like you're doing rounds."

In all the years I've been working the ranch, I've never needed a partner, much less a damn babysitter. What help would she be when she can't even look after herself?

"Are you—" I start to protest, but Addler cuts me off.

“Just do it.” The reply is curt, not like him at all.

I grit my teeth, knowing I’m royally fucked. Addler’s in a damn hurry, and he’s not gonna take no for an answer. It’s moments like this when I wonder what the hell I’m doing here. I have the money to go anywhere or do anything. Though I have my family’s shadow following close behind. It’s the reason I don’t buy my own place. But then I end up dealing with this shit.

“We’ll talk later,” he adds in his usual tone.

Okay, that changes things. Shit must be going down.

“Got it,” I reply, reading between the lines.

“Later.” Addler ends the call.

He takes over that new company on Monday and, with him at the office right now, he probably found something wrong. Whatever it is, he can’t talk about it in front of those people. But it’s bad enough he’s pulling me from what I’m doing to help.

The question is, why send me? Why not Bill? I can’t imagine the old lawman would be into any shady shit. I’ll check with Mayela, his sister-in-law. She might be able to give me some clue to what’s going on.

Meanwhile, I still have to deal with Sage. I slump in the seat. Damn woman has no business out here, but Addler probably needs someone to back me up in case something ain’t right. I wish he’d given me some clue about what I’m looking for. Considering everything that goes on in this region, so close to the Mexican border, it could be anything.

“God damn it.” I exhale in defeat and scroll through my phone messages. When I

come across Sage's name, I pause. Never thought I'd actually use the cell number Bill sent me, so I didn't bother to add it to my contact list.

Sage Donohue. What the hell kind of name is that? Makes me think she belongs in some small town on the East Coast that brings in a lot of seafood. I let out a breath, I do miss a good lobster roll...and pizza.

I can picture her having a slice. The cheese stretching out from the piece she's just bitten into...and those lips of hers. Fuck.

Fine. I open the contact card he sent and press the button on her number.

The line rings.

I need you to come in ? No that doesn't sound right. I don't need her anywhere around me. Addler wants her here.

The line rings several times, but there's no answer.

That'd be something, Addler wants you here . If she's like the other women around here, she'll fall all over herself to get here. That's what comes with having a pretty face.

The line rings.

The thought of her falling for Addler rubs me wrong. That's too much damn time thinking about her for my own good.

The line rings.

I pull the phone away from my ear. What the hell? She's supposed to be the one I call

in case of an emergency?

The sound changes from the ringtone to a hollow sound as she finally answers. “This is Sage.”

“Well I’m glad it wasn’t an emergency,” I mutter. She stays quiet. I’m caught somewhere between not knowing how to proceed and being annoyed at having to call her at all. “Where are you?”

She pauses. “I’m out of town,” she replies, her voice hesitant. “Well, on my way to Laredo.”

Fucking fantastic. I have to drag her out here when she may have plans for her day off. “Are you working?”

She inhales, and I can imagine her trying to figure out how to answer. Which means no, she’s off for the holiday.

“What did you need?” she asks, avoiding giving me the answer I’m looking for. Which only manages to annoy the shit out of me.

“I need you on-site.”

There’s another pause, which isn’t helping my mood.

“I’m not in uniform,” she announces. “I’ll have to go back to Carrizo Springs to change before I can come in.”

Well, that sure as hell ain’t gonna happen.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Sage

It isn't until I'm past the last gate on the ranch that it finally feels real. It's Friday. It's a holiday. And I'm halfway to freedom.

Laredo is a decent-sized city, sitting along the Mexican border. It's big enough to lose myself. A place where I can unwind, do some shopping, find some delicious food, and maybe get myself a drink and a room for the night.

Although it was a short week, it was one of the most frustrating ones I've had in a long time. The problems started with the rig move and dealing with Ezequiel. It extended through yesterday when the ranch owner showed up and spent the day at the office. There was so much tension, you could cut it with a knife.

Worst of all, it included Bill running out because his wife isn't doing well. I can't even imagine what they're going through.

At this point, I'm glad for a day, any day, I don't get home with mud on my boots. It's why I decided to take advantage of the three-day weekend and separate myself from the job. I didn't even bring work clothes with me.

I'm nearing the intersection with Highway 44 when my phone rings. Nooo . I don't have anyone who'd just check in to say hello. If I get a call, it's something to do with work.

The phone rings.

I take my foot off the gas pedal and pull onto the shoulder where many of the local truck drivers stop. I have to pull over before I get to the checkpoint. If I'm close enough for the border patrol agents to see me, they might think I'm up to no good. If I pass the location, I'll have to sit in line to get back.

The phone rings.

Hold on . I come to a full stop and put the truck in park. I reach out to check my cell phone. Ezequiel. Oh hell .

The phone rings again as I stare at the name, my stomach twisting at the thought of having to talk to him. I lock the doors, knowing this is going to take more than a quick minute. Letting my lids drift closed, I press the button to answer the call. "This is Sage."

"Well I'm glad it wasn't an emergency," he says in his usual surly tone.

I grit my teeth and open my eyes. What does he expect? Am I supposed to drop what I'm doing the exact second he calls? I was driving for goodness' sake.

"Where are you?" he continues.

I don't want to tell him, but I don't have much of a choice. This role I accepted comes with the responsibility of being available at any point of the day or night—that includes holidays. "I'm out of town," I reply. Though I'm actually close enough to turn around in case of emergency. "Well, on my way to Laredo."

"Are you working?"

Now, there's a question. I draw in a breath. When Mike was around, he took care of business. If, on a rare occasion, he took off to the valley with his wife to see their

family, I'd cover for him. I was the backup. Now that he's gone, with me taking the lead, there's no backup. If I was already in Laredo, I might consider calling Bill for help. While he's in San Antonio with his wife, he might be able to get someone else.

Resigned, I ask, "What did you need?"

"I need you on-site," he growls.

Ugh. I knew it . The fact I was getting a day to myself was too good to be true. If someone, anyone else, was available, I would have said I'd flown out to see my dad. Dad ... Oh God, that's a problem to deal with on another day.

I glance down at the peach colored toenails peeking out from the strappy sandals I'm wearing and curse under my breath. I should have brought my damn boots. I should have packed a spare uniform in my overnight bag, just in case. Instead, I'm in a white tank top, loose cotton shorts in the same color as my nails, and sandals that leave my toes exposed.

I cringe, preparing to tell him I'm not ready. I can already hear him berating me for not being prepared. "I'm not in uniform," I admit. And there's only one way I can get into uniform. I guarantee he's not going to like it. "I'll have to go back to Carrizo Springs to change before I can come in."

"You're not doing some damn beauty pageant," he snaps. This time it's my turn to be annoyed.

I try one last time. "Can we reschedule for tomorrow morning? I can be there before—"

"No, I need you here, and I need you now," he stresses. "If you can't handle the job, say so."

I grit my teeth again. After the news I got about the de Marcos buying the company, it's not a good idea to push it with this guy. He won't be going anywhere. The same can't be said about me. While I hope it doesn't happen, my job might be on the line after Monday's announcement.

You don't belong here.

It took me a long time to get settled, more importantly, to feel settled. Realistically, there's a chance I'll have to pick up and move to another company and maybe even another part of the country.

You don't belong here.

A hollow feeling grows inside me. Still, I'm here now, and the unclear future doesn't mean I'm going to drop the ball today. Regardless of anything else, part of me wants to show Ezequiel who I am and what I do.

"All right. Let me head back to..." He hasn't actually said where I'm going or what we're going to do. I won't push it, but I will get details. "Where is here?" I ask, keeping my tone as neutral as possible.

He pauses. I switch gears and check for traffic. A tanker truck zooms by; the draft left by his speed shakes the truck. "Go to gate seven. I'll leave it open for you then we can meet at the hangar to switch trucks. And I don't care if you show up in pajamas—just get here. Now. "

"I'm on the way." I end the call, not bothering to wait for him to say anything else.

I take a calming breath. I should have told him I was on the other side of the border patrol checkpoint. It would have bought me some time to swing by the office and see if we have anything I can use.

I scoff. While it's an idea, I already know we won't have anything in my size, either clothes or boots. The typical oilfield worker doesn't come with big boobs or an ass like mine.

Come on, you fat bitch . The man's voice echoes in my head.

Shaking away the thought, I pull out to the highway and do a U-turn. Ezequiel. I have to focus on him and what he wants.

I've never been to the hangar, but I know where it sits in Delta section. As security lead, I had to learn the map in case I have to show up anywhere. From my calculations, I should have about forty-five minutes before I have to face him, at best.

That's still not enough time to prepare myself mentally for what I'm sure is coming.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Ezequiel

I've been cooling my heels at the hangar for over an hour, waiting for the security truck to arrive. That's time wasted. I could have been doing something else, like looking for my missing cows.

The sun beats down on the damp ground, sending a hot wind whipping through the open hangar doors. It makes sitting here that much less tolerable.

Damn Addler for making it a point that I take security with me. I've been working this ranch for years, and I know my way around better than even him. But Addler insisted, and I suspect he has a good reason for the decision. The fact he can't say more is telling.

I turn to my laptop, moving the screen to a movie I plan to come back to before going home, so I can look at a map. The list Addler sent will take us across the ranch and back then out to the newest portion. My property. More to the point, the property my kid, or kids will own someday. It's my exit strategy from the life my family has chosen.

The security truck finally pulls up beside the window. I turn to the security monitor, a massive seventy-inch screen that displays feeds from around the building.

Sage climbs out of the truck, and every muscle on my face goes slack. She's in shorts and a tank top. My eyes are immediately drawn to her pulling down at the inseam where the loose material of her shorts was bunched up against her pussy.

“Fuck my life,” I curse under my breath.

She walks past, but I can barely see her head over the hood. The wind’s picking up, tossing her hair all over...and her shorts. She just ducks and runs a delicate hand along her temple while the wind points out every curve.

I don’t get it. What’s this damn princess doing out on a ranch, running security, for fuck’s sake. At this point, she’s probably a magnet to every dangerous thing on the ranch, me included. She’s 100 percent distraction, something I don’t need or want.

Or so I keep telling myself.

I turn back to the computer, bringing up a map of the ranch. I needed to focus on the task and not on Sage’s distracting presence. But the memory of her curves and the way her hair whipped around in the wind lingers in my mind. I’m going to need a minute to let my cock simmer down.

“In here,” I yell out as Sage finally makes her way into the hangar. The faint slap of her sandals echoes through the empty space. I try not to look, but I couldn’t help noticing how the shorts hug her hips and show off the curve of her ass.

She finally pulls the door open, I give her a frown of disapproval. I should have expected she wouldn’t be properly dressed since she was so hell bent on going back to change. Still, it’s not a bad idea to take out some insurance.

I take in her appearance with a critical eye. Her top shows a good bit of cleavage. I’m not even going to let myself get below her waist.

“Is that what you consider appropriate for the ranch?” I ask, not trying to mask my irritation. I know it’ll rub her the wrong way.

“It’s hot out. And I didn’t know I was going to be working today,” Sage retorts, meeting my gaze with a steely one of her own.

I grunt in response, actually impressed she’s showing some backbone. “Fine. Let’s get to business.”

“Great,” she says with a slight nod, “What do you need?”

“An escort.” I put it as plain as I can get.

Her eyebrow shoots up. “Excuse me?”

Okay, so maybe that was a bad choice of words, but her appearance shook me up a little. And maybe it got my mind heading in the wrong direction.

I start again, trying to remain professional. “I need you to escort me around the ranch.”

She looks at me skeptically, “Why do you need me for that?”

“I just do.” I shrug, trying to hide my annoyance. Isn’t this basically what I thought when Addler called me? “You got a problem with it, you can call your boss.”

She folds her arms under her chest. so I make it a point to look her in the eye.

“I just don’t understand why you’d need me to take you around the property.”

I can see the mistrust, and I can’t blame her, but this is really testing my patience.

“Addler asked me to call you,” I admit, grudgingly.

“Oh.” She loses the pissed-off expression and puts her arms down.

Hell, why didn't I think to start with that. Addler's pretty face can solve most problems when it comes to women.

“You know he bought the construction part of Kelly Oil & Gas.” I assume she knows, since he was at the office yesterday.

She gives a short nod. “Found out yesterday when he went to the office.”

“Well, he wants us to do inventory on some of the equipment he got as part of the deal.”

“And it has to be done today?” she asks.

“Yeah.” I get it. It is her day off. Probably one of the few three-day weekends she gets throughout the year, and she ends up being called in. A pang of what might be guilt goes through me. “Apparently so.”

She blows out a breath. “Okay. It's late, so we can split up—”

“No.” I shake my head. “If it was that easy, I would've taken care of it by now.” Her shoulders slump in defeat. “Here, let me show you.” I pick up the remote and click to switch away from the security feed. It closes out, which should leave me with a map of the ranch, which I have as a background.

Sage's jaw drops and she turns to me. “Umm...”

Instead, it's the screen I'd moved away from my laptop. An image of a woman bent over, her fingers between her legs, showing what she's got. The mirror in front of her reflects tits that would make any man's mouth water, her fingers pinching a hard

nipple. But the topper is the foxtail attached to the butt plug she's wearing along with a set of matching ears.

Ah, fuck .

“What is that?” she asks, glancing over at the screen.

“It's an action movie,” I reply, uptight at having her see what I was watching. Of all the people who could be here when this happened, she's got to be the worst one. I can only be grateful the woman isn't a redhead.

“You're watching porn at work?” she asks, eyes narrowing.

“Hey, I'm an adult. I can watch whatever the hell I want,” I reply in a challenging tone. Who the hell does she think she is?

She gives me a look of disbelief. “You're at work,” she reiterates, folding her arms across her chest again.

I'm not about to tell her the truth. She'll have to keep thinking I'm some lackey paid by the hour to look over the ranch. Because she doesn't need to know I chose to be here as part of the arrangement between families with a longstanding agreement.

The silence extends, and tension fills the room.

I break in with another question. “Weren't you heading to town, dressed like that, in a company truck?”

Her back straightens. “I was going to pick up office supplies while I was in town,” she says, defensively.

“Well I’m here twenty-four seven,” I inform her in an irritated voice. “So I can decide when I have time off.” That’s more than I usually tell anyone.

She blinks then gives me a hard stare. “Fine, whatever. Let’s just get this over with.” Her mouth is little more than a slash of annoyance.

I click on the X on the upper right, switching to the map. “Anyway, this is where we’re going.” I go site by site, from one part of the ranch to the other, ending in the property I’ll own.

“Okay, well, let’s get started,” she says then turns around and walks out the door. Sage moves along ahead of me as we walk through the expansive hangar. She looks over, admiring the jet on the far side. In this part of the state, it’s not unusual to have a jet, or like the de Marcos, two. The other is in Florida with the old man, Addler’s grandfather.

Sage has to think she has the upper hand. In her eyes, I’m a slacker. And what’s worse, now I can’t complain about her being late. She’s going to think I spent that hour watching porn. And I’m not about to defend myself to her.

I put on my sunglasses, my gaze trailing down her back as I follow her. With my longer stride, I could easily catch up, but I’m enjoying the view too much to try. All right, so maybe I haven’t turned my back on all women. But why the hell did it have to be this one I can’t get off my mind.

We exit the hangar, and Sage heads to her truck. “Where are you going?” I ask.

She points to where she parked. “To the truck,” she responds, as if I’m too simple to figure it out on my own.

“We’re taking my truck.” I go to the driver’s side. There’s no way I’m letting a

woman drive me around my own ranch. These guys are going to know who's in charge around here, and it's not her.

I can see the hesitation in her eyes, but she tightens her lips and comes in my direction. So this is what it's going to be like for the next few hours.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Ezequiel

I grip the steering wheel as I navigate the desolate road stretching out ahead of us. The sun is sitting low in the sky, casting a golden glow over the rugged landscape surrounding us.

Sage sits in the passenger seat of my truck, staring out the window at the passing scenery.

I should be glad she's lost in thought, keeping her mouth shut. But I can't help but wonder what the hell is going through her mind. I'm usually good at reading people, but I haven't got her pegged. If there's one thing I know, it's that when a woman's too quiet, something's wrong, or it's about to be.

I clear my throat, just to break the deafening silence. "We're almost there."

Sage nods. "Okay." But doesn't say much else. She's on edge. Is it because I called her in for this job on her day off, or is it something else? Well, we're almost done anyway.

We're heading to the last stop. Hopefully we'll find the dozer that's not where it should be among the rest of what's on site. It's a simple job, but I've learned the hard way that things are rarely as simple as they seem.

As we drive, the road becomes rougher, causing me to slow down. The terrain is rugged and uneven, thanks to the rain earlier in the week and the trucks coming through.

Again, I'm annoyed. If I was on my own, I wouldn't have to worry about getting stuck. I'd walk back if I needed to. But I'm with Sage, and she's wearing those ridiculous sandals.

Those damn sandals started it all. They're showing off pink toenails, which led to pink shorts, and pink lips, and left me thinking about anything else on her that might be pink. Of all the god damn times—

“I can't believe I'm going to ask this,” she says, breaking my train of thought. “But, is this area safe?”

I glance over at her again. She looks worried. Considering how green she is when it comes to the ranch, it shouldn't surprise me.

“Now you worry about being safe?”

She's sitting in my truck, with me, and she worries. But, when she's running around on her own, without a damn weapon, in a truck that barely has 4x4, she thinks she's okay.

“Nowhere on this ranch is completely safe.”

She tightens her lips. “I meant having to go out on this road.”

Even with the attitude, she looks too damn pretty. I've managed to keep her at a distance, but my cock's been semi hard since she showed up at the hangar. I know exactly what button to push now.

I smirk at her, relishing the satisfaction of getting under her skin. I make sure to curl the corner of my lips up so she can see, taunting her. “What's the matter? Getting sent out to the job sites too far below your pay grade? You feel like you're slumming right

now?”

As expected, the muscle at her jaw tightens. “You’re impossible.” For an added bonus, she folds her arms right under those mouthwatering tits as she looks away.

That should keep things civil for a while. We continue the drive a couple more miles. Up ahead, there’s a big gap in the brush and mesquites. Truckloads of caliche are piled high, stacked up back to back at the edge of the clearing. They were just starting work on the well pad when the weather turned bad.

My pulse quickens as we get closer. In a few months, Kelly Oil & Gas will have everything set up for the five wells they have planned here. And that’s only the first step.

I have a lot riding on this project. I paid a couple million for the mineral rights when I had Addler buy this place for me. He’ll transfer it over when the time is right. It’s my best chance of going legit and dragging any future generations from the family business.

We arrive at the site, and I bring the truck to a stop. The clearing is filled with heavy machinery parked to one side, including several bulldozers. Likely we found the one we’re missing. The problem is, while they’ve started working on the pad, the damp ground may not support the truck’s weight, and we’ll end up stuck. Again, I’m stuck having to take Sage into consideration.

After scanning the area, I open the door and exit the truck. “Wait here.” I toss the instruction over my shoulder. “I’ll go check it out.”

But the passenger door opens, catching me off guard. “No way.” She shakes her head . “I’m not going to sit here and wait for you.”

“Stay in the truck, Sage,” I say firmly, but it’s a waste of breath. Even through the front windshield, I can see the determination in her expression.

“I can handle it.” She jumps out, slamming the door behind her.

Damn woman . I clench my jaw, taking the last few steps around the front of the truck. She barely manages to take a step when the distinct sound of a rattle fills the air. I freeze, my senses heightened. It’s the last thing you want to hear when you’re out in the middle of nowhere.

Sage freezes midstep. Her mouth drops open in a terror-filled expression. Every bit of color has left her face. She sucks in a breath, for what will likely be a bloodcurdling scream.

“Quiet.” I keep my voice even, catching her before she can make a sound. At least she has enough sense to listen this time.

I scan the area beside us, searching for the rattler. I know from experience how dangerous these reptiles can be. All I see is dirt, rocks, and grass. It’s not under the truck, so it has to be...

“It’s behind me,” she confirms, barely above a whisper.

I straighten so I can see past her shoulder. Sure enough, the animal’s coming out of the grass, the rattle sticking up from what looks like a six-foot body. It’s slithering along the edge of the road, its body going over rocks and brush, coiling as it prepares to strike. That only leaves me a second or so to act.

“Give me your hand.” Reaching out with my left, I grab her forearm, pulling her to me as I draw my gun with my right. She slams into my side. I use the momentum to pivot, getting her out of the way of a strike, in case I miss.

I bring my gun up, take aim, and squeeze the trigger then watch as the snake takes the bullet. Its body twists, dislodging from the initial coil. I aim two more shots at the head. The snake writhes slowly, not yet completely still. It's always the most disturbing part, thinking a snake has to be dead, yet the body's still inching along.

Sage's arms are around me, her face tucked against my shoulder. She's shaking. Who can blame her? Not that she can see it, but the snake's longer than she is tall.

Her fingers curl into my shirt as I check the area, making sure there isn't another threat to deal with. Damn it, now I've had to kill another animal because someone didn't think to check their surroundings.

"Let's get you in the truck," I say, but Sage's body tenses, and she tightens her hold on me. Does she think I'm going to take her to the thing that could've attacked her? "Come on. We're going to the driver's side."

Her grip loosens, and I'm able to get her to move, though her step is unsteady. There's too much at stake to try and have her walk around the truck. I set my gun in the holster and swoop down to put my shoulder to her stomach. She lets a surprised yelp as I straighten.

"Hush," I say, knowing it's not the slickest move, but it's the most effective in case I might need to pull my weapon again.

Once we reach the truck, I open the door and set her behind the wheel. She collapses against the backrest, pale lips trembling. "You're okay now," I assure her. "If you're gonna throw up, aim for the floorboard. Don't open the door."

She shuts her eyes. "I won't."

"Good girl," I say before turning my attention back to the equipment sitting a few

yards away. It matches what's on the inventory, plus the bulldozer we had missing. I could easily call it a day, but that's not how I work. "Let me go check the dozer, then we're outta here."

I close the door, leaving her on her own while I set out to confirm the serial number is the one on the list. I'm going to tell Addler to have them paint a number on the chassis big enough to see from a distance. They can use that orange spray paint they put all over the ground.

This situation could have turned deadly if one of the crew had been out here on their own. They can't carry guns and may not have seen the danger in time. Coming face-to-face with a six-foot rattlesnake is bad enough. Having it dig its fangs into your leg without being able to do much to it is something else.

Sometimes, when I close my eyes, I still see it happen.

* * *

Sage

"Wait here," he commands, voice laced with enough arrogance to make my skin prickle. "I'll go check it out."

Worse, he thinks it's a given that I'm going to obey. Does he think I'm incapable of handling myself? I clench my fists and brace myself to tell him off, but, before I can say a word, he's shut the door and is striding off with an air of confidence that borders on conceit. The nerve of this guy!

I grit my teeth and stare after him, a knot forming in my stomach. I can't just wait here like a useless lump. With a determined shake of my head, I grab the door handle and push it open, not willing to have him do everything for me.

“No way,” I announce. “I’m not going to sit here and wait for you.”

“Stay in the truck, Sage,” he warns, turning to face me.

I won’t be told what to do, especially by him. I’m not some damsel in distress who needs rescuing. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself, thank you very much.

“I can handle it,” I assert in a firm voice. I climb out and slam the door shut behind me, determined to prove to him that I’m more than capable of taking care of myself. I move forward, intending to catch up with him, but when he reaches the end of the truck, a bone-chilling sound stops me in my tracks.

A rattle. The sound of a snake in the vicinity. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end. In this part of the country, they grow big and mean. And, with my luck, I got one of the worst ones.

Panic seizes me, freezing me where I stand. What do I do? I can’t think straight. This is like a scene from a horror movie. The giant snake’s coming up from behind me, its jaw open wide enough to swallow me whole. Oh God. I’m going to fall over. It’s going to catch up. I suck in a breath, ready to scream.

“Quiet.” The strength in his voice cuts through my terror, snapping me out of my stupor. He scans the ground around us searching for the snake.

“Behind me.”

The snake must be big enough that he can spot it from where he’s standing. His poker face is nerve-wracking. Is it bad? Stupid question. Yes, it has to be. I can’t see it, but I can feel it. It’s too close. I’m not even covered by jeans, and there’s a snake behind me. I should be asking myself how close it is, how bad it is.

“Give me your hand.”

I hear the words in his unmistakable voice, but I’m practically blind. Tunnel vision leaves his face in focus, but I can’t see much else around me. I thrust a hand out, cringing as I anticipate fangs digging into me from behind.

There’s pressure around my forearm, and I’m virtually lifted off my feet. With a mumbled prayer, I push off with the tips of my toes, trying to get out of reach of danger. His powerful arm pulls me toward him, and I land against his left side with a solid thud. It’s like hitting a concrete barrier, only there’s a little give.

The sound of his gun going off reverberates in my head. I turn away, setting my left ear against his shoulder and burying my nose in his shirt. The scent of him fills my nostrils. It’s beyond detergent or fabric softener. It’s him. And I’ll forever associate the scent with this moment.

The gun goes off again. I flinch, tightening my hold on him like he’s the anchor I need to keep me steady.

“Let’s get you in the truck.”

Oh God. He wants me to move. I swallow hard. What if there’s another one close by? I try my best, but somehow I can’t get my body to move.

“Come on. We’re going to the driver’s side.”

He takes a step back, and I have no choice but to let him go. I’m not going to be clinging to him as he tries to move away. I gather what’s left of my dignity and concentrate on trying to put one foot in front of the other.

Ezequiel bends down and, in a flash, he puts his shoulder to my midriff. A second

later, my feet leave the ground, then the world turns upside down. This time I do let out a scream.

“Hush.” His voice is gentler than I’ve ever heard it when directed at me.

He turns around, and I brace myself against his broad back so I’m not just dangling here. He opens the driver’s side door and gently lowers me onto his seat. It’s the most thoughtful thing he’s ever done.

I lose all strength in my extremities as adrenaline rushes through me.

“You’re okay now.” He nods, as if to assure me everything’s fine. “If you’re gonna throw up, aim for the floorboard. Don’t open the door.”

I shut my eyes, utterly embarrassed at what just happened. “I won’t,” I manage to croak, shaking my head.

“Good girl.”

Good grief . He didn’t just try to praise me for not throwing up, did he?

“Let me go check the dozer then we’re outta here.”

He closes the door, making sure I’m secured inside the truck. While I sit here, my heart racing and my body still trembling with fear, he continues on to finish the job. He pauses, taking another look at where the snake should be, then keeps walking. Meanwhile, I can barely find the strength to drag myself over to the passenger seat.

You don’t belong here.

After a few minutes, Ezequiel comes back to the truck, his expression stoic,

unreadable. He climbs into the driver's seat and starts the engine, the sound filling the cab of the truck. We drive down the dirt road, back toward the hanger.

I'm still shaken, my hands trembling in my lap. I'm embarrassed that I let my fear get the best of me. Worse still, I had to be rescued by him. At the same time, I'm grateful to him for being there, for protecting me from danger.

We drive in silence for a while, the only sound the rumble of the truck. He doesn't even put music on.

I'm lost in my thought, trying to figure out what to do now that he's been proven right. We're finally within sight of the hangar. I gather up my courage and say what has to be said.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Ezequiel

“Ezequiel,” she says, breaking the silence that had descended upon us. I glance over at her for a second then turn my attention back to the road. “Thank you,” she whispers.

I’m not in the mood for gratitude from her or anyone else. I have enough on my mind already. I keep my eyes on the road and my thoughts to myself. But she seems to need to say more.

She takes a deep breath. “I thought I could handle it,” she says, her voice trembling. Every word she utters seems to cause her physical pain. “I’m not some fragile flower that needs protecting. I can take care of myself, normally,” she adds in a rush. “But you’re right...I don’t belong out here.”

What the hell is she talking about? I never said she didn’t belong here. But before I can even open my mouth, she continues, “I’ll turn in my resignation when Bill’s back in the office on Monday.”

Oh hell. I clench my jaw. She’s taken my words and run off with them, totally missing the point I was trying to make.

“I know you’re not a fragile flower.” I keep my eyes fixed on the road so I don’t lose my cool. “But that doesn’t mean you won’t get hurt out here. You aren’t careful. You charge ahead without looking or listening.”

“I heard you loud and clear,” she bites out. “You don’t want me here.”

“Enough.” I slam on the brakes, and the truck jerks to a stop. I turn to her then, looking her in the eye, while I set her ass straight.

“I never said you didn’t belong out here, Sage,” I say, keeping my voice as even as I can manage.

“You did,” she retorts, clearly not wanting to back down.

I let out an exasperated breath. “What did I say to you?” I ask, defensively.

“You said I don’t belong here,” she answers, her voice rising.

“No.” I shake my head, trying to remain calm.

Her eyebrows shoot up. “I’ve had those words echoing in my head since they came out of your mouth, Ezequiel. You said you thought I don’t belong here.”

Tension builds inside me. It’s been a long day, and dealing with Sage’s stubbornness is the last thing I need right now. I put the gearshift into park. “There you go, not listening.”

“You clearly—” Sage starts, but I cut her off. I’ve had just about enough of her attitude.

“What else did I say?” I ask.

She closes her mouth, but I can see the anger simmering just beneath the surface. If she could, she’d probably take a swing at me. But she doesn’t say a word.

I turn in my seat, setting my forearm on the steering wheel as I drive my point home. “You have no idea, do you?”

“I...” Sage’s mouth opens and closes a couple of times. I stare at her long enough that she squirms in her seat.

“I said you don’t belong out here, not-without-a-weapon . And not with you not watching where you’re going,” I remind her.

“Oh.” She settles back into the seat, all the bluster disappearing. It’s like she’s finally realizing the gravity of the situation.

“You know why I remember the words so clearly?” I continue, not expecting an answer. “Because you’re not the first person I’ve said them to.” I give her a few seconds to let that sink in. “As you’ve just learned, there’s shit out here that’ll kill you. You”—I pause—“illegals, cows, a horse. You’re not the first one to learn the hard way, and you won’t be the last.”

She nods slowly, her expression serious. “I understand,” she says, again.

“The job you’ve taken on is dangerous. This isn’t just pushing papers or typing on a keyboard. You’re running around the ranch, by yourself, and I don’t want anything to happen to you while you’re on my land.”

“I appreciate your concern,” she says softly. “I swear, I’m usually not like this.” She hesitates, wetting her lips. “Being around you, just...You throw me off my game. I end up feeling totally inadequate in the long run,” she admits, shoulders hunched.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’m not trying to make you feel inadequate,” I say, losing some of the bitterness. “I just want you to be safe.”

“I know,” she says. “And I appreciate it. It’s just...sometimes it’s hard to accept help from someone when you’re used to doing everything on your own.”

I nod in understanding. “I get it.” I’m the same way. Asking for help isn’t in my nature, but out here, in the middle of nowhere, it becomes necessary. Not even I can survive on my own forever. “But I guess my way of making sure you look out for yourself can be hard.”

She smiles at that, probably the first genuine smile I’ve seen from her. “Yeah, a little.”

“A little.” I scoff. Whatever brought her out to the middle of nowhere had to be bad. I’m no fucking shoulder to cry on, but at least she’ll live to see another day.

“You know,” Sage says, breaking the silence. “Maybe you’re not as scary as I thought you were when we met.”

How do I respond to that? I mean, she’s not wrong. While I have a reputation for being a hard-ass on the ranch, that doesn’t begin to cover who I was before.

Her face reddens, as if she’s regretting her choice of words. But it’s too late now. “I mean, you have this whole tough guy thing going on,” she rushes on, fumbling her words.

“Scary, huh?” I finally respond.

She gives a nervous laugh, the sound filling the truck cab. “Yeah. You’re all quiet and brooding, and you have that intense stare that makes me think you’re waiting to see how you can chew me up and spit me out...this time.”

I can’t help but chuckle at that. She’s not too far off, but I’m not going to admit that to her. Yet, somehow, the fact she picked up on that is oddly satisfying.

“And I’m sorry for...earlier.” She glances across the lot, to the hangar, an apologetic

expression on her face. “I was judgy, and I shouldn’t have done that.”

Resentment claws at my insides. So, I like looking at a woman’s naked body. Most men do. “Was it the porn or the selection?” I ask her, half-joking.

She tightens her lips, holding back a smile. “I guess I’ve never seen a woman with a fox tail.”

“Sometimes life gets boring. You go online, hit the wrong button, and end up going down the rabbit hole.” I shrug. “Or the fox hole, in this case.”

Her forehead wrinkles. “I’ve never seen you in town.”

“Nah. Got nothing to do there.”

She does a double take, eyes widening. “What do you do for fun?”

“Surf porn.”

She rolls her eyes, a slight smile at her lips. “When you go out, what do you do for fun?”

“Haven’t gone anywhere in a while.”

She cocks her head. “You don’t leave the ranch?”

Now, there’s a complicated situation if I’ve ever had one.

“There’s nothing out there worth doing.” I shrug. “So I’ve got no reason to leave.”

She turns thoughtful. There she goes, judging me again.

It's best I change the subject before she goes into the weeds. "Maybe you were judgy. That's what you said?"

"Yes." She smiles.

"Everybody's got to make a living. I'm sure that girl's getting paid to wear a tail."

"Not something I could ever do." She glances away. "I'd end up starving if that's how I had to make a living."

Starving? That's a fucked-up thing to say. For a second, the only sound is from the truck's engine. But you don't have to be an expert at reading people to know she's been through some shit. Whatever happened, it's made her feel like she's not good enough, and she thinks she needs to prove herself.

"Put your phone up there." I point to the holder Addler had me set up for when I drive him to the airstrip.

Her expression turns guarded. "Why?"

"Because I'm going to show you you're wrong."

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Sage

I'm stunned into silence. He's going to show me? Show me how? I turn to face him, expecting to find out I misunderstood what he meant.

There's something in his gaze, something intense and heated. Although it's technically my day off, I'm still at work. I should be appalled; any woman would be justified in having that reaction. I should be calling him out for being unprofessional. I should be telling him what he's insinuating is inappropriate.

I don't do any of those things. Instead, I'm frozen, my mind racing. I hate him...right?

I'm still holding his gaze, and what I see there makes my heart skip a beat. He's moved away from the driver's side of the truck, sitting close to me, his tall frame making him seem bigger now. I can feel the heat of his body next to mine.

Just in the minutes we've been talking like normal people, I've seen a different side of him. If I'm being honest with myself, I have to admit I find him attractive. But I'm not sure what this means. I'm struggling to focus, my senses taken over by this sudden situation.

A part of me wants to let go, but it's been a long time since I wanted a man. I've gone from nearly declining his call to contemplating letting him show me whatever he wants.

I nearly gasp out loud at the realization. I want this to happen. I want him. The sense

of hesitation is mixed with excitement, making my face flush.

“I...” I swallow hard, my mouth dry. “I’m not sure what you—”

“Put your phone in the holder and find out.” He gestures to the small mount attached to the truck’s frame. He wants me to record us.

I hesitate for a moment, my mind racing with doubts and fears. His expression shows nothing. What if I’m wrong? Then again, what if I’m right and he’s expecting a lot more from me? Am I setting myself up to land in trouble?

But then, a small voice inside me speaks up. It’s my phone . This time, even the voice in my head is urging me to take a chance. I’ve been playing it safe for too long, and maybe it’s time to take a risk.

Put your phone on the holder and find out.

“Okay,” I say finally, my voice barely above a whisper. My pulse is echoing in my throat. I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone. My hands are trembling, and I’m conscious of my own breathing. I’m trying my best to keep my mind from balking at what I’m about to do. I reach out and set my phone in the holder.

“Open the phone and turn on the camera,” he says, his voice low and rough.

Oh my . Something flutters in my chest, a mixture of excitement and anxiety. It’s bad enough to feel self-conscious about getting naked with a man the first time, now he wants me to watch it happen.

I nod, my throat suddenly too tight to speak. I reach out, setting my index finger on the screen, and swipe up. Nothing happens. Dismayed, I do it again, fighting back nervous laughter.

The phone doesn't unlock. Instead it switches to the number pad. My hands shake as I enter the code and bring up the camera. The image of the hanger fills the screen. I take a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves as I touch the little arrows and flip the camera view.

We're both on the screen. Taking that step seems huge. Now the critical side of my brain kicks in. I'm disheveled after everything that happened earlier.

That moment flashes through my mind again. Then he tugs me toward him, and I land against his side. The warmth of his body, the hard muscles, and the arm surrounding me all remind me of what it was like to be held. How he moved me out of the way and put himself in danger. I've never felt so vulnerable and afraid, or so protected.

"What do you see?" he asks, pulling me from my memory. I glance at the phone, and his eyes lock onto mine on the screen. "Tell me."

I turn my attention away from his face, focusing on the image of us. I'm a mess. My hair's all over the place. I lower my head, a look of dismay reflected back at me. "I'm—"

"No." He shakes his head, cutting me off. "You are pulling yourself out of the scene."

I bite my lip, trying to comply with his request. It's hard when he's right beside me. I'm so tempted to jump in and see what happens.

"Angle the phone down so you don't see your expressions." He reaches across me, and I sneak a look at him. His body seems much bigger when he's this close. "There you go."

I look back to see how he's changed the angle and zoomed so I can only see myself

from the shoulders down to just past my knees. Oh goodness. Here I thought I was being sneaky, but he must have watched as I was checking him out. “Okay.”

“Now you only see a woman on screen, not you. It’s just like what you saw on the monitor.”

I give a little laugh. “I don’t look anything like that,” I remind him.

“You let me be the judge of that,” he says. My breath hitches. I turn to him and find his eyes darker, his expression intense.

“What if—”

“Hit the record button, Sage.”

My heart races and my mind is in turmoil as I reach out and move to the video option. Taking a leap of faith, I press my finger against the red circle at the bottom. The circle turns to a red square, and the numbers at the top of the screen start moving.

I lean back, uncertain of what he wants me to do. Time is ticking away, and those numbers seem to be moving a lot faster than any clock would.

“Take the time to admire the woman’s body,” he says from nearby. “Look at the smooth, bare skin visible up to her collarbone.” I follow along as he says, completely out of my element. “Look at her chest. Follow the edge of her shirt down to her breasts.”

I’m openly studying the view as he might see it. Being honest, I think my breasts are bigger than the woman’s. I don’t know if that’s good or bad.

“Admire the cleavage you can see on screen.” He pauses, letting me catch up. “Know

it's nothing like the view I get from where I am," he says, sounding pleased.

Of course, with his height, he has to be looking almost straight down. That would give him a significantly better view than just the inch or so of cleavage I see on the screen.

His words have served his purpose. I am conscious of my body, or the body on the screen. Even more so of the fact he's watching also.

"Do you remember how the fox girl was holding herself?" he asks, his gaze trained on my chest.

My nipples pucker against my bra. That image is probably going to be burned into my mind for all eternity. I swallow hard. "Yes."

"I want her to cup her breast."

He's right. Looking at myself on screen, it's much different than if I could actually see my face. I bring my right hand up, cupping the bottom of my breast.

"She needs to fill her hand."

I slide my fingers up, covering the front of my breast. I change the angle, not sure how he'd prefer to see it done. Although it's not visible on screen, my nipple's a hard little ridge against the center of my palm. My breathing is shallow as I wait for the next thing he'll have me do.

"Watch her," he says, his attention on the screen. "See how she touches herself, how she takes the weight of her breast in hand. Tell me where you think she's enjoying it most."

The instruction allows me to change position, to readjust my hold as he watches. I settle for cupping the underside, but still high enough that the point where my index finger meets my palm is sitting right at my nipple.

“There,” I announce, in a voice I barely recognize. I glance over out of the corner of my eye. Seeing how much he’s enjoying this makes me want to do more. “Now, what’ll she do?” I ask, continuing on like we’re watching someone else.

“I’d like to see her pinch her nipple.”

I give myself a tiny squeeze, but the change in his breath tells me he noticed. It’s empowering, knowing I’m holding this man’s attention.

I stretch the moment out then slowly curl my finger, moving a half inch then another. He’s focused on the screen. I can’t decide what I want to watch, him or me.

I bring my thumb in, pressing both fingers against the hard peak. His lips part. What’s he imagining? I pinch, sending a shot of sensation through my head and down my body. A little shudder runs through me, leaving a wave of goosebumps. Again, he noticed. Men are visual creatures.

With that in mind, this time I don’t wait for him to tell me. He’ll want to have me play with my nipple. I roll it a bit, just enough to make the material of my blouse twirl. The change in his breathing fascinates me.

What started out as a hesitant caress, leaves me emboldened. I bend my finger and use my knuckle now. The caress is harsher, a deeper action. And big, bad Ezequiel Mata is barely blinking as he watches. I turn back to the screen.

“The contrast in size is a little surprising,” I say, as if it’s a casual observation. “I’m not sure if her hand is small, or her breasts are large.” I leave it there, waiting to see if

he'll pick up from where I left off. My heart is pounding as the silence is drawn out.

"I think it's her hand," he replies. "If it was a man's hand, her breasts might just fit perfectly."

He doesn't disappoint. Now to lead him along the path to do what I want.

"You think so, huh?" I ask with a skeptical tone. "I guess I'll have to take your word for it...unless someone comes along to show us."

"I suppose so." He slips a hand behind my waist. "Hmm, looks like you knew what was going to happen." He cups my right hip and slides me over with little to no effort. It's as if I don't weigh a thing, which we both know isn't true. "Have you seen this movie already?"

"No," I reply as he comes close enough for me to feel the heat of his chest against my back. "I'm not really into"—I catch myself before I say porn—"this kind of movie."

"Hmm, you might change your mind before long." His hand comes around my side. I raise my arm, giving him room to maneuver. He follows along my forearms until he's cupping the underside of my breast, sending a shiver through my body.

With my hand in the way, he's only able to fit two fingers along the underside. I have the absurd image of him holding a glass of wine. No, maybe it's more like a brandy snifter, considering the size.

"I don't know that that's quite fair," I add in a skeptical tone.

"How's that?" His index finger moves along my pinky. I want to bite my lip as I wait for him to just move me out of the way so he can touch me properly.

“Well, they’re not on equal ground. His hand is bigger than hers, so you can’t really tell.” That should be enough to have him pick up on what I want.

“That’s because he’s still settling in.” This time his left hand comes up to slide along my side.

Trust Ezequiel to throw me for a loop. He practically has me tucked into his shoulder. He has me lean back as his thigh presses against my left hip.

His fingers come up over my left breast, widening as he settles over the fullest part. He zeros in on my nipple, pushing hard against the stiff peak. Then he bends his finger and uses the knuckle against his thumb to mirror what I’m doing.

A gasp escapes me. The sensation is powerful enough to bow my back. I barely have enough mental capacity to turn my head to one side. The blasted man takes it as an invitation. He moves in close enough to have his beard brush along my jawline.

Ezequiel wraps his fingers around mine, gripping me tight enough to shoot sparks throughout my body. A whimper escapes me.

“You see? A perfect fit, just like I expected,” he says in a gravelly voice.

“Mmmhmm.” I can’t quite think straight as he takes his time to learn the feel of my body. It’s one hell of a reaction, considering it’s all over-the-clothes action.

I must have said it out loud because he releases my hand. I snap my eyes open, watching his fingertips glide over the goosebumps, burning a trail along my shoulders as he pushes the straps down.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Ezequiel

She has a hell of a way of issuing an invitation. I'm not stupid enough to let it pass.

I push the tank top and bra over her shoulders and down her arms. I take a moment to taste the spot behind her ear, inhaling the scent of her, an aroused woman.

I move along, right under her jaw. My attention goes down her chest to the cleavage offering a mouthwatering view from above. My only regret is that the view from this angle won't be on the screen to be enjoyed later. That means I'll have to savor every second.

Part of me wants to let go. I'm actually fighting to hold back. I'm not going to strip her down like I'm some damn teenager with his first woman. That would go too damn fast, and I want to enjoy this moment. To remember what she looks like and recall it whenever I'm alone, thinking about her.

The tank peels down, bringing the white bra with it. The top stretches, but the additional material bunches against her skin. It makes the little scoops of lace press into those incredible tits. They move just the slightest bit with every breath she takes.

I leave the sleeves where they are and move in, sliding over the soft, firm mounds until they're filling my hands. I take my time, keeping her covered from the recorder, stealing away a moment just for me. Though I know that if I was watching, and not touching, I'd want to yell at the damn idiot to move the hell out of the way so I could see her body. And I'm banking on the fact she'll be feeling the same.

The puckered skin around her nipple teases my fingers. They're tempting me to touch, but I'm going to make her wait, make us both wait, even if I'm torturing myself along the way.

I plunge into her bra, curving my fingers toward the shadowy triangle between her breasts. I take her weight, discovering the intense heat under the heavy mounds.

The shirt is stretched out for all its worth as I enjoy massaging, stroking her freely. She presses back against me and lets out a low moan that makes direct contact with my cock.

I wasn't going to go this far, but now that I have, I can't deny the fact I want more. More of this woman who I tried to keep at a distance from the very first day.

I thumb her nipples, watching the hard button bounce back, pointing, the very top sitting at the edge of the material. Only the ridge is visible to the camera.

My fingers close on her nipples—both at the same time, tightening at a measured pace. She's arching away, the back of her head sitting along my shoulder as I barely hold it together.

Her muscles tighten, and she cries out in a way that satisfies something inside me. That dark part of me wants to pinch her, holding until it's painful, then release her so she's sensitive. So every touch is somewhere between pleasure and pain.

That would go too fast. No, I'll take pleasure in the way she's reacting. I press my face alongside hers, enjoying the way her pulse is racing at her temple.

I run my tongue along her neck, enjoying the salty sweetness of her skin. Her hips are moving, as if she can't sit still. The constant shifting drags my attention down below. She brings her foot up to the corner of the seat, and I'm hooked.

Those loose shorts fold back against her thigh. Without thinking, I release her right nipple, two fingers going straight between her legs. She gasps. Her underwear isn't much of a barrier, and it wouldn't hold me back if it was.

A groan escapes me. She's wet enough that I hear it when I pull apart those swollen lips then go sliding down her pussy.

"You're fucking incredible," I grumble at her temple, something I never pictured myself doing.

The image on the screen is incredible. One breast is filling my hand. The other is crowned by a deep-pink nipple, pointing to the camera. Meanwhile, my hand is at the inside of her thigh, a third finger disappearing under her clothes.

My fingers move over the swollen inner lips, making her body jolt at the most sensitive spots. The sounds of me moving over her wet pussy fill the truck cab. I swirl a finger around her clit, and she cries out.

"You need more than a finger, don't you?" I mutter as I stretch to put my middle finger inside her.

"Oh God," she says within a heavy breath. I pump my finger, carefully adding a second into the tight little hole. "Yes."

I push at her shorts as far as I can reach then hold out the elastic so she can take over. "Take this." She obeys immediately, shoving the shorts along her legs.

But I want more than a few minutes of a movie.

Leaning back, I open the door on my side and drag her across the seat. The shorts are left behind along with her underwear and a sandal. We manage to clear the steering

wheel as I pull her legs over so they're spread along the side of the seat.

I clutch the edge of my belt, working it open as my attention stays on her. My cock's out in record time. I run a thumb across that rich temptation between her legs, making her arch her back. Fuck .

I glance over and scoop up my phone. With my left, I manage to get the damn thing unlocked and the camera mode to video. Capturing this sight will be heaven. Every shift of her hips, every inch of her lips, and every second of me as I bury myself inside her.

The camera captures her hands clutching at the seat. Her muscles clench with every inch she takes. I only hope the way her breathing is breaking up will make it into the recording.

The heat of her is incredible. The tightness intense. I bottom out and take a second to let my breath rush out. "So fucking good." It isn't long before she's shifting. Yeah, she's well ahead of me, but I'll make it good.

I pull out and have enough sense left to move my phone, catching myself pumping into her. I lean away, leaving the head in while I hope to capture the underside and my thumb rubbing against her. I'm barely moving, gritting my teeth with the effort to hold back.

"Ezequiel," she says in a breathy voice that threatens to tighten my balls.

My grimace relaxes a bit as I switch the view and manage to put my phone back in the holder. I wrap my hands around her hips, holding on as I take her for a long-awaited ride.

Sage is making little sounds of pleasure each time I plunge in. Both things I never

thought I'd hear. Her inner muscles are starting to quiver. It's making it hard to hold back. At this point, I'm not even sure how I've lasted this long.

She cries out. Her hips push against me as she comes up on her elbows. Her body's spasming, closing around my cock in the tightest grip I never could have imagined. I slam back in her tight little cunt. Once...Twice...Then I close my eyes as I claim the very last second I can be inside her.

I clench my teeth as I pull out just when my balls are ready to explode.

Sage is panting. She's wasted, her body limp on the seat. I'm ready to join her there, but I have to turn off the camera before she sees. Just one last thing to do. I run my fingers over her right cheek, spreading my cum over that beautiful ass.

This is another moment I wish I could catch on video because I know I've got to have a huge grin on my face right about now.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Ezequiel

I follow the road behind Sage until we reach the gate. Opening my door, I climb out of the truck, thoughts of her still filling my mind.

I walk past her vehicle and go around to the latch without a sideways glance. A woman could expect different things after what just happened. I'm not sure I'm prepared to find out what this one wants.

I pull up the chain that goes around the gate and the main post, taking the lock in hand. Yeah, I could have given her the combination. She's security, so she should have it anyway. But I chose to drive out with her. Why? She's unarmed, and unfamiliar with this particular area. Never mind that she made it from here to the hangar by herself earlier.

One hand on the gate, I walk back across the road to let her through. What will she do? I hadn't meant to go so far, yet here we are. The question is, where will this end up?

She drives past, and I curl my fingers into a fist, squeezing tight. There isn't a single vehicle on the road to distract us. I start preparing to deal with whatever she might say.

Only she pulls the truck out onto the highway and picks up speed. Instead of the drama I was half expecting, she pretty much took off without a backward glance.

I let out a breath as I walk back, putting the chain back in place as I work through the

mess of thoughts. It should be a relief that she kept driving, but somehow it's not.

Setting the lock in place gives a sense of finality. What the hell is wrong with me? It's been a long day, but we did everything we were supposed to. I should have a feeling of accomplishment, but instead, I'm restless as I walk back to the truck.

Doing a U-turn, I head home, determined to put Sage out of my mind. It's going to be a long day tomorrow with all the ranch hands off for the weekend. I'll need to step up the search for the last few cows. This would be so much easier if we had a helicopter. That would be a hell of an investment. Might make it easier to get out of here every now and then.

I've never seen you in town.

I should call Addler and give him an update. I pull my cell from my back pocket and dial his number then set my phone in the holder. The simple act triggers a replay of what happened earlier.

Sage is on the screen, stock-still. I could feel the energy pulsing through her body, a mix of excitement and nerves. She's holding her breath in anticipation, waiting to see what I'll do. My fingertips prickle, and I remember the feel of her skin as I move down her chest to go into her shirt.

"What's up?" Addler's voice comes through the speakers, breaking into my thoughts. It takes me a second to focus enough to open my mouth. I clear my throat before speaking.

"We hit all the locations on the list," I say, thinking back to the first stop, to the drilling rig then, ultimately, to the encounter with the rattler. "Some shit's in the wrong place, but we found everything we were supposed to." And a hell of a lot of trouble in the process.

“Okay. That’s one less thing to worry about,” Addler says, sounding more relaxed.

“Security’s going to turn in the list on Monday so they can get all the equipment posted in the right place,” I continue. “That way everything’s accounted for when you’re all official-like, Mr. de Marco .”

I can almost picture Addler on the other end of the line. That last bit was for him, since I know how he feels about being called Mr. de Marco. To him, that’s always been the old man, his grandfather, whose expectations he thinks he hasn’t met.

“She give you any trouble?” he asks, not taking the bait.

I hesitate, giving myself time to think. Spending the day with Sage led to a whole lot more than what I expected, but I don’t think Addler needs to hear about any of it.

“What do you mean?” I ask, trying to figure out what to say without sounding like a fool.

“I don’t know that anyone would appreciate being called in to work on a holiday,” Addler says, his tone sharper now.

Oh, well that’s not as hard to detail out for him.

“She was on her way to Laredo and turned around,” I explain. “Think she wasn’t too happy to be called in when she wasn’t in uniform, but that’s it.” I pause, as I remember getting her out of those shorts. “Other ’an that, she was pretty...” Hot? Wet? Sweet? Tight? “Accommodating,” I say, settling on a pretty neutral word.

Addler pauses for a moment, and I can almost hear the wheels turning in his head. Did I give too much away and leave him suspicious?

“You heading in?” he asks, changing the subject and effectively letting me off the hook.

“Yeah. Gotta grab a bite then go to bed,” I reply, feeling the exhaustion seeping into my bones. “It was a long day.”

“You two want to swing by for dinner and a couple of beers?” he offers.

Man, that sounds odd. The “you two” in the same sentence with “a couple” echo in my head. It’s not what he meant, but that’s how it caught my ear. All I can think is, there’s no couple here. While I was worried she would think that way, she made it clear when she drove away.

I shake my head, even though he can’t see me. “Nah. She just went out the gate.” Without a single word or a backward glance, “And I’m not good company,” I admit. “Just need a shower and a bed.” Alone, always alone.

Then all at once, there she is, in my bed. What would it be like to join her? To lie beside her and stare into those clear-blue eyes. To touch her like I did earlier. To hear her soft laughter...

I try to shake the image, but damn she looks good there. Fuck. “I have a lot to catch up on tomorrow,” I remind us both.

“Okay, man. Thanks for dropping everything last minute,” Addler says. “I’ll let you go. Get some rest.”

“Yeah, you too,” I reply, ending the call and pocketing my phone. I don’t need the damn screen staring at me, making me think of pale skin, stiff nipples, and heavy breathing. Her legs spread...

God damn it.

I put her out of my mind and keep driving. Somehow, I make it the few miles back to the house without thinking about her. A quick turn around the corral and barn show nothing out of place. So, for now, everything looks good for calling it a night.

I park by the side door and reach for the key. As I look up, I catch sight of the flowers beside the house. One, in particular, draws my attention. The bush is covered in white roses, the color turning a pale pink and intensifying as it reaches the center.

The flower calls to mind the sight of Sage as I had her over the side of the driver's seat. Now all I can see is the tightest pussy I've ever sunk my cock into. I'm hard in an instant.

Fuck my life . How many years have I existed out here on my own? I hadn't needed a woman, or wanted one, in a long, long time. Now suddenly, this redhead shows up on the ranch, and I'm all over her—or I'm wanting to be.

No...no, I don't—then the image of her in my bed comes back, wedging itself directly into my mind's eye. I'm over her, sinking my cock into that wet heat.

I suck in a deep breath. I've never considered myself soft. Every weakness was beaten out of me at an early age, but I ache at the thought of this woman. My cock's straining against my zipper, and my mouth waters at the possibility of tasting her. Everything I only got to see on a tiny cell phone screen.

That's it. I got to see everything, but I didn't get to do the things I wanted. There was too much heat, too much urgency to get to the end. All of it was on the screen, but I could hardly say what her skin tasted like.

I want to call her, to get her here, for a while. That's what I need. Just one more time,

to get her out of my system.

Not giving myself the chance to change my mind, I pull out my phone. I'm not the kind of guy who sends flowery messages. After the way she left, I don't know if she'll answer my call. She might not even acknowledge a message from me. But I know a sure-fire way around that.

I type out the four words sure to get me an answer.

Send me the video.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Sage

I'm on the road to Laredo when my phone pings with a message.

I'm almost at the same point as earlier, only this time I'm not dreading hearing from someone. The last call led to me having one of the most thrilling experiences of my life.

It's only a few seconds until I can pull over and see what's happening. If it was something at the ranch, I'd get a call. There's no follow-up to the message. Not like the incessant ringing I had before.

I arrive at the juncture, slowing down as I get off the road and onto the shoulder. I lock the doors again and pull my phone out.

Ranch Manager. This time, when I see it's Ezequiel, I don't have that sense of foreboding. No, this time it's anticipation of what he wants. I press my index finger to the screen to open up the message.

Send me the video.

The throbbing starts between my legs. The video is what started it all. The image flashes in my mind—his hand going into my top. How he circled my nipples. How he tugged and played until I was a hot mess.

The dots appear on the left-hand side. He's writing a message. Likely because he's seen I read what he sent. I bite my lip, waiting to see what he's going to say.

Send me the video . The message pops up, same as before.

I glance around at the mesquites and brush. A truck goes by fast enough it shakes the cab.

No.

I type the two letters, but I hesitate, biting my lip. He's in the video, too, so technically he'd have every right to it. But that's not a situation I want to get myself into.

I press the button, sending the message, then bite down harder.

I can picture his face. Mainly, the way his mustache will shift as his lip quirks in annoyance because he's not getting his way. That's too bad. This time, I feel no remorse in thinking that.

The three dots dance around on the screen again. Anticipation builds inside me, then the dots stop. What happened ? A call comes in, interrupting the message. Frustration takes hold of me for a split second, then I see the name flashing across the screen. Ranch Manager. Ezequiel.

My heartbeat thunders as the throbbing between my legs increases. I hit the button, answering the call.

"I didn't get to taste you."

Oh Lord.

My body showers me with moisture. It's not just what he said, but how he said it. I've never heard that tone in his voice before. It does something to me I can't quite

explain.

As for tasting me, I'm not sure what exactly he means. We didn't kiss, and, although he played with my breasts, he only used his hands. Then he moved south. Whew . I don't know if I'd be able to deal with much more than what we did. As it was, the orgasm he gave me blasted me into the stratosphere.

I wet my lips before I can say a word. "I didn't get to taste you either."

The growl, such a feral sound coming from the likes of him, seems fitting. Goosebumps run down my arms and over my chest, going everywhere he touched me not so long ago.

"Woman, you sure aren't making this easy."

Seems fitting that for once he's the one having a hard time instead of me. Not that the state of my panties would confirm that.

"How is the video of what we did going to help you with not tasting me," I tease.

"At least I'd have something to remind me of what I missed out on."

Missed out on? How could he even think that? What could he possibly do? The guy banged me so hard he cleared my sinuses.

"Send me the video," he says again.

I'm so tempted. I know what it's like to have someone take over your imagination. To have them be everything for you. Is that what he's looking for also? If so, how can that be me?

“I can’t,” I whisper into the phone. I couldn’t deal with having that video fall into the wrong hands. Having everyone see what I let him, a man who doesn’t like me, do to me, to my body.

“Why not?”

“I deleted it.” My hips shift as I feel the dull ache of having had him inside me.

“I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t have to,” I counter.

“Where are you?” This time it isn’t that demanding sour tone he’s always used. The velvet in his voice has my toes curling again.

I swallow hard as another water truck passes. “I’m on the side of the road.” I glance at the sign, showing Laredo in one direction and Catarina in the other. “Actually, right where I was last time you called.”

“I saw you didn’t go home.”

I probably should have. This changed everything about what I planned to do. The sun’s going down already, and I’m actually going to show up at a hotel with a man’s hands imprinted on the white tank top I’m wearing. I’ll have to walk in with my arms folded over my chest for them not to see he was playing with my boobs.

“No, I was trying to get to Laredo.”

He pauses. He’s quiet long enough that the silence creeps up on me. Why isn’t he saying anything?

“Come back.”

Out of all the things he could have said, I never would have expected that.

My heart’s in my throat. Another round? The throbbing between my legs urges me to say yes. My nipples tighten, reminding me of how it felt to have him touch me.

“Um...”

There’s no denying he’s making a demand, not asking me what I want to do. I don’t know if he’s even interested in what I want, what I need. It’s an order. Nothing less.

Yet, I’ve never wanted something so badly.

“It’s late.”

It’s my excuse to buy myself some time. To figure out if it’s what I’ll do. This afternoon, it was a moment of passion when I was vulnerable. Maybe it’s what I wanted to hear. Maybe at some point I could come to regret it. But, if I go now, it’s my own decision, no matter what his tone is.

“And?”

“I’d never make it to town in time to grab a hotel. It would be the middle of the night when I got there.”

“Who says you’d be leaving before the sun came up?”

Dear Lord.

“Maybe I can talk you into letting me record you again.”

Oh hell . My breath rushes out. Images assault me out of nowhere. His strong arm around me, fingers spreading over my breasts. My shorts at my knees and his fingers inside my panties. I can still hear the sound of his fingers moving through my wetness, my breathing shallow as I tried to keep it together while he fondled my clit.

“You’re thinking about it,” he says, knowingly.

“I—” The blush of embarrassment rushes through me. I never thought having a man’s hand under my clothes would be such a turn-on. “You’re just trying to get some amateur porn.” I chuckle. “So you can get off on the image of me.”

“Sweetheart, I’ve been getting off on the image of you a for a while.”

“Oh my God,” I mumble. I can’t even imagine that happening. I’m caught somewhere between embarrassed, shocked, and a little turned on at the thought of being his fantasy.

“Now, I want the real thing.”

The memory of my pussy trying to tighten around him sends a shudder through my body. “Okay.” It’s little more than a whisper, but his breath rushes out.

“You know how to get to the Torres house?”

I have a mental image of the map on the wall. The Torres house is about half a mile from the main house. “Yeah, I think so.”

“I’ll send you the combination to the lock. That way you don’t have to pass a guard shack.”

That’s thoughtful, considering my position and the rumors that would start. It also

keeps me from going across the road in front of the main house, which may come with its own set of problems.

“I’m on the way.”

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Sage

As I approach the Torres House, my excitement's building. The sun's going down in the distance, casting gold, pink, and purple rays across the sky.

A man on a tractor waves as he continues to mow, leaving a clearing that extends for a couple of acres. I wave back and continue along to my destination.

Along the drive leading up to the house, the mesquites and brush have been cleared away. The spacious area has nothing but bright green grass with the edges of the clearing lined with nopal. I can feel the weight of my foot pressing down on the gas pedal as I approach the house, and my heart races with anticipation.

The Torres House is exactly as I imagined it would be: a rustic ranch home sitting amid large, shady trees.

The stones covering the bottom half of the house are a mix of light and dark shades, giving it an earthy, organic feel. They provide a beautiful backdrop for the multitude of rose bushes lining the side and front of the house then disappearing around the corner. They're in full bloom, the larger flowers bursting with color.

It's utterly charming, and totally unlike the image I have of big, bad Ezequiel Mata.

I pull up to the house, enjoying the contrast between the rustic charm of the house and the ruggedness of the man himself. This is like stepping into a different world, one far removed from the hustle and bustle of the city I left behind.

I know why I'm here, and I know what he wants from me. But I also know what I want from him. He'll use me as much as I'll use him. I have to remember this is nothing more than two people wanting to get off. This is just a fling, a temporary escape from reality.

I reach back and unhook my bra, giving in to a sudden urge to shed all inhibitions. It's not long before the hooks are free, and I pull the strap down one arm then another. I manage to maneuver out of the thing without too much struggling. Then I toss it in the back seat like I'd discard an unwanted wrapper.

I adjust the girls and take a deep breath before opening the door. The grass extends out behind the house. It's cut short, likely for safety's sake. I can't help but think of what happened earlier, and a shiver runs down my spine. I scan the area, looking for any signs of danger, but everything seems to be in order. I finally feel safe enough to step out of the truck.

The air is thick with the scent of freshly cut grass mixed with the earthy aroma of mesquite, something I'm finally getting used to since I moved to South Texas. I skim the edge of the lawn, reaching the rock-lined sidewalk leading up to the house. The door opens just as I reach the front steps.

"You're learning," he says, with a hint of satisfaction as he pushes open the metal screen. Another security measure common in the area.

I suck in a breath at the sight of him. He's even more rugged and handsome than I remember, his chiseled features and intense gaze taking my breath away. He's freshly showered, wearing a black-and-blue checkered shirt that hugs his broad chest, and jeans that fit him like a glove.

Why have I never noticed this about him?

I glance down at his feet and see he's wearing socks. It's a small detail, but it adds to his charm, making him seem more approachable and slightly less intimidating.

But as I look back up at his face, I see that his attention is focused on my chest. My nipples harden under his scrutiny, and a wave of desire washes over me. The dark promise in his expression sends a flutter of anticipation through me.

He holds the screen door open for me to enter. The safety and security of the door add to my excitement, knowing that we have privacy. We're practically hidden away from the rest of the world.

I approach him and can't help feeling like I'm about to walk into the den of a beast. He's a head taller than me and normally ferocious, so I'd say I'm justified. Though I know what's about to happen, and I can't wait to see where this will take us.

As I walk past him, I catch a whiff of his clean scent. I wish I had the opportunity to shower. Instead I show up for a booty call smelling like I've been riding around in the truck all day. And maybe like he's been riding me. The evidence of that last part is still on my right butt cheek.

The living area has comfortable-looking, overstuffed furniture and a big screen mounted on the wall.

He shuts the door behind me and, before I can even turn around, he scoops me close, walking me back until I'm pressed against the door. My anticipation turns into surprise at his sudden move, but I'm thrilled by his reaction to me.

The door feels cool and solid behind me, like a reassuring barrier separating us from the outside world. I can feel the heat of his body through his shirt, and I can't resist running my hands up and down his broad back, reveling in the hard muscles rippling beneath my touch.

He cups my breast through the tank. “You did this for me?” he asks, his lips beside my temple.

The hard tweak on my nipple earns him a gasp as a wave of sensation shoots up to my temples.

“Maybe I did it for me,” I murmur.

His lips find my neck and I tilt my head back, a shiver running down my spine as he nips and sucks at the sensitive skin. It’s a heady feeling to be wanted this much, by a man like him.

He brings the tank up, pulling it over my head to leave my breasts bare to him. He fills his hands, covering me completely, bringing his thumb up from underneath to put pressure on just the right spot. I’m going to end up a puddle at his feet.

Never one to do things the easy way, he picks me up and pulls one leg around his waist as he presses me against the solid wood behind me. His mouth goes to my nipple. I’m left to hold on for dear life as I wonder how a man’s mouth can be so hot. How can his tongue licking at my flesh make me feel so good?

He switches, enjoying one breast then the other, making me wetter than I’ve ever been in my life. My pulse beats between my legs, and I’m nowhere near his cock.

He comes up, leaving a trail of kisses along my chest, threatening to burst that bubble of pleasure surrounding me. His lips are a breath away from mine. “Your turn to taste.”

With nothing more than that, he sets me on my feet then shifts his gaze down to my face. He puts his hand on my collarbone, adding pressure until my foggy mind picks up on what he wants. It’s got to be every porn watcher’s fantasy.

I sink to my knees, passing the hard bulge behind his zipper along the way. Sitting on my heels leaves me too low. So, as soon as he drags the zipper down, I straighten.

He shifts his clothes, letting his jeans fall away to revealing a huge, hard cock any woman would want to worship. I don't get the scent of his body, only the clean, neutral smell of soap. I wrap my fingers around the base and take him in my mouth.

How did something this size fit inside me? Then I'm reminded of that burn of penetration the first time he went in. He'd worked me until I was slick, actually a lot more than that. It still didn't prepare me for him. Or for the pleasure in the pain I was experiencing after so long.

He's far enough in for me to be in danger of gagging. I swirl my tongue along the underside, learning the feel of him. A hum of deep-rooted satisfaction comes from somewhere inside him.

"Touch yourself," he commands.

As much as I love being in charge of my own decisions, I revel in the way he says it. I set my free hand over my left breast. I barely have the mental capacity to deal with both his pleasure and mine. I'm too far gone. He's too damn big. And I'm too damn wet.

It's when I get to my knuckle that I get that jolt through my body. "Ah." What I half expected was him to pump his hips, choking me in the process. But he pulls up at the base of my skull, and I stand.

One hand is at my waistband. I push down on my shorts and underwear, shaking in anticipation. He brings me up, and I lose a sandal as I shake off the last of my clothes before he brings me up to wrap my legs around his waist.

“Condom,” I manage to say.

“You’ll take what I give you,” he says from between gritted teeth.

I have a fraction of a second where I feel him at my entrance, then he shifts his hips and thrusts inside me.

My entire body goes rigid from the sharp pain of that initial stretch of my pussy. He retreats, and I can feel the loss of him, as if there’s an emptiness inside me now.

“You’ll enjoy it,” he says pumping in and out of me, a hard rhythm where his body is hitting mine with a vengeance. “And when you’ve come all over my cock, which you will...”

Oh God, yes I will . I tighten my hold on him.

“Then I can think about pulling out.” I may have lasted a matter of seconds after that. I curl my fingers into the thick cotton of his shirt as my hips try to follow him every time he moves away. Then I shatter.

My cry fills my ears. My body’s spasming around his thick cock.

“F-fuck you, Sage.”

He presses his upper body against, breathing hard as he pulls out of my body on the last thrust, leaving me wrecked. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to sit right again.

Ezequiel

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” she says, looking up from the half-eaten dinner. “Why is this called the Torres House? What’s a Torre or Torres ?” She scrunches her eyebrows.

“Torres is a last name.” I haven’t dealt with outsiders in so long that it seems weird to have to explain that to someone. Although, one look at her pale skin and red hair and you know she’s not a local. “It was built by Addler’s family a couple of generations before his grandfather married into the family.”

“Generations?” she asks skeptically. “So I guess that means you weren’t the one who planted the roses?” she asks, trying to hide a teasing smile.

“No.” My tone should leave no doubt. But the damn things are the main reason she’s here now, so I shouldn’t complain. “They were there before his grandmother was born.”

Sage looked surprised. “Was she born here?”

I nod. “She was here for a while when she was a girl. But there was some question about the ownership of the ranch. By the time that was worked out, she was married.”

“It was years, then.”

“Yes. They only stayed here for a few months, while the old man built the main house. Then he added a wing for her folks and moved them over there.”

“He took his in-laws to live with them?” Sage’s voice is incredulous.

“I know.” I shrug. “But the old man really liked her old man.”

Sage glances around the kitchen, taking in the custom cabinets and butcher block counters. “This place doesn’t look like it’s been around that long.”

I nod. “It’s been remodeled over the years.”

“It’s really nice,” she said, eyes brightening with apparent surprise.

“I like it.” I’m not above feeling a swell of pride, knowing I’m the one who did the work.

“Nothing like the place I’m staying.” She makes a face. “It’s basically a man camp. Those trailers are old. They’ve probably been used by hundreds of men over the years, and nobody’s bothered to even paint the place, much less do any upgrades.”

“Some people don’t like to change things much.”

Sage raises an eyebrow. “It makes me wonder, why would anyone remodel a house with so much history tied directly to the family?”

“The house is old enough that I’d be chopping wood to cook and drawing water up from a well, using rope and a metal bucket.”

She looks over at the gas stove then at the faucet with the water purification system. “Ah, I didn’t even think of that.”

“The old man was good with the change,” I say, thinking back to the conversation. “Said it was better to have someone make it livable than to have the place be

abandoned.”

“Is that Roman de Marco?”

“Yeah.” I nod.

“I’ve heard about him,” she murmurs under her breath, tapping her fork on a lasagna noodle.

“I’d be surprised if you hadn’t.” The man’s a local legend. And with the family keeping to themselves so much, it’s only worked to make people curious about the whole lot. “He’s another one who doesn’t like snakes.”

“Oh?” That catches her full attention.

“He used to have a snake roundup. Any of the cowboys who brought one in got a bonus added to his weekly pay.”

“Well that was nice...I think,” she says, sounding like she hasn’t figured out how to feel about the old man’s edict.

“Seems one got too close to Addler when he was a kid. The old man wasn’t willing to risk his only grandson getting bit, so he set out to make this a safer place.”

“I can see his reasoning.” She nods. “Do they still do that?”

“No. He stopped sometime after Addler went off to school.” I take another drink from the bottle of Mexican Coke.

“That makes sense.” She cuts off a chunk of noodle and eats it.

“You can fix yourself something else to eat if you don’t like the lasagna. I should have stuff in the fridge and a stocked pantry.” It’s one of the meals Mayela left me, so I don’t have to mess with cooking during the week. Personally, it’s one of my favorite things to eat, along with the garlic bread, but she may be one of those picky eaters.

“Oh.” She straightens in her chair. “No, this is delicious,” she says, turning back to the plate. She has another forkful of what must be cold lasagna now. Then again, like pizza, this stuff is still good even when it’s been sitting out. “It might be too delicious,” she admits. “I love pasta, but...”

She stops herself and squirms in her chair.

“But?” I’m not about to let her off the hook.

She blows a breath out, keeping her gaze pointed away from me. “I gain weight really easily.”

“You got no complaints from me.” I take in every inch of her body until a blush builds up on her cheeks. “Then again, I suppose I wore you out.”

“I guess you did.” The color turns a deeper red.

“If you’re ready to call it a night, go ahead. I’ll show you where the bedroom is.” I point to the hall.

“That actually sounds fantastic.” She gives me a tired smile. “I’m sorry. I feel like such a wimp,” she admits, hunching her shoulders as if she’s not comfortable with admitting that.

I wave it off. “Nah, don’t worry about it. It’s probably your bedtime anyway.” I’ve

seen the people from Kelly Oil & Gas pull into the yard at six or seven. They have about an hour drive to get out here from either Carrizo or Laredo. That means they get up at four or five to start their day.

She stands. "Let me help with the kitchen."

"I got it." While I normally use disposable, I figured having stuff to clean up would give her time to do whatever women do before they go to bed.

"Do you mind if I grab a shower first?" she asks, setting her chair back then moving to put her plate in the sink.

"Yeah, go on in." I point toward the bedroom. "I'll wait until after you shower to do the dishes so I don't use up all the hot water."

"Let me just go out and get my bag from the truck." She'd mentioned spending the night in Laredo, so she must have packed.

"I'll go get your clothes," I say, stopping her in her tracks. "It's dark out, and you parked far away from the house." I slip on some shoes and grab my gun belt.

"I didn't want to park on the grass," she says nervously. "Um, is that really necessary?" She folds her arms under her breasts as she watches me work the buckle.

"There's a lot worse than snakes out there."

"I suppose so." Sage's gaze drifts to the window, the corners of her mouth turning down.

"As a rule, it's better to have it and not need it." Normally, I'd just stick my gun at my lower back, but I have no idea what her suitcase looks like. "Where do you have

your keys?”

She reaches into her pocket pulling out a key fob that doesn't have a single key on it. Probably one of those switchblade keys, but what about a key to her place, or the office?

“The clicker is all you need to get in.” She points at the button for the door.

“Let me go ahead and bring it in closer, just in case. I'll park it around this side of the house, by my truck.”

She chews on her lip for a second. “Only company personnel should drive the company trucks.”

Of all the crap to worry about. But then, she's the one who runs security.

“You realize Addler owns the company.”

“Um, yeah. I guess so.” She hands over the key. “As long as you have the fob, you just need to press the button on the dash to get it to start.”

I pull the front door open then scan the area before I flip the lights on and check again. No movement anywhere. Satisfied, I step outside. While I've never had a problem, even when I have to go to the back and check any animals I might have to keep in the corral, you never know what or who might be in the shadows. And I'm not about to put her in danger.

I reach her truck, check the bed then the window to the back seat then press the button on the fob. As soon as I open the door, I know I'm going to have a problem. The seat's too far forward for me to get in behind the wheel. I move the seat back so I have enough leg room then climb in.

Moving the truck around the house, I park it by the kitchen entrance, right next to mine. I catch sight of the same flower that got me thinking about her.

Yeah, I didn't have much of a problem with the length of her legs earlier. I was able to move her around wherever I wanted without a single problem.

I get down and move to the back door then reach for the duffel bag on the seat. The bra she wore is on the floorboard. I reach for it, fingering the lace along the edge, then bring it to my nose, inhaling her scent. Yeah, she's all woman.

With that, I close the door behind me, hit the alarm, and head back into the house. The image of the white rose stuck in my head.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Sage

I'm filled with excitement and trepidation, my heart beating fast in my chest. In a matter of hours, I've gone from hating Ezequiel to having mind-blowing sex with him. Twice. Now I'm in his house, standing in his multi-head shower, letting hot water cascade over my body. The droplets cling to my skin, and I revel in the sensation of preparing myself to share my body with him again.

Reality seeps into the moment. This should be a one and done. I can't fall into the trap of giving myself over to him completely. The last time I trusted a man, it nearly ended me.

Come here, you fat bitch.

The memory sends shivers down my spine. I push it away, refusing to let it intrude into my life and ruin this moment. However, I do need to be careful with Ezequiel. This should be a one-time thing, and I need to keep my emotions in check. No matter how tempting it may be, I can't let myself get attached. I need to create some distance between us, especially since I'm already feeling the pull toward him.

I close my eyes, letting the water wash away my anxiety and fear.

The temperature drops, so I turn the water off, my fingers lingering on the sleek metal knobs before I step out onto the plush bathmat. I reach for the towel, enjoying the softness against my skin as I dry off.

I take a moment to appreciate the exquisite design of the bathroom around me. I'm

not used to this kind of extravagance, and, I have to admit, I feel a little out of place. I can imagine myself in a fancy hotel that has a huge bathroom. The oversized bathtub takes up one side of the room, tempting me with its ability to fit two or three people. I could see myself soaking away the troubles of the day, bubbles tickling my nose. Custom cabinets, anti-fog mirror, and a counter so big I could stretch out on it.

Wrapping the towel around me, I move to the counter and reach into my bag for my toiletries. After some face lotion, I run a brush through my hair, the bristles catching on knots as I work my way through. There isn't a hair dryer in sight, and I'm not comfortable enough to go through the drawers to see if I can find one, so I make do with towel-drying my hair as much as possible.

I reach into my bag for my lavender nightie with a ruched top and flowing bottom. The silky fabric slips through my fingers as I pull it over my head. I pause for a moment, admiring myself in the mirror, feeling beautiful and desired. I'm not exactly sure what to do next. I know why I'm here, why I agreed to come. Does he expect me to be naked? I bite my lip. Well, I can forgo the panties. If he expects clothes, I'm there. If he doesn't, it's one less thing to deal with.

I reach for one of the water bottles he has on the counter so I can brush my teeth. The minty flavor tingles on my tongue as I rinse my mouth. I reach into my bag for my meds and pull out the pill box. I flip it over, emptying the contents into my palm, then pop them in my mouth as part of my nightly ritual. Grabbing the water, I take a drink and down the pills.

It's only after I swallow that I realize one of the pills helps me sleep. I scrunch my toes against the smooth, cool tile and curse myself silently for forgetting such a crucial fact. How will that affect me tonight? How long until it kicks in? Did I just ruin any plans he had?

Taking a deep breath, I drop the pill box back into my bag. It's too late to do anything

about it now. I take hold of the doorknob, my nerves fluttering in my stomach. This is it. The moment of truth. I pull the door open and find myself alone.

There's a moment of disappointment, but he did say he was going to clean up the kitchen. That was going to happen after I showered, so he wouldn't take the hot water.

I pick my phone up from the counter then pad across the plush carpet to the king-sized bed. I'm even sure which side is his. I bite my lip. Should I go check with him? No, being here alone, he'd take the side he can get in and out of easily. That means I'll take the far side.

Sitting down on the edge of the mattress, I place my cell on the bureau, beside the lamp. I take a moment to admire the room. The rich mahogany furniture is beautifully crafted, with rounded corners and intricate handles on the drawers. The room is dimly lit, with a soft glow from the bedside lamps creating a warm and inviting atmosphere.

The man camp seemed to be going for shabby chic, but, over the years, it's turned into dumpster chic. Sigh. But it's better than having to pay for a place myself. With everything running more expensive in these little oilfield towns, it would eat into my check and sit empty for all but the time I'm sleeping.

As I lay on the bed, the smooth, cool sheets surround my legs. It's a comfy cocoon against my skin. The scent of Ezequiel lingers in his bed. The intimacy of this moment makes me nervous. I'm not exactly sure what to expect. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves as I turn off the lamp on the nightstand. The room is plunged into darkness, and a shiver of anticipation runs down my spine.

Ezequiel

I walk into the bedroom. The sound of the door clicking shut behind me echoes in the silent room. Sage is tucked into my bed, the covers down around her torso, showing the top of her breasts. Her chest is rising and falling with each peaceful breath. She looks so pure and innocent, it makes me feel like a monster for bringing her here.

I sit on the edge of the bed, watching her sleep. The urge to touch her is strong, so I reach out to brush a strand of hair away from her face. She doesn't stir, and I'm relieved she's sleeping soundly.

I rub my hand over my chest, over the area with the tattoo I had no choice in accepting. It's a constant reminder of the shit I've gone through because of my father. The sacrifices I've made and the consequences I face for being part of my family.

Her world is so different from mine. Being security would make things hard enough to deal with. Being that she's not a local, she could never understand the things that happen here, the deals that need to be made, and the people I'm related to.

It's a situation, a life I never would have escaped without the help of Roman de Marco.

If I hadn't let my dick take over, I would have put her in another room. She'll never understand, never accept who I am. The best thing I can do is let her be and send her on her way in the morning then stay the hell away from her in the future.

I feel empty inside at the thought, something that hadn't happened in a long time. It's

the beginning of a chasm that will never heal.

She's lying there, peacefully asleep in my bed, looking like some beautiful fairy who wandered into my dark world. I want to protect her, to keep her safe from the things that happened in my past. From who I am and the things I've done.

My gut clenches with the realization that I want her, consequences be damned. I want this night with her so bad it hurts.

I take off my clothes, feeling like a fool for stripping down to my undershirt. I climb into bed with her, my hand slipping around her waist, pulling her close, feeling her warmth and smelling her sweet scent. She's completely out.

I study her face, her features relaxed, making her look so innocent, so vulnerable. It's a dangerous game I'm playing, but I can't help myself.

She doesn't wake up as I set my knee between hers, climbing on top of her and pushing her legs apart to settle between her inviting thighs. Despite her being unconscious, finding her pussy bare sends a rush of blood to my already hard cock, making me ache for her even more. It's something that'll flash into my mind over and over for a long time to come.

I put two fingers into her cleavage then pull down the top. Her breasts are bare, the oversized globes naked for me. Running my hand over the soft skin, I come up to roll her nipple, relishing the way it hardens beneath my touch.

Despite it all, she still doesn't wake up, but the thrill of the forbidden makes the experience all the more exciting. This is my moment, my chance to explore her body, to feel the heat between us. It's dangerous, but it's also intoxicating.

I sink into her body, her pussy offering less resistance than earlier. The slightest noise

of pleasure comes from deep in her throat. This isn't a normal sleep. She's knocked out hard. Her body's moving every time I bottom out, but she seems to be oblivious outside of the body's normal reaction.

Annoyance borders on anger, spurring me on. My thrusts grow harder; the sound of my hips hitting hers fills the room. The sound of my breathing echoes in my ears. Any other time I'd be relishing this moment, but I'm riding the fine line between anger and pleasure at the shit she's pulled.

My balls tighten, emptying along her inner thigh and pussy as I pull out. I feel nothing toward her, nothing I'd have with a shared experience. That pisses me off more than I could ever imagine.

Done, I climb off her, to my side of the bed. I turn, going up on an elbow. What the fuck is she thinking?

Her cell lights up on the nightstand. Curious, I reach across her and pick up the phone. It's a notification of a payment, nothing urgent. But having the cell reminds me of the video I asked her for, something she failed to send.

With little remorse, thanks to her current state, I key in the code I saw her enter earlier. After a few taps, her phone unlocks, lighting up the bedcover and my arms. I automatically glance over at Sage, but she's oblivious. I suppose if taking a cock doesn't wake her, the light won't either.

I go straight to the albums and find the video. There it is: Sage in my truck, her arm stretched out to press the record button. I attach it to a message and send it out. A few seconds later, my phone buzzes when the video arrives. Satisfied, I go back and delete the message to myself.

Now that I'm done, I give myself free rein to investigate. Her pictures are from the

ranch, the shots she took during the cattle strike, the damage done to a road after the rain, and these types of work pictures going back a couple of years.

She's also included a bunch of memes she's got off social media sites. Exercise routines, food, a mixture of desserts and protein shakes, and sunsets. They're primarily taken at the office, but a few are from the lake, and some at places I don't recognize.

Out of the thousands of pictures, there's one with a man and woman, their features familiar enough that I know they're her parents without having to ask.

The messages don't have much either. Me, Bill, a guard, another, Elena, guard, guard, guard, Mike, and more things from work. Finally, I come upon a message from "Dad". I press on the message without bothering to ask for permission.

Hey, pumpkin, we haven't heard from you. I know you're dealing with the pain and old enough to look after yourself, but you're still my little girl. I'm sorry I failed you. I wasn't there when you needed me most, but don't take it out on your mother. We love you.

I'm stuck on the word pain. Being that he's her father, it could be anything from a broken heart to physical pain. But, she's apparently able to deal with it. It's still made me curious.

I quickly go to my message and hit the share-location button. Why? I'm not even sure, but I chose to follow my instinct.

Sage

I wake up to silence and unfamiliar shadows in the corners. The room isn't permeated with sweat, age, and the stale smell of cigarette smoke. It's definitely not the dingy old trailer I've called home for the past few months. I blink a few times, trying to clear the fog from my brain.

The scent of wood and leather are mixed with the unmistakable fragrance of a man. Ezequiel. My blood's rushing in my veins. I reach out to touch the cool softness of the bed sheets, hoping to find him lying next to me. My heart races as I look around the room, but he's nowhere to be found. I'm alone.

My inner clock is off. I'm not sure how long I knocked out, but it feels like I might have slept through the night. My mind races to try to piece together the events of the previous night. Did he come to bed? Slowly, I sit up, to have the sheets fall away from my bare breasts. I bring the sheet up, covering myself, before my sleep-muddled brain realizes the cap sleeves on my nightie have slipped down to my shoulders. I pull the sheet away to find the bottom of the nightie up around my hips. Did I have restless sleep?

I have a vague memory of his hands roaming my body. Him kissing my shoulder... But that hasn't happened...I think. As I try to steady my thoughts, I can feel his presence all around me. It's his home, his room, and his bed. He's left a mark on this place, and it's impossible to ignore.

Memories flood back into my mind. The intense passion, the heat of his breath on my neck, and the desire that consumed me. Yesterday was something else. I've never

experienced anything like it before. But, did that extend to last night?

I turn to get up, but my body protests, bringing me to a complete stop. I flinch at the stab of pain at my hips and the curve of my butt. I pause, taking a deep breath and allowing myself to take stock of every twinge and adjust before I have to move. To make matters worse, my body burns from the unfamiliar stretch of my inner muscles. He's bigger than any man I've ever been with, and he gave me a run for my money.

I've never experienced a day like yesterday.

With a deep breath, I slide over to his side and swing my legs over the edge of the bed then manage to hobble for the first few steps. As I reach the door, I pause, listening for any sounds. I hear the faint humming noise of the air conditioner, but little else.

It's weird not to hear someone snoring, coughing, or moving around. It's something I've gotten used to with thin walls. This is absolute heaven.

I slowly turn the doorknob and push the door open, stepping into the dimly lit bathroom. I'm washing my hands when I finally hear noise. My reflection in the mirror confirms my hair's a plastered mess. I quickly turn the water off and reach for the plush hand towel. Scooping my brush up from the top of my bag, I run it through my hair, doing the best I can so he doesn't find me looking a mess.

There's a knock on the door, firm, solid, like the man himself. My heart pounds. He came looking for me, and I'm still sore, even though it's been hours since we were together. I'm just not used to being with a man any more.

"Sage." His voice comes through the door.

"Just a minute." I put the brush down. Did I happen to wake up when he left? No, the

sheets were cool.

“Now.”

My eyes widen at the hard edge of his voice. “Okay.” I reach out and unlock the door, the sound of the bolt amplified in the silence. Taking a deep breath I open the door to join him in the bedroom. Only he’s at the door, blocking my way. He’s turned the lamp on so I can see the anger etched on his face. It startles me enough to bring me wide awake and alert.

“What are you on?” he asks point blank.

“I...” I shake my head. “No. I’m not.” I swallow hard. “I’m not on anything.”

“Don’t give me that shit.” His scowl grows darker. “There’s a difference between a heavy sleeper and a woman who doesn’t realize she’s being fucked.”

A gasp escapes me as the reality of what he said sinks into me. He had...he—we had sex? “But...” my brain goes blank. This is too much to process in the middle of the night.

“That’s what I thought.” He pushes past me, going straight to my bag. “I don’t want any shit in my house.”

I take a deep breath, trying to stay calm, but my mind races.

I’m at his heels, the blood rushing to my cheeks. “It’s not drugs,” I explain from beside his shoulder, my voice trembling. “I have a prescription.”

“That doesn’t mean you aren’t addicted to something.” He jerks my bag to the edge of the counter, finding the pill box at the top, next to my hairbrush.

“Ezequiel, please,” I beg, my voice shaking. “It’s just my medication.”

He grabs the pillbox. “I need it to function.”

I’m going into a near panic.

He doesn’t respond, but I can tell he’s not convinced. His jaw is clenched so tight I can see the muscles working. A knot forms in my stomach. This is not how I wanted things to go.

Ignoring my protests, he empties it into the toilet. I fold my arms under my breasts as he flushes it.

He doesn’t understand, doesn’t know what I’ve been through and how it changed my life. I’ve clawed my way to a semi-normal life, but I’m not sure I would have made it this far without help. It’s the reason I need the pills to function, to keep the demons at bay. I want to tell him, but the words stick in my throat.

My hands shake with frustration. Why can’t he just trust me? Why does he always assume the worst about me? I take a deep breath and try to stay calm.

The bathroom suddenly feels small and cramped, the tiles underfoot\ cold and slippery, and I have to hold onto the sink to keep my balance.

I look up at Ezequiel, hoping to see some sign of understanding. But all I see is anger and suspicion. I can’t take it anymore.

“Fine,” I say, my voice shaking with anger. “You don’t trust me? Then maybe it’s better if I just leave.”

I grab my bag from his hands and storm out of the bathroom, leaving Ezequiel

standing there in silence.

Ezequiel

I trudge through the thick mud, feeling it seep into my boots, numbing my toes. Meanwhile, the heat of the day chips away at my strength. The cow's pitiful mooing reaches my ears, making me quicken my pace. I have to get closer, but, with every step, the mud's suction-like grip slows me down.

The cow's desperate eyes plead with me for help, and I can feel my heart wrench in response.

I curse under my breath, my frustration mounting. I wish I had brought more help with me, but Addler gave the cowboys the weekend off, leaving me to deal with the ranch on my own. That leaves me with only one person I can call.

With a deep breath, I pull out my phone and dial Addler, hoping he'll pick up. The phone rings a few times before he answers.

"What?" he answers, sounding annoyed.

"Got a cow stuck in the mud," I say, my voice tense with worry.

There's a pause on the other end. "Ah, damn." I can almost hear Addler's regret at sending everyone out for the weekend. "Where?" he asks curtly.

"The Stagecoach," I reply, wiping sweat from my forehead with my sleeve.

"How bad?" Addler asks curtly.

“I don’t know how she ended up this far in,” I say, frustration mounting. “She’s been struggling and she’s about worn out.”

“I’m on the way,” Addler says, and I can hear him moving in the background.

“Grab the trailer,” I manage to throw in while he’s still on the line. “I came out in the quad so I could search farther out.”

“Got it,” he replies, then hangs up. Relief washes over me, knowing help is on the way.

I turn back to the cow, feeling helpless. She’s still stuck up to her belly in the mud, and I can’t leave her like this. With a deep breath, I trudge back to the quad, my heart heavy with guilt and worry. I hope Addler doesn’t take his damn time.

As I wait for him to arrive, I try to think of a way to help the cow. I know I can’t move her on my own, but maybe there’s something else I can do. I pace back and forth, my mind racing to come up with an idea.

I go back to the quad, searching the saddlebag for a strap. I pull it out and unroll it. Eying the distance, I realize it’s not going to be long enough. Still, I have to try, so I fight through the mud to get back to the animal.

As I struggle to secure the strap around the cow’s midsection, I confirm it’s not long enough to lift her out of the mud. “It’s not gonna work, girl.” I tug and pull at it, but it won’t stretch any farther.

My frustration mounts as I know we need something longer to get the cow out of this predicament. I go back to the saddlebag, pulling out a couple of thick bungee cords.

With renewed determination, I grab the end of the strap from on top of the mud and

pull the cord through it before heading back to the quad. By now I'm starting to feel the burn in my thighs. Man, I'm going to feel this tomorrow.

I struggle to put the clip on the back of quad then get on and turn the key. The back tires slip, going into the mud. Now I'm slipping, trying to move slowly, to avoid hurting her further, but she cries out in pain as I pull the strap tight.

I freeze, feeling guilty for adding to her suffering. The clip pings as the strap snaps. "Fuck."

I shut the quad down and sit there for a moment, feeling defeated. I reach for a water bottle, unscrew the cap, and take a long drink of the cool water, feeling it quench my thirst.

My gaze falls on the cow again. She must need this more than I do. After being stuck in the mud for so long, she must be dehydrated.

Without a second thought, I head back toward the cow, water bottle in hand. As I approach her, she looks at me with tired eyes, her mooing pitiful, her mouth covered in mud.

"We'll get you out of here, girl." I try to soothe her with gentle words and a soft touch, but I know that she needs more than just my comfort. With one hand on the water bottle and the other on the cow's head, I pour the water into her mouth, one sip at a time until the bottle is empty. She drinks it down eagerly, and I feel a sense of relief knowing that I'm able to help her in some small way.

I take a deep breath, trying to come up with a new plan to rescue the cow. Time is ticking. I stay by her side, offering her comfort and support, keeping her company as we wait for Addler to arrive.

The sun beats down on us, and sweat trickles down my back. But I don't mind the discomfort. At this point, I've sweated out most of this morning's anger. Maybe it's just what I needed to get over this shit.

Now I have to figure out what to do about Sage. Which leads me to something else I can do. I reach for my phone and shoot off a message.

“Get me everything you can find on Sage Donohue.” I include her phone number and email.

I get back a simple reply. On it .

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Sage

He never kissed me.

The thought crosses my mind as I pass the ranch on my way back to Carrizo. It's strange how that one simple action can hold so much meaning. I replay our encounter in my mind, still feeling the heat of his hands on my body.

I can't believe I let him touch me like that. It was unexpected, but I can't say I regret it.

I never expected to find myself in bed with him.

Part of me feels angry at him. One moment I was in his bathroom, getting ready to start my day, and the next he was accusing me of being on drugs. It was all surreal.

But I know exactly why I went to him in the first place. I wanted to feel alive, to forget about the monotony of my life for a little while. I wanted to be wrapped in his arms, feel his strength, and revel in it.

Despite everything, there's a part of me that wants to go back to him, to feel his hands on my skin. It's why I showered at his place, imagining myself in that huge tub, with him. It's why I went to his bed with hardly any clothes on.

Now, as I reflect on what happened, I realize I screwed up. I took the medication without a second thought. Now, with Ezequiel going off, I'm down two days' worth of meds. What am I going to—

I backtrack through that thought only to have an icy shower fall over me. I'm more worried about the fact I lost two pills than anything else that happened.

Is he right? It's become second nature to take it every day now, even though I promised myself I wouldn't. Maybe I need to start weaning myself off it, to see if I can make it through the night without it. Fear nips at my heels. The nightmares always feel like they're just waiting for me to fall asleep.

Dad keeps harping on me to talk about what happened. Even though he's always been a hardass, he kept going on about how having a record doesn't mean a guy's bad. He opened a security business and hired some tough guys from his old neighborhood. Men who knew the streets and what to look for. And he's never had any real problems with them.

What happened to me was revenge. An isolated incident. All I know is that when I picture that particular individual, I see his fist coming down at me.

I never expected to find someone I'd go to bed with. And I never would have expected I'd end up spending the night with Ezequiel Mata.

After everything that happened, my heart just wasn't in it. I went to Laredo hoping to escape, to leave everything behind. But the memories followed me like a shadow. I tried going to the mall, but didn't feel like shopping. I couldn't decide what to do for lunch. Even as I sat at the food count, picking at my food, I had no appetite.

The truth is, I was looking for something. Something missing from my life. And when everything happened with Ezequiel, I thought I found something that might at least keep me going. His strength and the fact he was so possessive does something to me. I hadn't really experienced anything like that before. In fact, it's been quite the opposite.

As I drive back to Carrizo, I can't help but think about what could have been. If only he had kissed me, maybe things would have been different.

I really like the way he reacted when I showed up. The memory of him holding me against the front door sends a shiver down my body. Another part reminds me I can't get carried away. I'm not going to set myself up to be disappointed.

It's too late to second-guess any of that now. The damage has been done, and I have to live with the consequences.

Just then, movement catches my attention. There's a group of people hiding in the grass along the highway. My first thought is about the possibility of snakes. Then the fact these people came from across the border, walking through La Escuadra Ranch.

Fear creeps in as I think about the implications of this. I know I have to call the border patrol and report it, even though I hate the idea of doing so. It's the right thing to do, and I can't let my fear stop me from taking action.

Blowing out a breath, I reach for my cell and scroll down to the number for our contact at the border patrol checkpoint.

Ezequiel

As I stand there in the hot sun, I hear the trailer rattling behind Addler's truck before I even see the dust cloud it kicks up. The truck pulls up, and Addler climbs out. I go over to meet him and see a woman following him out of the truck. Her long black hair falls over her shoulders in waves.

Well, I'll be damned . Didn't expect to see a woman with Addler.

"She's exhausted." I push my hat back and swipe at the sweat rolling down my temple. "At this point, the quad's just spinning its wheels, and I already busted the strap."

"Let me get the ones I brought," Addler says, nodding as he turns around to walk back to the truck, leaving me with the woman. "Oh, Ezequiel, that's Elena," he says, as if him bringing a woman round is an everyday thing.

"Miss Elena." Since I'm covered in mud up to my elbows, the best I can do is offer a nod. She's a pretty thing; her big brown eyes hold a spark of intelligence. Looks vaguely familiar. Is she from one of the neighboring families?

"Hello, Ezequiel," she says, reaching out for a handshake. I bring up my hand, which is caked in mud, and show it to her. Neither her smile nor her hand falters. I'm not sure if she's stubborn or the kind of woman who doesn't mind getting a little dirty. Only time will tell.

I switch to a fist bump, which just makes her smile even bigger. "We brought water

and sandwiches,” she says.

I’m liking her more and more.

“I’ll take a water,” I reply. “The food’ll have to wait.”

She goes to the truck’s back seat, and I hear the familiar rattle of ice. My mouth waters. Cold water would hit the spot after being out in the hot sun half the day.

Addler eyes the distance from the edge of the pond to where the cow’s mooing pathetically. “How did she end up stuck so deep?” Addler asks.

I wanna say I gave up trying to figure out why females do the things they do, but I got enough sense to keep my mouth shut in present company.

“Probably went for a drink and sank.” I empty the bottle in one swig then crush the empty. “The rain we got the last few days turns the outer ring of the pond into a bog.” I point to the edge of the pond. “The more she struggled to get out, the deeper she went.”

Addler’s gaze goes to Elena’s face, stopping at her forehead. “There should be another cap in the back of the truck if you want one,” he offers. “Just be careful where you stand, or you’ll end up covered in mud.”

“Okay,” she says, and goes back to the truck. Addler hands over another water bottle and the straps then moves to the winch on the front of his truck. Gotta hand it to him. He’s cool as can be about the whole thing.

I down half the bottle then take my hat off and pour the rest over my head. The cool liquid rolls down my back and shoulders, offering some relief.

“And keep an eye out for anyone walking through,” Addler warns her as he pulls the winch line. “We shouldn’t have people crossing with the river running high, but some will still go for it. We don’t want to end up on foot out here.”

So, she’s not a rancher. May be from the Kelly office. That’s the only place I would have seen her.

“Will do,” she says obediently, climbing onto the truck’s floorboard so she can look out into the distance. I turn to hide a grin, knowing she won’t appreciate it. Addler’s keeping a straight face, so I’ll have to wait for Mayela to get any real information. For a woman who spends her life away from town, she’s got all the right connections.

The animal gives a tired moo as we get closer. She watches cautiously as Addler pops open a bottle. He slogs over until he’s near the cow’s head then proceeds to pour water in her mouth a little at a time. After a few initial snorts, she starts drinking. Of course the damned female would behave for him.

I tie the straps together and pull it under the animal. After wiping it down, I attach it to the winch line then turn to Addler. “We’re set.”

He heads back to the truck, grabbing the winch controller. “Get in and scoot,” he says, pointing to the bench seat. She slides over, looking at him like they’re on a first date. I lose my grin as the memory of Sage cuts in on my day again. She’s in the front seat of my truck, her thighs spread as the recorder’s going.

The animal’s desperate cry snaps me back to reality. I put my arms up to catch his attention. “Whoa, whoa. The mud’s causing too much pressure.”

Addler gets out of the truck. “Shit.” He heads back to the trailer.

Her eyes are wild, her labored breathing showing the struggle she’s put up until now.

“Hang on, girl.” I try to soothe her as she sinks a little more.

Addler comes back with two shovels, tossing me one. We set to shoveling mud, not that I expect we’ll get very far. It looked like everything had settled after baking in the hot sun, but here we are, lucky not to have lost our boots.

It’s a struggle to stay ahead of the mud sliding in from around us. We’re finally making headway when she tries more kicking. I stop to soothe her again. “Hang on, girl. We’re trying our best.” At this point, I’m not sure which one of us is more exhausted.

Addler brings an arm up to wipe his forehead. “I can’t tell where her legs are.” He tosses the shovel toward the bank and starts using his hands to clear out the mud. Been a while since I’ve seen the college boy put in this kind of effort. Not since the old man...then it hits me. That’s who she is. Elena Santos.

Mayela said the girl was working with Kelly Oil. Ever since, I wondered if that’s why Addler bought the construction division. Because a man will do stupid shit over a woman—the right woman.

Addler stops, catching his breath. “Elena, what are you doing?” he asks.

“This I can help with.” Elena jumps in, using both hands to clear out mud the way we are.

“Be careful,” he says. “She could start kicking.” Just then, the confounded female decides to demonstrate. Addler takes a hoof to the leg. He sucks in a breath, clenching his jaw as he takes it like a man.

I duck to hide a grin. Like I said, a man will do stupid shit over a woman.

“Addler, are you okay?” Elena asks, wide-eyed. She’s frozen in place, waiting to see what he’ll do.

“I’ve had worse,” he mutters. True. Back then, the old man just told us to suck it up and expected us to either finish the day or head to the hospital. He had no middle ground. “She doesn’t know any better, Elena. She’s just going on instinct.”

With the third set of hands, we start making more progress than before. Wouldn’t have thought the slip of a woman had it in her.

“Let’s try it again,” Addler says, heading back to the truck. “Get up on the bank.”

As much as Elena seems strong and capable, it’s best she stays out of harm’s way. “Over there.” I point to an area away from the truck. “You never know what can happen. The cow could kick, or the truck could slide. This way, you’re safe.”

Without a single argument, she moves to the bank, clearly worn out. I gotta give it to her. She seems genuinely concerned about the cow. And she’s not afraid to put in hard work, even though she was gonna end up dirty.

“Remember to check for snakes!” Addler warns, before getting into the driver’s seat.

“Oh dear Lord,” she mutters, stopping in her tracks to check the grass around her.

Snakes. The memory of Sage fills my mind. She was terrified, those pretty eyes huge as she was frozen in place while the reptile slithered out of the grass. I pulled her to safety without a second thought. But the moment she landed against me, she broke my concentration. For a fraction of a second, I wasn’t sure of my aim, and that could get you killed under the best of circumstances.

Addler starts the winch again. This time it moves her a couple of inches. Wild eyed,

she lifts a leg, flailing as she tries to take a step. But it's progress.

"You almost got it." My breath rushes out as she gets her footing, limping forward, out of the bog.

Addler hits reverse on the winch then grabs the strap, keeping the momentum going to walk her to the back of the trailer. I'm glad he had enough forethought to leave the doors open and pull the ramp down when he went back there.

"This way, girl." He maneuvers her around the back, rerouting her as she tries to head down the road. Reluctantly, she climbs into the trailer and I secure the door.

"Let's get her to the corral. She should be good, but I'd rather keep an eye on her for a couple of days."

Addler gives me a quick nod. "We'll follow you back."

"Go on ahead. I need a minute." After having a couple of bottles of water, I need to piss, but since there's a woman around, I'll wait.

"Gotcha. We'll go on ahead and start getting her cleaned up. You finish up here and we'll meet at the corral." He rounds up Elena, and they head down the road.

I wait until they're out of sight before I relieve myself. Once I'm done, I climb onto the quad and make my way back down the road. The tires kick back mud, and some of it's pelting my back. It would be nice to have someone who'd rub away the aches and pains after a day like today.

It's a hell of a thing to suddenly introduce a woman into what's been a man's world for the years I've been here. First, this thing with Sage happens. Now Addler shows up with Elena. Only he's riding off with his woman.

I slow down a bit, thinking back to what happened earlier. Did I lose it? There's one thing I don't condone, and that's drugs. It's already cost me a future. Granted, we were young, and she was thrust on me, without any prior knowledge, to be my wife. An old-fashioned arranged marriage between cartel families. There was no saying no.

It wasn't until I found out she was pregnant that I understood why everything happened. My brother's baby, my married brother's baby. He'd had another arranged marriage, with a powerful family. So, having a plaything, with whom he shared a habit, wasn't good business. In the end, somebody had to die.

Neither the woman nor the child were ever mine, but, even after I lost both, it left me with a hole in my life. I lost a future family and my own family because my brother couldn't keep his dick in his pants. Then I nearly lost my life when her father became suspicious and thought I had something to do with her end.

Not something I could ever tell Sage, or any other woman. Only, with her, it leaves an emptiness inside me. It's something I never expected to happen because I couldn't bring myself to care about anyone.

I finally make it home to hear Elena's laughter coming from behind the house. As I come around, I see Addler used the hose to knock the mud off the cow then turned it on her. They're laughing together.

For once, I actually envy the college boy's life.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Sage

My heart is pounding as I thrash about in the grip of the familiar nightmare. I gasp for air, lungs burning with the effort to breathe, because I know what's coming.

I'm back on duty, wearing my uniform. My duty belt heavy at my waist. The convenience store's fluorescent lights flicker overhead as I walk out with a cup of coffee in each hand. One with cream and sugar for me. The other with French vanilla and extra sweetener for my partner, Lyle.

The memory of the moment we shared when I learned his coffee preferences comes to mind. It was a more private setting, still half-dressed, fingers lingering on bare skin after spending the night together. It's against the rules. No fraternization between a trainer and trainee. But, sometimes these things happen... Maybe it's what made it more exciting.

I round the corner of the building, to the parking area along the side and come to a sudden stop. Lyle is standing there, by the trunk of the patrol car, his face pale. A man has an arm around his throat, a gun, later discovered to be Lyle's own, pressed to a spot right below his ear.

I stand there, feeling like something has clamped onto my legs. My heart's beating so hard my pulse is slamming against my temples. My gut clenches with fear as I realize the gravity of the situation. I'm helpless, my hands full while the weight of my firearm presses against my hip.

I know I need to act fast, but my training has taught me to prioritize my partner's

safety above all else.

“Put it down.” A shiver runs down my spine as the man issues the order.

I hesitate, weighing my options. If I surrender my weapon, my partner and I will be at the mercy of this dangerous man.

“Do what he says.” Lyle’s eyes are wide, terrified. He’s barely shaking his head, afraid of the gun at the base of his skull. “Sage,” he pleads. He’s my training officer, so I’m used to following his lead, even when he’s urging me to comply with the criminal’s demands.

It’s here the nightmare turns choppy. Although fear grips my insides, I do as he says, dropping the disposable cups. The splash of coffee sounds overly loud. My service weapon feels heavy.

The criminal’s evil grin...the laughter that still haunts me...

Then, my partner turns and offers himself up as a sacrifice...no, he offers me.

“Come here, you fat bitch.” The brute’s guttural voice echoes in my head again. He pushes my partner aside and reaches for me as I struggle to free myself from the nightmare’s grasp. The taste of bile rises in my throat as I confront the danger.

His fist comes down, again and again. The pain. My shirt rips. His hand squeezes my breast so hard he leaves bruises.

The laughter.

My heart breaks as I watch Lyle run away, leaving me to suffer at the hands of the attacker. He was someone Lyle had put away. Now that he was out of prison, he’d

come for revenge. He'd stalked Lyle and found out about us.

"Come here, you fat bitch." The words are still echoing in my head.

The gun goes off. A body slams into the ground as the acrid smell of gunpowder fills the air. I can't breathe...

I shoot up in bed, heart racing.

Even as I wake up, panting and sweating, the image of the criminal's sinister smile remains burned into my mind. Stringy hair, dirty ball cap, a black mole on the tip of his nose. The stench of rotting teeth and an unwashed body surrounds me.

I had to make a split-second decision and prioritize the safety of everyone involved. Guilt washes over me again. If I'd found a way to protect my partner, he'd still be alive, and none of the rest would have happened. It's a heavy burden to bear, but it's the responsibility that comes with being a law enforcement officer. And I failed.

I take a few deep breaths to calm myself down. The nightmare may be over, but the memory of it will linger, haunting my thoughts for hours to come. It's what always happened before I got a prescription to help me through.

Wrung out, I climb out of bed and head to the bathroom. I open the cabinet, looking at the brown bottle sent by the pharmacy. My gaze immediately goes to the writing at the bottom of the label. No refills remaining. And I lost two pills. I have to wait until Monday to talk to my doctor.

What are you on ? I can still hear the anger in Ezequiel's voice. I don't know what happened there, but I inadvertently hit a sore spot with him. That doesn't mean he's wrong...

My stomach roils. Am I addicted to the stuff?

Part of me feels justified in saying I'm not an addict. I just can't bear another night of this.

I didn't take my pill tonight because I wanted to prove he was wrong. Now, I'm not so sure. I'm scared about what tomorrow will bring. I can manage during the day by keeping busy. But, at night, when I'm asleep, my barriers fall away.

I'm wrung out, emotionally and physically. And for once, I feel the inexplicable need to share—with him.

It seems a little disloyal to dad. As a former small-town cop turned business owner, he kept pushing me to accept that having a record doesn't mean a person's bad.

He's been trying to convince me that what I went through was an isolated incident, with a particular individual.

It's the middle of the night, but I have a desperate need to say something.

I stumble back to the tiny bedroom that's part of my bleak existence and pick up my phone from beside my pillow. I scroll to Ezequiel's number.

I'm not hooked on the pills. I'm afraid of the nightmares that come when I don't take them.

Tears stream down my face as I admit my weakness. I hit the button to send my message then drop to my pillow. The scent of my shampoo fills my nostrils, replacing what filtered in from my dream.

Seconds later, my phone dings. I push myself up to check the screen, because I

wasn't really expecting a response.

The two words leave me weak with relief.

Come here.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Ezequiel

I'm not hooked on the pills. I'm afraid of the nightmares that come when I don't take them.

I'm still thinking about the message she sent in the middle of the night. It came out of nowhere, and it sounded like she was hurting. I can't have that.

Did she wake up from one of those nightmares? What kind of trauma did she endure to need drugs to help her sleep? I understand that kind of strain on the body and mind after living through too much shit myself.

The headlights of her truck cut through the darkness in the distance. She doesn't bother keeping to the speed limit Kelly set up. For some reason, that makes me smile.

She drives past the front of the house, going to the side where I parked her truck last night. Good girl. You never know what kind of danger lurks out here.

I go through the house, past the kitchen, into the mudroom. The motion sensor kicks in, turning on the security light, illuminating the yard around the house. I open the side door and step out in my socks. With my firearm at the back of my waist, I check the area to make sure she's safe.

She gets out of her truck, closing the door quietly. I can barely see her head over the side of the truck. Part of it is her height, but she seems even shorter than usual.

I knew something was wrong the minute the message came in. Never mind the time,

there was something in the tone. While I could have thought it was her being pissy, I trusted my instincts. Turns out I read it right.

She comes around the front of the vehicle, in what has to be bedclothes. This time they're loose shorts and a gray tank. Her shoulders are slumped. Even in the dim light, I know she's carrying the weight of the world.

I'm not sure what to do with her now. My natural inclination is to shake her and tell her to suck it up and straighten out. I'm not stupid enough to do that. Doesn't take much to figure out she's been through some kind of hell.

She looks up as she reaches the door. Her eyes are vacant, the dark circles under them and the tired expression get to me. She's totally unlike the stick-up-her-ass security lead I'm used to.

Without saying a word, I push open the security screen to let her in. She walks past me, her steps slow, a pained expression on her face.

I close the door, putting the locks in place behind her then setting the alarm. She's standing in the kitchen, hands in her pockets, reminding me of a lost little girl. A lonely, lost little girl.

Even though I'm feeling every muscle I overused today, I ignore the pain and scoop her up in my arms. Her eyes widen in surprise.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"Sleep," I say, feeling the strain on half my body. "We'll talk tomorrow." This is nowhere near the worst I've ever had to push through. And here, I know I'll have a win at the end.

She nods, seeming relieved.

I carry her to the bedroom and set her in bed. She slips out of her sandals and gets under the covers while I put my gun in the nightstand's top drawer. I switch off the lamp, leaving us in darkness. She slides over to where she slept last night so I can climb in beside her.

My hand goes to her waist, dragging her back to my side, where she belongs. I wrap my arms around her, settling her against my chest. She takes a deep breath then releases it like a satisfied kitten. I close my eyes and breathe in the scent of her hair. The softness of her skin and the warmth of her body soothe me.

I liked what you were wearing yesterday.” That little night dress with the elastic top was damn near perfect. My cock stirs at the memory of finding her in it.

She moves out from under my chin. “The one I had on while I couldn’t tell if I was being fucked?” she says, with some of her sass inching back.

I release her, running my hand over her hip then up her waist. The tank top bunches against my wrist at an angle as my hand climbs up her body to cup her breast. The softness of her skin and the firmness of her nipple under my fingers send a jolt of desire through me. “It did make things a lot easier,” I say, giving her nipple a quick pinch.

She snorts, squeezing me tight and arching just enough to push into my palm.

We lie here quietly, her bare legs tangled with mine. Her grip releases after a while, as she drifts off to sleep. The sound of her breathing lulls me into a sense of peace.

Unanswered questions keep going through my head. What happened to her? What made her this way? Who did this to her? And where can I find the bastard?

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Sage

I drift up from a deep sleep, my body sluggish, but not emotionally wrung out as I usually am. A clean, masculine scent, now familiar, lingers on the pillow beneath my head. Ezequiel. I fell asleep listening to his heart beat under my cheek. I smile, still not fully awake.

I open my eyes slowly, taking in the dimly lit room, then run my hand over the fitted sheet, feeling its cool, smooth texture. It's empty, but this time I know he came to bed. He slept beside me through what was left of the night.

He must have recognized how broken I was when I showed up. He didn't shoot questions at me. He didn't demand answers. He didn't bring up my supposed drug use. He just held me and gave of himself when I needed him most.

I settle back against the pillow, now fully awake and alone. I take a minute to give a contented sigh before tossing back the covers without a second thought. I'm immediately hit by the cold air permeating the house. I wrap my arms around myself, rubbing my biceps as I try to warm up.

Ezequiel likes to keep the house cold, a welcome respite from the broiling South Texas sun. But it's an unexpected jolt to the system when you've spent the last few hours snuggled up to a virtual furnace.

I slide over to his side of the bed and sit up. It's a big change from having to force myself awake each morning after the alarm goes off. Then I work through a medicine stupor from pills that are supposed to help me through the night.

The smell of coffee makes my mouth water, prompting me to get moving. But that's not the only scent in the air. I smooth my hair back, pulling my scrunchie off in the process. Then I do my best to repair the mess that must be my hair before pulling my ponytail up again.

I get up, scrunching my toes into the thick carpet, luxuriating in the feel of it under my feet. It's not hard to decide against slipping my sandals on right now.

Adjusting my top, I let myself out into the hall then silently shut the door.

Heavenly scents of breakfast make my stomach rumble. I press my hand to my midriff, trying to quiet it down. The protest is to be expected. I haven't been able to eat a thing since I left here yesterday.

Swallowing hard, I head down the hall toward the kitchen. The light shining brightly, illuminating the way.

I peek around the corner to find Ezequiel casually leaning against the counter. His beefy hand is wrapped around a thick mug, steam rising from its surface.

"Breakfast," he states. As usual, not a question.

I swallow the lump in my throat as I walk toward him, sticking to the counter. I don't want to get close enough to be tempted by what he fixed.

"I'm not much of a breakfast person," I say, my mouth watering. Then my stomach rumbles again, making a liar out of me.

"Is that a fact." He takes a drink, his eyes fixed on me as he studies me over the rim of his cup.

My nipples pucker at the intensity of his gaze.

“You look hungry,” he says, voice full of innuendo.

“I’m not.” I pointedly ignore the heaping plate of scrambled eggs and bacon sitting on the table next to his.

His gaze lowers to my breasts, burning through my top.

He must’ve noticed my body’s reaction. Part of me is embarrassed at getting caught.

I take a step back, leaning against the counter for support. My heart is pounding as my cheeks flush with embarrassment. I can’t believe he can still have this effect on me, even after everything that’s happened, but I have to admit, I like it.

I scrunch my toes against the tile. “It’ll make me fat...ter.” I add the last part, in a lower voice.

“I don’t mind,” he says arrogantly, as if that’ll put a stop to the reason I won’t eat.

“I do,” I retort. It’s bad enough that my clothes are getting a little tight. Every time I use a button shirt I’m reminded of what that man said to me.

He takes another drink out of the mug, his eyes narrowing the tiniest bit, but it’s enough for his gaze to turn dangerous.

What is it about this side of him that thrills me?

“We’ll just have to find a different way for you to work off what you eat.”

A jolt of desire courses through me, at his words. Oh Lord, now I’m wet.

He sets the mug down and moves across the kitchen, broad shoulders filling the space as he draws nearer.

My pulse beats between my legs.

I shift my gaze, not wanting him to see that hungry look he mentioned. Unfortunately, I can't help but notice he's aroused. I watch him take every step until he's right in front of me. Close enough that I feel the heat off his body.

"So, you plan to head back to town wearing this?" He hooks my blouse at my cleavage and tugs down, baring half my breast. Then he brings his hips against mine, pressing his erection into one side of my belly.

I part my lips, needing the extra help to get enough air into my lungs. "I...I brought a uniform."

"Hmm." He moves along the inside of my breast, following the curve until he's on either side of my nipple. The pressure he puts on one side or the other changes, so I don't know what to expect. It's building my anticipation, keeping me on edge, wanting his fingers to come together and give me that much-needed jolt.

"You have the body of a woman. It's nature's gift." He caresses my breast with the back of his fingers. "Soft in some places." Then he brings his knuckles together hard enough to make me gasp. "Stiff in others."

Need shoots straight to my clit, sending a shudder through me that brings another shower of moisture.

"A man gets to discover all the hills"—his palm covers my breast, moving down over my waist and hip— "and valleys." His gaze is burning into me as he works his way into my shorts. He leans away, giving himself enough room so he can watch what

he's doing to me.

His foot pushes at the inside of mine, giving himself more space. My hands go to the counter behind me so I can hold on for dear life. I'm so distracted my legs nearly buckle. I'm so lost that the second he touches me, my hips thrust forward of their own volition.

"That's right. Give me what's mine." His words sound a little rough.

"Mmm." I wish I could deny anything of the sort. But my body's pressing against him as he moves along my slick folds. I can hear the strokes as he moves through my wetness.

"Push down your shorts."

My pulse quickens as I hook the elastic at my waistband and do as he asks. His attention is down below; he's watching me bare my body so he can see where his hand is buried between my legs.

Visual...man . The disjointed words go through my mind as his gaze remains glued to the same spot. He's moving faster, and I can barely keep a thought together.

My clothes land on the floor.

He reaches for the top button on his jeans, pops it open. Then drags the zipper down until his jeans are loose. If it wasn't for his massive erection, he'd likely be naked from the waist down. He works his cock free as I drown in my own desire.

"See this?"

My mouth waters at the sight of him.

“In the years I’ve been here, nobody’s tempted me.”

Years.

“Last time, you barely got through the door.” His fingers plunge into me, bowing my body back against the counter. “Before I buried myself in this tight little cunt.”

A groan escapes me. “Better than porn?”

His eyes darken. “You want to watch me drilling you from behind, or the real thing?”

My mind backtracks, searching for the words that set off an alarm in the back of my mind.

Maybe I can talk you into letting me record you again.

He said me . It was my phone recording what we did. “Did you record us that day?”

His lips pull to one side, a dark promise in that smile. “Do you want to watch, or the real thing?”

Even as I try to feel appalled at what he just admitted to doing, I can’t. My body’s too far gone to go back. “You,” I whisper.

He turns his head. “What?”

“I want you,” I repeat, louder. “I want your cock.”

“Good girl,” he says, clearly pleased. He removes his fingers, leaning in to run his hands behind my thighs. I brace myself as he pushes me up, placing my lower back against the counter. “Such a pretty little cunt.” Then he plunges into me.

In that split second before it happened, I wanted to protest. I was going to tell him the counter's solid. It'll be hard against my lower back. But he hit with such force, I nearly saw stars.

The sound of the wet strokes adds another layer of heat. My instinct to catch myself before I fall from this position wars with the need to meet his every thrust. I know he's got me, so I let go, trusting he'll keep me from falling. I tumble into the most thrilling orgasm of my life, leading with a scream that'll echo throughout the house.

The world falls away as I come down. I'll be sore again later, and I'll have bruises, but damn is it worth it to have him hitting my pretty little cunt .

He's leaning over me, somehow drawing the energy to bite at my nipple through the fabric.

"Maybe, later, we can do both," I suggest.

He lifts an eyebrow.

"You asked if I wanted to watch, or get the real thing..."

That wicked grin makes another appearance. "That's my girl. Now let's get you fed."

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Sage

I arrive at the guard shack, the engine rumbling as I come to a stop. Ochoa steps out of the booth and saunters up, all swagger and confidence.

“Mornin’, Miss Sage.” He braces the clipboard against his hand, filling in my truck’s information and my name like it’s any other day, but it’s not. Today is Sunday, my day off. The fact he’s acting like nothing’s wrong says more about me and the time I spend at the office than anything else.

“Morning, Ochoa.” I try not to let the realization ruin my day, not after the marvelous way it started. “Anything to report?”

“Nothing.” He shakes his head but doesn’t lift his head as he continues writing. “With the holiday, we haven’t had anyone going in and out.”

I glance at the log and see I’m the second line, so only one other person has been by since six o’clock this morning.

“I guess that’s a good thing.”

“Gonna be a long day?” he asks.

I shake my head, “Nope, I should just be here long enough to do some paperwork for tomorrow.”

“I heard a rumor,” he says, his head snapping up so he can look at me. “Is it true the

office got sold?”

I’m hesitant to give information, but it’s really a done deal, so what’s the harm in him finding out a few hours early. “Yes,” I finally confirm. “We’ll get the official announcement tomorrow.”

He nods. “Okay. Anything I should worry about?”

He’s concerned about his job. Well, technically, so am I. Nobody really knows what’ll happen with the new owner.

I try to put him at ease. “I don’t think so, but we’ll find out for sure tomorrow.” His shoulders slump in obvious disappointment he won’t get any additional information from me. I give a two-finger wave and move along.

As I drive down the familiar road toward the office, I can feel my nerves starting to creep up on me. The building comes into view. I take a deep breath. Will this be one of the last times I see it?

The parking lot is empty except for Elena’s car, parked neatly in her usual spot. Ah, she was the first line on the log. It doesn’t surprise me. She’s another workaholic, and I’m sure she’s trying to prepare for tomorrow.

I pull up beside it, turn off the engine, and step out into the stillness of the lot. The sun is shining, and there’s a warm breeze, but I can’t shake the feeling something’s off. I glance around, taking stock of the area, looking for any threat, but I’m alone.

I take the steps at a quick pace, hand hovering over the railing. All those safety videos have fueled my habits, over the years. I don’t tend to have issues when I don’t have a big, hunky rancher watching my every move.

The monitor at the door clicks, unlocking as soon as it recognizes the app on my cell. I make my way into the building, my footsteps echoing through the empty hallway. The silence is deafening, and I can feel my anxiety growing with every step. I check her office, but it's empty. Maybe she's getting some coffee . But the break room is empty, too, and the bathroom is dark.

The sense of unease I got when I arrived comes back with a vengeance. It's like I'm the only person left in a deserted city. Where is she? What's going on? The unanswered questions buzz in my head like angry bees, and I can feel a sense of dread inching closer.

"Elena?" I go running toward the back, in case we happen to have walked in opposite directions. But that can't be. I would have heard her footsteps, like I can hear my steel-toe boots doing now. "Elena!" I repeat, loud enough for her to hear me anywhere in the building.

I stop at Bill's office. There are a couple of boxes, partially filled, like he's packing. What happened here? Has he been fired?

I pull out my phone and unlock it, fingers shaking slightly as I navigate to the contacts list and dial her number. The line is ringing as I head to the back, pushing the bar to throw open the door.

I check the smoking area, even though I know she doesn't have that habit. Nothing. Then her phone goes to voice mail.

Cold, hard fear settles in. I can almost feel someone coming up behind me. I check over my shoulder to make sure that isn't the case. I'm alone. Just miles of mesquite and brush all around me. God protect me, but, for the first time since the incident, I wish I had a weapon.

“Elena,” I call out in desperation. I make it all the way around to the parking area. Her car is still there, so I haven’t missed her. I scan the ground, looking for signs of a struggle, and find nothing. That leaves me with an even bigger mystery.

I turn back to my cell, scanning the screen for the number I need. My stomach is in knots as the phone in the guard shack rings. After what seems like an eternity, Ochoa picks up. “What time did Elena come in?” I ask, voice holding a slight tremble.

“Elena?” he says, confusion clear in his tone.

“Yes, Elena Santos.” As if there’s more than one. “What time did she come in this morning?”

“Uh, just a sec.”

Papers rustle on the other end of the line as Ochoa searches for something. My stomach clenches with anxiety, and I take a deep breath to try and calm myself. Finally, he speaks again.

“Sorry, Sage, but Elena hasn’t been to the office this morning.” My knees go weak. This can’t be happening. “I thought maybe she came in before I got here, but no.”

“Check yesterday’s page,” I instruct, hoping against hope she was just missed somehow.

There’s a rustling sound as Ochoa flips the page. After a moment, he says, “No, I don’t see her on here.”

A sense of panic rises inside me. “Are you sure?”

“I’m positive,” he replies firmly, papers still rustling. “Wait a minute. Rudy has her

logging in on Friday.”

“Friday?” I come up with all kinds of scenarios in my head. Was there a fight? Was it an illegal alien? Was it a wild animal? I can feel my heart pounding in my chest as I get a flashback of the snake incident.

“There’s no exit,” he says, catching on to my concern. “Hang on. Let me call him.” He puts me on hold, but, seconds later, he comes back. “No answer. I left a message and...I just sent a text.”

“Thanks.” I’m dreading the next steps, but it has to be done. “I’ll call Bill. You get on the radio to gate five and three, tell them to shut down and get over here so we can search the perimeter.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Code 10-40, Ochoa.” The code giving them authorization to speed on the premises, without using sirens.

“Roger that,” he says, sounding serious.

I take a deep breath and pick the phone up again, this time calling Bill. The phone rings once, twice, three times. My heart sinks as his voice mail starts. Elena’s like one of his own kids, so I know he won’t handle this well.

Taking a deep breath I try and figure out what to say without causing a panic. Bill has enough going on with his wife being sick.

“Bill, it’s Sage. Can you give me a call as soon as you get this message?”

Ochoa comes down the road and pull into the parking lot. “What’s the plan?”

“We need to check the perimeter.” I swallow hard. “In case there are signs of foul play.” I can’t even imagine having to do a notification on someone I know. Especially someone I just sat down with a couple of days ago.

Ochoa looks out at the brush. “You think she got taken?”

The memory of feeling like someone was coming up behind me returns. A memory of a fist coming down. Pain exploding on the side of my head. My ribs breaking. I shake the memory away.

“I don’t know.” Which isn’t going to set anyone at ease. “But we have to start somewhere.”

He nods. “I’ll get my gaiters.”

“Damn.” I curse under my breath.

“No snake guards?” he asks.

You’d think I’d have some with me after what I just went through. “No, I don’t.”

“I’ll get started,” he says heading back to his SUV. “The guys should have some, too.” He pops open the back. “We’ll do the leg work.”

“Thanks.” I make a mental note to get some snake guards.

“I should have asked if anyone’s seen illegals,” Ochoa says offhandedly.

“Oh.” My eyes widen. “I saw a group on the side of the road.”

He stops, one leg covered in the snake guard. “Coming out of the ranch?”

“They were toward the far end of the ranch, over by the property line.” Which is probably too far.

My phone rings. The familiar tone announces Bill calling. I take a deep breath and hit the button, while Ochoa heads back to his vehicle.

“Bill, thanks for getting back to me.” Another call comes in. Ezequiel. Unfortunately, I have to let the call go to voice mail.

“What’s wrong, Sage?” Bill asks, both tired and serious.

“Listen, something’s happened.” I moderate my tone, making sure I don’t sound dire. “I came to the office earlier and found Elena’s car.” I lick my lips. “Seems Rudy logged her in on Friday, but she never logged out.” Never...I shouldn’t have used that word.”

“Nobody noticed she didn’t leave?” he asks, his composure cracking.

I shut my eyes. “I know.” How could the guard not check on her?

“Let’s not get carried away,” he says, reverting to his usual steady tone. “I’m sure you’ve already hit all the worst-case scenarios.”

“You don’t think it’s foul play?” I ask, hoping she isn’t hurt, or worse. Some of the people coming through are hardened criminals.

“Her car’s there, so there’s a good chance she’s okay. She probably had car trouble and got a ride back to town. Have you tried calling her?”

“She didn’t answer.” I feel like I’m going to be sick. “I’m really worried, Bill.” My voice trembles, despite trying my best to keep it steady. “There’s no sign of a

struggle.” Though that doesn’t mean she wasn’t taken.

“We’re heading home, but it’ll be hours before I make it.” His wife is asking questions in the background. My heart breaks for her. “Can you get someone to check her house?”

“I’ll go.” It’s something I can do, since I’m not prepared for anything else. “I have the guards on the way to help check the perimeter.”

“Good idea,” he says, sounding sad.

This can’t be happening. Not to Elena. I take a deep breath and try to focus on the task at hand. I need to find her. I need to find out what’s happened.

“I’ll keep you updated.”

“Call Ezequiel,” he suggests. “He can round up his guys to lend a hand.”

“Will do.” I end the call. A second guard has shown up. Ochoa’s bringing him up to date. “I’m heading to town to check her place.”

Ochoa gives a thumbs up. I jump in my truck and head up the road and around the cones he set up across the one gate that doesn’t have an actual bar to close the entrance. We may have to do something about that.

I hit the highway just as the third guard heads into the ranch. Thank goodness . I smash my foot down on the gas.

Crap, I have to call Ezequiel. I bring the phone up so I’m holding it at the top of the steering wheel as I find the number and hit the button to call.

The phone rings; my blood pressure skyrockets. “Damn it. Doesn’t anyone answer their phones anymore?”

Ezequiel

I'm coming up on the main house, cattle trailer in tow, when I see the dust clouds kicked up in opposite directions. Security's running around the ranch like a guy who lost his wedding ring and is about to go home to a jealous wife.

I pick up my cell, to call Addler. He likes to know what's happening on his property at any given point. It's a lesson learned from the old man himself.

His truck's out front, so he should be home. What the hell. May as well stop off and see how he's doing. Might catch him limping around after a day of hard labor. Been a while since the college boy had to sweat. Might get a word or two about his friend.

I pull up to the two-story Spanish-style house Addler calls home and kill the engine. I open the door, take a step out, and wince. Getting out of the truck brings my own sore muscles to mind. Not that it stopped me from a good, hard fuck not too long ago.

I take a deep breath and check the perimeter. There's nothing out of the ordinary in the vast expanse of the ranch stretching out around me. In the distance, the cow I just dropped off in the next field is grazing lazily along with a few others.

I open the wrought-iron gate in front of the house. It creaks a little as I push it open. The day's so tranquil, I can hear the sound echoing across the property. There's enough security around the house that we'd get notified if anyone without a fob was coming too close. Still, it doesn't hurt to be cautious.

Locking up behind me, I move on to the large wooden door at the entrance and let

myself in. More out of habit than anything else, I check my boots before stepping into the grand foyer. Best to avoid Mayela's wrath by keeping from dragging dirt and mud through the place while she's away.

The walls are covered in his mama's artwork. Images from the ranch at different points in time. Some while she was here and others from pictures out of the family albums. There's several doorways leading out to different parts of the house.

I hear noise coming from the kitchen. It's pretty much where I figured I'd find him, so I continue on through the main living room and dining area. Damn, it's a whole workout to get across the house. I shoulda gone around the back like I usually do, so I'd avoid all this.

I walk into the kitchen and get one hell of a surprise.

Addler's on the kitchen floor, with a woman draped over him. She's wearing his shirt; the curve of her hips and her bare legs show she's astride him. Her feet are down around what looks to be his shorts. It's Elena, I'd recognize that long, dark hair anywhere.

Damn it. I may be able to back out of here without them noticing. They're both caught up in a kiss that don't look like it's gonna end any time soon. The image is hotter than any porn I've ever come across.

Resigned, I let out a breath then clear my throat.

She gasps, looking up to find me standing close by. I have enough sense to look away. I'm still a man, so it's not like I could ignore that rack of hers. I don't need to think about that right now.

Staring at the kitchen table doesn't help. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her sit up,

and the shirt she's wearing is wide open. Holy fuck .

Addler drags her down against him. She curls into him like a lost child. There's only so much I can do to be polite to the nice lady. And this is really pushing the limit.

"I'll come back," I offer.

"Give us a second," Addler says, enjoying himself enough that he'll probably be paying for it later.

"Gotcha," I reply. The best I can do is head to the back. "I'll be out here." I let myself onto the patio through the French doors.

I can't help but wonder how long this has been going on, and it bugs the shit out of me. I don't usually have the curiosity of a comadre looking for good gossip. Which gets me to wonder if Mayela hasn't heard the chisme . As the de Marco's long-time housekeeper, she's always up to date on what's happening.

I step outside and take a deep breath of fresh air. The sun is high in the sky, already beating down onto land.

Speaking of heating up, the door opens, and Addler joins me on the patio.

"Well, that was unexpected." I'm not sure if I should apologize or give him a hard time about not saying anything about Elena.

He runs his hand over his beard. "Didn't exactly plan on it myself." A shit-eating grin covers his face.

"Wanted to check in with you," I say, before we end up distracted by what I just walked in on. "Something's up."

He immediately loses the grin. That's to be expected. We're out in the middle of nowhere, so, if things go wrong, we can only rely on one another. "What happened?"

I look to the roads in the distance. "Got some security vehicles running around out there."

"You sure it's them?" As if I haven't been watching everything that's been going on since the day Kelly Oil showed up on the ranch.

"It's several vehicles running around. They're kicking up enough caliche to show they're speeding," I point out. "Which means it has to be security."

He frowns. "They haven't called in?"

"No." I push back my hat, running the back of my hand over my forehead.

"Not even Bill?" he asks, sounding skeptical.

"No." I shake my head.

He goes quiet; likely his mind racing. He would have expected the old law dog to check in if the shit hit the fan. So, if Bill hasn't called, does he know what's going on?

"What about the security admin you ran around with?" he asks, freezing me on the spot. What about her? I stop the words before they come out of my mouth.

Of course, she would come to mind. This isn't about me and her. She's just the next logical choice. I hadn't thought about it, but, I guess, when Bill's not around, she's the next one in charge.

“I haven’t called her,” I admit. “Figured I’d check with you first.”

He cocks his head. “Do you know anything about her?”

There’s a loaded question if there ever was one. I know she doesn’t carry a gun and doesn’t watch where she’s walking. I know she sleeps in that cute little dress that lets me get to her tits without any trouble at all. And I know how it feels to be inside her tight little cunt. That moment when I was riding her while she was asleep comes to mind. Then the image of her on the counter.

Yeah... Obviously, that’s not what he means.

“Her name keeps popping up every time something happens. Even when the old man was still here.” And, as annoying as it may be, “She seems to have her nose in everything.”

“Hrmph.”

For not being a local, she’s pretty damn nosey. Doesn’t help that Bill is always sending her out to do shit. Even though he knows there’s still places on this ranch where she has no business poking her nose. Sage is going to check on the guard . Sage is interviewing the suspect. Sage is going to meet you and document the incident. She’s damn near everywhere...

“Sage. What the hell kind of name is that?” I ask, not really expecting an answer.

He snorts. “I said the same thing.” He turns thoughtful. My shoulders tighten. Something bad’s coming. I can feel it. “Kelly Oil has some shit going on.”

“Oh?” I knew it.

Addler checks behind him, as if he expects Elena to show up suddenly. Somehow, I don't think she will.

"Derrick says they've got money missing they can't account for. So far, everything leads back to South Texas. Specifically, the ranch, since it's the newest acquisition."

"Shit." My family's embroiled in the kind of life that deals in cash. I have millions I can't account for in this country. It caused me a problem when I wanted to buy a place of my own. I'm lucky the de Marcos have enough money coming in that they can fold my part into theirs.

"That's why I showed up at the office early," he explains. "If they have something to hide, they'd have to do it before Monday."

"Girl from the office." I glance toward the house, wondering if she's got a part to play. "She tangled up in this?"

"Not that I can tell."

Not that he can tell... Wonder how hard he's looking. Because from what I walked in on, I'd say he's not looking in the right places. Or maybe what he found sent him in another direction.

"Sure you're not running blind?" I ask him point blank. It's a legit question, considering I have my own stake in the thing with Kelly Oil.

"I've been checking the books. Once Bill's back, we'll see if there's anything he's seen that could seem suspicious."

"Good." I'm glad nothing's come up with her. Although I know she and Addler have some history, I like the girl. She didn't think twice before diving in to get her hands

dirty to get the cow out of the mud. And the first thing she thought of was making sure we had food and water. “She makes a hell of a sandwich.”

“Yeah.” He grins. “She does.”

Well, with that out of the way, we need to figure out the next step. “So, what do you want me to do?”

“Keep an eye out.” He shakes his head, as if there’s still no clear path. “If you find out anything from security, let me know.”

Let me check. I dial her number, but get voice mail. “I’ll try her again in a few.”

“Okay, thanks.”

I take the outside route so I don’t bump into Elena again. I’m not sure she’s ready for that.

Getting into the truck, I head home to drop off the trailer. I’m halfway there when my phone rings. Sage. I hit the button to answer the phone.

“Hey,” I reply, a smile in my voice.

“Hey. I’ve got a situation,” she says, sounding concerned. “Elena came to the office on Friday and hasn’t been heard from since.” Her voice trembles. “I have guys looking for her—”

So, it’s been a weekend fling for them. “She’s fine, if that’s what you are wondering.”

“And Bill said to...” She pauses. “Did you say she’s fine?”

“Yes, I just saw her over with Addler.”

The roar of her truck’s engine goes down. “You physically saw her?”

That’s a hell of a way to put it because I saw way more than I intended.

“Yeah. Come by the house, and we’ll go over.”

Sage

In the past, I've only admired the de Marco home from afar. Now, pulling up in front of the house, I can see all the detail put into the structure. It's a breathtaking experience.

The two-story mansion stretches out like a pair of magnificent wings. A large wrought-iron gate matches the grates at each window. Each one masked in an intricate design. I wouldn't have thought the grate to be more than decorative if I hadn't seen something similar in town.

Ezequiel parks his truck in front of the gate, and I follow suit. He looks at me, as if expecting to see an awestruck expression. Well, he would have gotten one, but it turns out he's much more interesting than the house.

"Hey again." I meet him in front of his truck.

"Let's get this done." He heads toward the wrought-iron gate then pauses. "Follow me," he says, changing direction. "It's easier if we go this way." He leads me around the house. Even though we're on an even, well-maintained sidewalk, it isn't long before I decide I should have driven here.

We go in a side gate then walk past a massive grill area with its own bar then a pool that looks so inviting, I almost want to dive in. Finally, we reach the back of the house.

Ezequiel knocks at the French doors. I catch a glimpse of Addler sitting at the table.

Elena is standing between his legs, her arms wrapped around his neck while he caresses her backside. I look away quickly, realizing I've stumbled upon an intimate moment.

Ezequiel pushes the door open, and follow him in. Miss I don't know him, I'm just a local is cozied up with Addler de Marco, playing handsies. I can't wait until I get her alone on Monday.

Ezequiel clears his throat then gives Elena a quick nod before turning to Addler. Maybe I misunderstood, but I didn't think things were that formal between them.

"You said it was okay to come by," Ezequiel says.

"You're good," Addler replies.

Elena gives him a sharp look. I wonder what's going on between them, or her and Ezequiel. It couldn't have something to do with the comment I made the other day, could it? I search my memory, knowing I made a disparaging remark about him, but I can't remember what I said.

"Hello again, Mr. de Marco." I give him a quick nod. "I just needed to check on Elena and make sure she's okay." I turn to her, as if I can't actually see she's physically okay.

"I'm fine," she replies, sounding uncomfortable. Is it because we showed up when we did, or something else?

"It's just that your car has been parked at the office for a couple of days," I add, more than anything to let her know why I'm here. "The guys reviewed the logs to see if you'd left and didn't find anything."

“I’m sorry, Sage. I hadn’t...” She stops, her lips parted as if she doesn’t know what to say. “Hadn’t expected...to be here this long,” she finally finishes.

I know exactly how that can go. I refuse to look at Ezequiel in the meantime.

“That’s fine.” I smile, though I’m more anxious for Monday to get here with every word that’s said. “It’s just that I called Bill.” I shrug, feeling stupid for doing that now that I know what’s going on. “He said for me to call Ezequiel, and he was going to call you. He got concerned when you didn’t answer...”

She winces, and I can sense her discomfort. “I don’t have my cell.”

“Well as you can see, Sage, Elena’s safe,” Addler points out.

My cell phone rings, and the ringtone tells me it’s Bill. “And there he is.” I hit the button to answer. “Hey, Bill.”

“Any luck?” he asks, sounding frazzled. “She isn’t answering.”

“I found her,” I reply, hoping to set him at ease. “She’s safe...”

“Let me talk to her.”

I glance at Elena. “Sure, one sec.” I hand her my cell. “He wants to talk to you.”

Her expression is dismal, as if she’s expecting to be chewed out for hanging with the one guy she should avoid.

“Hi, Bill,” she says, her voice neutral.

“Thank God you’re okay.” The volume is high enough that I can hear the relief in his

voice. “Sage was worried that you’d been carried off by an animal or someone lurking around.”

“Well, kind of.” She glances at Addler.

That’s enough to let me put the pieces together. Addler and Ezequiel are the two people who don’t have to log in. Even if she had gone past the gate, they wouldn’t have had to stop.

Bill chuckles. “There was no sign of a scuffle and, if it was an illegal alien, he would’ve taken your car, too. But she says it’s been sitting there for a couple of days...”

A blush runs across her cheeks. She glances at Addler and clears her throat. “I, um... We-we’re working on clearing up the invoices, like you said—”

“I know, girl,” he says. “I talked to Addler on Friday, when you ran late. He told me y’all were getting together.”

Her expression changes. “You did?”

“I told him we were running behind because of all the changes happening when I was running around with Isabella. He agreed you were the best one to help get the coding straightened out so we could close the books right.”

“Really...” She turns to Addler, her expression dark.

“Yup, we had a good long talk. I told him about the expense report running behind. And how you’d gotten after me about the receipts and getting it submitted on time.”

She clears her throat, “I—” She tries to cut in, but he keeps going.

“So you don’t have to worry. I’ve got everything scanned in. And most of it is logged into the report. I just didn’t get to finish, with having to run home.”

All the color leaves her face then floods back with a vengeance. Maybe that’s not the right word to use, with the way she’s looking at Addler now. I can feel the tension in the air; something is about to go down.

“You told him this?” she asks, sounding like she’s doing her best to keep her temper in check. While I’ve never seen her truly angry, I have a feeling that when she is, it’s best to stay out of her way.

“Yes. I told him I’ll be in early tomorrow so I can finish the report and submit it before the bigwigs come in from Houston.”

Meanwhile, Addler appears oblivious to the tension in the room. I’m not sure if I’m missing something or if he simply doesn’t grasp the gravity of the situation.

“I see.” Elena’s voice remains measured as she responds, then she turns away from Addler.

My mind races. Can Addler really be that clueless?

“Then we’ll get him switched over to the big office. I’ll move in next door to you to make things easier on us. He belongs over there anyway, now that he’s the owner.”

That explains the boxes in his office. It’s a bit of a relief, really, knowing he wasn’t fired. I sneak a peek at Ezequiel, knowing things have changed a lot in the past couple of days.

“Okay. I’ll see you then,” she says quietly then ends the call and hands the phone back to me.

I force a smile, trying my best to keep the situation from unraveling even more.

“I need a ride to my car, Sage,” Elena says quietly.

And I fail. My shoulders droop as I shift my weight uncomfortably, looking from her to Addler then back.

“I...” From everything I’ve heard, Addler’s a nice guy...though he was a bit of jerk when I first met him. Now I’m wondering if everything I’ve heard has been wrong. “Okay, of course.”

She shuts her laptop and shoves it into her backpack. Scooping it up, she keeps her chin held high despite the turmoil she must feel inside. Then she walks past us, out the French doors.

Addler’s just watching her leave. I want to tell him to go after her, to convince her to stay. But it’s not my place to interfere. Ultimately, the reality is that it’s his decision to make.

Ezequiel takes a deep breath, as if he doesn’t know what to do. Then he nods, indicating for me to follow Elena. Well, it’s not as if I’d let her take off on her own.

With a heavy heart, I follow her out, ready to provide whatever support she needs.

I follow Elena as she strides past the beautiful pool without a glance. Her pace is quick and purposeful, her backpack bouncing against her back with every step. It’s clear that she’s not happy with how things have turned out.

I catch up and fall into step beside her. We walk for a few moments, the only sound the soft click of our shoes on the pavement.

Finally, I can't help but ask, "You okay?"

She glances at me, her expression guarded. "I'm fine," she says, her tone clipped.

I nod, not wanting to push her. We continue walking, the silence stretching between us.

Ezequiel

“I know, girl.” Bill’s voice comes through. “I talked to Addler on Friday when you ran late. He told me y’all were getting together.”

“You did?” Elena seems surprised.

“I told him we were running behind because of all the changes happening when I was running around with Isabella.” That’s rotten luck that she’s had such a hard time. “He agreed you were the best one to help get the coding straightened out so we could close the books right.”

“Really...” Ah hell, her eyes are practically shooting sparks at him.

“Yup, we had a good long talk. I told him about the expense report running behind. And how you’d gotten after me about the receipts and getting it submitted on time.”

She clears her throat, “I—”

“So, you don’t have to worry. I’ve got everything scanned in. And most of it is logged into the report. I just didn’t get to finish, with having to run home.”

All the color leaves her face. Tension ratchets up in the room. I’m starting to feel like Addler’s fucked.

“You told him this?” she asks, like she’s going to blow a gasket.

I look back at Addler, and he's got a poker face in place. I wish you the best, brother. I have a feeling you're going to need it.

"Yes. I told him I'll be in early tomorrow so I can finish the report and submit it before the bigwigs come in from Houston."

"I see."

That's the same as saying everything's "fine." He's fucked.

"Then we'll get him switched over to the big office. I'll move in next door to you to make things easier on us. He belongs over there anyway, now that he's the owner."

"Okay. I'll see you then," she says, much too quietly. She jams her thumb on the screen then hands Sage her phone. "I need a ride to my car, Sage."

Sage is like the little kid looking from one parent to the other, knowing they're fighting, but not knowing why.

"I..." She opens her mouth and closes it. "Okay." She gives a nervous smile. "Of course."

Back straight, shoulders squared, Elena shuts her laptop and shoves it into her bag. She picks her shit up and heads for the door.

Addler watches her walk out on him without saying a word. Damn, knowing the history between them, I have to say he did a hell of a job keeping it together.

Sage turns to me. I take a deep breath and give a quick nod, telling her to go after Elena.

I shove a hand into the pocket of my jeans as the door closes. We're left in the kitchen, the room as silent as a tomb.

"I lied to her," he admits, eyes unfocused. "More of a lie of omission, but still a lie."

Not quite knowing what he means, I ask, "Lie of omission?"

He sits back. "I brought her here for a meal." He gives a half-chuckle. "Then I thought she was up to something. Which she was," he tacks on. "But not what I thought it was."

"The thing with Bill?" I add, putting the pieces together.

"Yeah." He nods, seeming beaten down. "I didn't tell her I'd talked to him. And she was being the good daughter, trying to save his job."

"Fuck." I actually wince. That's low, even for me.

He nods. "I was going to tell her, but..." He shrugs.

"Shit happens."

He gives a humorless smile. "Yeah, shit happens."

Sage

I get into the truck and buckle my seatbelt. The engine roars to life, filling the cab with a low rumble. Elena gets in the passenger seat and sets her backpack on the floorboard between her feet. She buckles up, but doesn't say anything. I can feel the tension around us like a physical weight.

Leaving the house isn't a problem. It's the long drive back to the office that has me feeling weird. Elena's hardly said a word, which makes the drive seem like an eternity.

Part of me wants to hit the gas and reach the office so she can get to her car. But I don't want to push my luck. I don't know if I'll still have a job at this point tomorrow, and now I have a lot more to lose if I have to find another job. Especially, if I don't find anything around here and end up having to move.

"I have to admit, I was really worried about you." I say, hoping to start a conversation, but she stays silent.

I try a different approach. "The guys were getting ready to go into the brush. I couldn't do much because I didn't have any snake guards." I swallow hard, remembering the fear twisting my stomach. "Up until then, I'd never needed them, so it hadn't occurred to me to have some in the truck." I take a deep breath, remembering the snake writhing at the side of the road. But my comment still gets nothing.

"Bill called back and said for me to go check your house. You know, in case you had

car trouble and got a ride home.”

“I’m sorry.” Discomfort rises in the car at her soft apology. “It was an unexpected situation,” she says, choosing her words carefully.

I nod, trying to ease the awkwardness. “I understand,” I say, my voice gentle. “I didn’t make it all the way to town. I was by gate five when I finally got Ezequiel on the phone.”

At the mention of Ezequiel, Elena stiffens and turns away to look out the window. I can sense her unease. Did I say something wrong? Ugh, it was probably the way I was trash talking him the other day. What did I say? That he was a piece of work, which isn’t untrue. But was there something else? I try my best to do damage control.

“I got to spend time with Ezequiel, and got a whole new perspective on the guy. Turns out he’s a decent guy,” I try to reassure her. “Yeah, he’s a little grumpy”—there’s no denying that—“but that’s just the outer layer. Once you strip him down, he’s a whole other person.”

I realize too late that my words may have hit a nerve. Elena fidgets, and I remember the incident with Addler. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—” I start, but she cuts me off.

“It’s fine,” she says quickly, her cheeks turning pink. “I know Ezequiel can be a good guy.” She wrings her fingers. “I spent time with him and Addler yesterday, trying to get a cow free from the mud at the Stage Coach pond.”

“That’s great.” I breathe a sigh of relief, glad she’s not upset with me. “I spent some time riding around the ranch with him.” I’m not sure how much she knows about what’s going on with Kelly Oil, so I avoid bringing up what we were doing. Especially the last part. Now I’m the one trying not to blush. “He knows this place like the back of his hand.”

The car is quiet again, and I focus on the sound of the tires on the road. The sun is starting to set, casting a warm glow over the landscape. I try to enjoy the scenery, but my mind is racing with thoughts of the meeting tomorrow. Will I still have a job after all this? And what's going to happen with Ezequiel if I don't.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Ezequiel

A lie by omission... His words echo in my mind as I pop the top off a cold beer.

I haven't told Sage anything about my life, about my family. With her staying over, she's going to find out one way or another. I'll eventually have to take my shirt off.

Is she coming back tonight? We didn't talk about that. I pull out my phone, rewatching the recording she made. My hands on her tits. My girl was into it. I grin, watching as she turns to look at me, as if she needs to see my expression while I'm playing with her. She's so fucking hot.

That whole thing with her weight bothers me. I get women wanting to be slim and trim. But a guy doesn't necessarily see things the same way. Her tit is filling my hand, the hard, pink nipple pointing at the camera. It's a beautiful thing.

Just look at the way she brings her leg up, letting me slip my fingers into her shorts.

I watch as I lean over her, trying to catch a glimpse of her pussy. She was so damn wet by then. I stick two fingers into her underwear, spreading those full pussy lips. A bit of the sound comes through the speaker, adding to the visual.

She's pushing her shorts off, and I remember wanting to dive into her so hard it hurt. I dragged her over to the edge of the seat before she could protest.

There's a break as I switch phones. I smirk, knowing what's coming. How my cock dives into that sweet little cunt over and over until she shatters.

I wasn't lying this morning when I told her I hadn't been tempted by any woman in a long time. I have enough money to buy any woman I've seen on video, enough to buy them several times over. I could have flown somebody in, flown out to anywhere in the world. But I was content to be alone. Until Sage.

She's spent two nights in my bed, and I want her there again. Is she coming by? We didn't discuss it. I was too busy enjoying the way she came all over my cock. She melted afterward, and I was left holding her up, by my cock.

But it poses the question of whether she realized I came inside her. Do I regret it? Not one damn bit. In fact, I'm ready to do it again right now. If she hadn't been knocked out the night before, it probably would have happened then. But I wasn't about to have my kid start out life with a junkie mother.

Now that I know that's not the case, I'm ready for what comes next.

The reality of the situation sinks in. I've planned for a future, for a family. I just hadn't looked at finding the woman who'd be the mother of my children. I could never picture what that woman would look like. Hell, I wasn't even sure if she'd be in the picture, but now I can't imagine anyone other than her.

My phone rings. Sage? I bring it up to find Mayela calling.

"Hey, how are things going?" she asks.

"Okay. Why? What's up?"

"I called Addler but he's not answering," she says, sounding concerned.

"Yeah, he's had a rough day." I'm not sure how much he'd share with her about what he did this weekend.

“Don’t tell me,” she says drily. “This thing with Elena blew up in his face.”

I take a drink of my beer. “Well, I don’t know what he decided to do about it, but I’d be careful walking into the house unannounced.” Now I can laugh about the whole thing. Though I’m not sure if she wants to know about what was going on on the kitchen floor.

“Do I want to know what that means?” she asks, sounding suspicious.

“Elena was there until earlier.”

“Oh, really.” She sounds like she just got a juicy bit of gossip.

“But yeah, things went wrong. And if he’s as smart as I think he is, he won’t let her get away.” I take another drink.

“Let’s get real here,” Mayela says patiently. “If he’s smart about this girl, he would have gone after her a long time ago. And I would have been changing diapers these last few years.”

She looked too pissed to expect anything of the sort. “I hate to break it to you, but you may not have diaper duty any time in the near future.”

“Ay muchacho.” She sighs. “I’ll head over once we get home and get settled.”

Which leads me back to her sister. “Bill took his wife to San Antonio. How did that go?”

“She’s the same,” Mayela says, sobering. “We’re praying for a transplant, but I don’t know that it’ll happen for her.”

“Sorry to hear that.” It’s a tough spot for them to be in. But maybe there’s someone I can reach out to.

“It is what it is, but thanks for asking,” she says, sounding tired. “I’ll go check on the kid and see how he’s doing.”

“Good luck.”

I end the call and shoot off a text to see if anything can be done. It’s sobering to find us all at a crossroads. I definitely need to make changes. I need to come clean and get ahead of this before I end up like Addler.

Going back to my messages, I find Sage’s contact. Hey, you coming by?

She answers right away. Maybe .

So how could I convince you? I reply, playing along.

Maybe a soak in that big tub .

That’s doable. Head over .

Is it big enough for two?

That’s all going to depend on the conversation. But I don’t want to start that now. Maybe .

Let me pack a couple of things. You want anything? Other than the nightie.

I like the fact she thought of that. How about some pizza to go with this beer .

Sounds good .

Sage

The scent of pizza wafts into my nostrils, making my stomach growl in anticipation. It's been a long day, and all I want is to relax with some good food and even better company. It's been months since I've had pizza, and it's more tempting than I thought it would be. I've actually considered sneaking a slice before I get to the ranch. But, somehow, I've managed to hold back.

The thought of Ezequiel waiting for me sends a shiver of excitement down my spine. He didn't ask me what was wrong, why I felt I needed meds to make it through. But I've already made up my mind to tell him. I can't keep it bottled up forever, and I don't think he'll judge me too harshly.

On the heels of that thought, my phone dings, announcing a message coming in. The ringtone says it's a message from Dad, which sobers me quicker than seeing the porch light come on when trying to sneak in after curfew on a school night.

Dad and Mom have been trying to get in touch with me, but I've been keeping them at bay. He's been giving me space to settle in, which is a lot coming from him.

I pull up to the gate and put the truck in park before picking up my phone. It's been a while, but I think I may finally be ready to talk to them. I consider what to say. I've had his email sitting in my inbox, waiting. Should I just reply to that instead of calling?

I know he's going to start out about the inci...the beating I took. Meanwhile, Mom, an avid churchgoer, will try to get me to forgive and forget so I can move on. Sigh. I

still have issues seeing past the fact the guy was an out-of-control criminal. I can't deal with that in my life, and I don't know that I ever will.

That still leaves me at a crossroads. Dad's made the first move, and Mom's made another. That means I'm next, so I pull up his text and read what he wrote.

Hey, pumpkin. Checking in. Hope you got to take a day off and enjoy the holiday. We're flipping burgers at home, thinking about you. Miss you. Your mother's praying for you.

Taking a deep breath, I try writing a reply. Everything I come up with is either too formal or too dismissive. I need something like the Goldilocks of texts. Not too long, not too short. Not too gripping, not too flippant.

My stomach rumbles. I drop my hand on the steering wheel and shake my head. Why did I ever think I could do this quickly? Ugh, why did I think I could do this, period?

Putting the phone in the cup holder, I exit the truck and glance around, checking the ground around me for any sign of danger. The sun is setting, the light turning dim all around me. Thankfully, everything seems quiet and peaceful, so I let out a sigh of relief.

Taking a few extra minutes, I go to the back seat and open the new snake guards I picked up earlier.

Pulling one out of the package, I wrap it on my left shin and set the Velcro strap in place then don the other. I wiggle each leg for good measure. These things feel really stiff, but it's better than the alternative. With a vehicle coming down the highway, I straighten up and shut the door.

My body practically buzzes with anticipation as I approach the gate leading to

Ezequiel's house. I can't wait for him to see me in these. My mind is already focused on what's to come. Pizza. A warm bath in that monstrous bathtub. And, of course, Ezequiel.

Pulling up the chain, I palm the lock and cringe, quickly switching to holding it with my thumb and index finger. The metal has been baking in the hot sun all day. I flip it up to see the base then proceed to put the numbers in the right order.

My moment of peace is shattered by the revving of a loud engine.

My heart jumps into my throat as I turn to see a pickup truck bearing down on me. I fumble with the chain, trying to get past the gate so I don't get crushed. The truck skids to a stop a few yards away. The dust it kicks up surrounds me like a cloud, stinging my eyes and making it hard to breathe.

My heart races as the passenger door opens. A dark, bulky man steps out and heads toward me, rocks crunching sharply with each quick, determined step.

My mind's racing. I have to call Ezequiel, but I left my phone in the truck. The passenger door is locked, so I make a run for the driver's side. He's too fast, getting in my path, effectively blocking my way.

I stop in my tracks, weighing my options...or I would if I had any. Once again, I wish I had a weapon. "What do you want?" I back away, putting as much space between us as possible, but he keeps coming.

His expression turns murderous. "I want the money you cost me," he says in accented English, "you stupid bitch."

Before I can react, he grabs me and hurls me onto the ground like I don't weigh a thing. I slam into the caliche underfoot; sharp rocks and grit dig into my arm and side.

Memories of the last time I was attacked flood my senses. The same fear and panic rise up inside me. I swallow hard, keeping the bile at bay, taking deep breaths to steady myself.

“I don’t have your money.” I shake my head, bracing myself on an elbow against the sunbaked ground. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

A second man, the driver, gets out. His hat’s pulled low, so I can’t see his face as he takes quick steps to go behind my attacker and get in my truck. Is this a carjacking? No, it can’t be. The man who threw me is wearing a designer shirt. His boots are dark, smooth, and recently shined.

His fingers curl into me like a vise. He drags me up, off the ground, tearing my sleeveless blouse in the process, leaving me exposed and vulnerable.

“She doesn’t have my money.” The heat of his breath hits me square in the face, suffocating me with the stench of cigarettes. He’s so close, I can see the pores on his nose, the light layer of dust that’s settled on his face and hair.

I try to push him away, but he’s too strong.

“You cost me a lot of money, chica ,” he sneers. “And now it’s time to pay up.”

He’s going to punch me. My pulse is pounding against my temple as I struggle to break free. My gaze is focused on his fist, expecting it to come down on me again. I want to scream. I want to run. I don’t want to end up in the hospital, slowly trying to heal broken bones.

But he just laughs, the sound of it making my skin crawl.

“Alvaro.” The man inside the truck sticks his head out. His eyes are open wide, his

face seeming overly long. “Es Ezequiel.”

My attention turns to the phone in the man’s hand. It’s mine. Ezequiel is calling, but my ears are buzzing so hard I couldn’t hear it ring.

“Lleva cerveza y comida,” he says, sounding worried. “Y le está hablando Ezequiel,” he says, punctuating with the phone.

So he figured out I have food and beer and Ezequiel is calling me.

Alvaro, the man holding me, shoves me away and reaches for the phone. I scramble backward, trying to put some distance between us.

I know I’m in a mess of trouble, but I’m more concerned about this guy. What happens when the criminal willing to come after me in daylight seems afraid of Ezequiel?

Ezequiel

I stare down at my phone on the kitchen counter. She's been sitting at the gate for way too long. I pull down on the screen on my phone, trying to refresh the search, but her location stays the same.

I start to go through the possibilities one by one, but my gut tells me something's wrong.

I hit the button to call. She'll have to start dealing with the fact I take care of my own. That means looking after her, making sure she's safe when she takes too long at the gate.

Ring.

The sound fills the kitchen. I tap my foot impatiently, the sharp sound echoing off the tile floor. The lock on the gate is a four-digit tumbler. Did she forget the combination?

Ring.

Maybe she's on another call. Something could've happened at the ranch. But I'm assuming I would've heard about it by now.

Ring.

The tension inside me coils as tight as a spring.

Okay. That's it . Somethings wrong . The tension releases, as if my body thinks it's finally gotten the message through.

I head over and grab my gun belt with one hand, the other still holding my phone to my ear. Then she picks up the line, and I stop in my tracks.

“ Que paso, pendejo .”

The sound of my own blood rushing in my ears drowns out everything. I haven't heard that voice since I left Mexico, but I recognize it immediately.

“Alvaro. What the fuck are you doing on this phone?”

My half-brother has no business being on the side of the border. That river is our line in the sand, the fence that divides us. He stays on that side; I stay on this side. And everyone lives their lives.

“I came to see the lady guard,” he says, as if it's an everyday conversation. “Now I come to find out she's your puta .”

Anger tears through my chest. I grip the phone so hard I'm going to crack the screen.

My mind races. Where's Sage? “What the fuck do you want with her?” I demand.

“I came to collect. Your puta cost me a lot of money.”

What did she get herself tangled up in? My mind races as I try to think of a way to get her out of this mess.

“How's that?”

“She called in la migra .”

Oh fuck.

“And they rounded up the whole group, along with the coyote and the mules.”

But Sage was just doing her job. “When was this?”

“Yesterday”

Not last night. Not this morning. I think back to where she was. Laredo. So she would have been coming or going, and she couldn't have seen them at the ranch.

“Well, if they were stupid enough to get seen, then that's on you. They shouldn't have been coming in in broad daylight. And they shouldn't have had anything with them,” I remind him.

“Fuck you, asshole.” The cold edge on his voice says my goading hit the mark. “She cost me a lot of money. I have people looking for me.”

That shouldn't surprise me. His mother's side has always been more interested in money than actual business. But that leaves me in a bad spot. I need to get Sage away from him as quickly as possible.

“Let her go, and I'll get you your money.”

He laughs into the phone, and the hair on the back of my neck stands on end. He knows as well as I do that this isn't gonna end well.

“It's a million, five, little brother.” He laughs, knowing I overplayed my hand. “You bring me my money, and I might just let her live.” Then he hits the button to end the

line.

I go to the closet, pressing on the false panel to get to the safe. I grab a suitcase, not bothering to count out what he needs. This more than covers the cost. Though nothing close to what she's worth to me.

Then I think better of it. If he knows what she's worth to me, she'll always be in danger.

I dial a number I haven't used in years and put the phone on speaker as I strap on my gun belt. Tino answers on the second ring.

"What's wrong?" he says, sharply.

"Alvaro's at the gate."

"Hrmph." He grunts as I pull out a duffel bag and start transferring cash.

"He's holding someone who's important to me." I pause to consider my next words. I'm looking at generations of business transactions. The blood, sweat, and tears of my blood relations. But, most of them are gone. People have moved on, trying to get legitimate businesses started, including the de Marcos. So, without another thought, I tell him, "If I don't make it, burn it all down."

"After he pulled this shit. I might do that even if you do make it," Tino says with deadly calm. "I'll send maintenance to clean up."

The line goes dead.

I have no doubt Tino wouldn't leave a soul in his path. Men who make money like we do, who've had to weigh trucks to get a close enough count on how much we're

being paid, have skeletons in our closets.

Sometimes, they come back to haunt you.

I zip the duffel bag, sling it over my shoulder, grab another with some fire power, and head out of the room. My heart is pounding as I make my way to the truck. I need to get Sage away from Alvaro, and fast.

The miles stretch in front of me. I floor it but keep in mind that I have to make it there in one piece, or it could cost Sage her life. Sage... It's getting dark. She's bound to be terrified.

If that fucker hurts her...

As I approach the gate, the headlights illuminate the area. I take in the scene around me, needing to assess the situation. Her truck's on the other side of the gate. But Sage is on the ground, leaning against the fence post, her legs pulled up to her chest. She looks so small and vulnerable, and she isn't moving.

Alvaro's standing by his driver, his arms crossed over his chest as he waits for me.

I get out of my truck and grab the duffel, carrying it in my left hand. I walk in his direction, the caliche crunching under my boots. I keep the headlights behind me.

As I get closer, I can see the smug satisfaction on his face. He knows he has the upper hand, and he's relishing every moment of it. I grit my teeth and steel myself for the confrontation.

First things first. "Sage," I call out, "how you doing over there?" I can't take my eyes off him. While I can only see Moises leaning against the front of the other truck, I don't know who else might be hidden somewhere.

“I’m okay,” she says, sounding hoarse. “Both of them left me alone after they talked to you.”

So, there’s two of them. Good girl. Just hang on for me .

Alvaro’s eyeing me, as if he’s sizing me up. I pull the gate open, swinging it back. Then I drop the duffel between us.

He looks down at the bag. “Well, what do you know. Looks like you have a million-dollar pussy,” he says to Sage. “Actually one-point-five million.” He chuckles. “Should have tried it out myself.”

“Fuck off, Alvaro. You’re high and not thinking straight.”

“What’s the matter, little brother?” he scoffs. “I thought you liked my leftovers.”

The muscles in my back cramp. I can’t let that happen. I might need to act fast. “You mean just one more time we had to clean up the shit you always leave behind?”

He loses the smug expression. Damn, he’s so damn easy to manipulate. Shoulders back, he starts in on me instead of Sage.

“Let’s go,” I say to Sage. She gets up, moving toward me.

“You think you’re some chingo n because you made your bones when you were a kid?” He laughs, way too hard. “That’s nothing, puto . Nothing!”

The flapping material on her shirt catches my eye. As she gets closer, I can see she’s been battered, and it takes everything in me to keep from losing my cool.

“What the hell happened here?” I demand. “Who did this to you?”

“It was meeee,” Alvaro jeers, as if he’s rubbing it in my face. He snorts, clearly enjoying the chaos he’s caused. “I told you, I came to collect, and she was going to pay for what she did, until you stepped in.”

My blood boils. “You knew she was heading here, and you still did this?” I gesture to Sage’s battered form.

“Alvaro,” Moy says, warning. His gaze is fixed on me. “You’ve caused enough trouble.”

Alvaro glares at him. “You think you have enough balls to tell me what to do?”

“I’m the one who’s going to make sure you pay for what you’ve done,” I reply, cold and steady. “You don’t touch what’s mine.”

We stare at each other, a silent challenge passing between us. He turns away, looking at Moy. “Look at this guy,” he says with a mocking laugh. Then, just as I expected, Alvaro makes a move. He turns in a flash, reaching for his weapon.

By then, I have my gun out. I squeeze the trigger, in a three shot grouping before he can get off a shot. All the while, I’m keeping Moy in my peripheral vision.

It’s short and brutal, and, when it’s over, Alvaro hits his knees. His body slumps to the ground, lifeless. Then I find my new target.

“You think twice before messing with what’s mine,” I growl.

Moy holds up his hand. “I didn’t—”

“He didn’t touch me,” Sage jumps in to defend him, stopping me from finishing it.

I lower my gun. “Let’s get you home.”

“What about him?” Moy asks.

“Don’t worry about him.”

“And what about me?” he asks, his body tense.

I look down at the bag at my feet. Moy is my uncle, my father’s brother. While he’s part of the family, he’s on the right side. “Take the bag. It’s a million five. It could keep you for the rest of your life if you work it out right.”

He nods slowly. “Yeah.” He rubs his hand across his mouth. “Yeah, I can do that.”

Together, we lift Alvaro’s body and carry him to his truck. I can’t help but feel a sense of relief and anger. Relief that the threat is gone, but anger that it had to end this way...in front of her.

Sage is pale, her eyes downcast.

I take a deep breath, trying to push down the frustration.

Sage

We've driven back to his house in silence, the only sound the hum of my truck's engine. My eyes are fixed on the passing scenery, but I don't really see any of it. I'm lost in my thoughts, trying to make sense of what just happened.

"You okay?" he asks, as he turns off the truck.

I nod, numb. "Yeah. I'll be okay."

That's not entirely true, I'm shaken to my very soul. I need time to process what's happened. If he still had his truck, I would have gone back to Carrizo.

My mind replays the last hour, picking apart every detail. I don't want to be helpless anymore. How many times could I have ended up in major trouble over the past couple of days. But he saved me each time.

You think twice before messing with what's mine . I wrap up those words and tuck them near my heart.

Mine . The word itself echoes in my mind.

I break the silence. "Thank you," she says quietly, still looking out the window.

He glances at me, his expression inscrutable. "You don't have to thank me. I'll always protect you."

Tears burn my eyes. I bring my hand up to my mouth, trying to keep from falling apart.

He comes around the truck, taking me in his arms and carrying me inside. He sets me on my feet, and we stay like that for a few moments. I can feel the warmth of his embrace seeping into my bones. The scent of him, comforting me.

I close my eyes, allowing myself to sink into the moment.

As he pulls back, I can see the worry etched on his face. His hand reaches up to cup my cheek, and I lean into his touch. The rough texture of his calloused fingers sends shivers down my spine.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you sooner,” he says, his voice heavy with regret.

I shake my head, sinking against his chest. “You came for me.” This makes me feel whole in a way I’ve never felt before.

“I won’t let anyone hurt you again,” he says in a husky voice.

I take a deep breath and pull away far enough to see his face. “I believe you,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

He puts his hands to my cheeks, bringing me in for a kiss. I close my eyes and savor the sensation of his lips on mine. The taste of him, the way his lips move against mine, send shivers down my spine. When he pulls away, he leaves me weak and wet.

I take his hand, leading him down the hall to his bedroom. I don’t want any questions as to where I stand. I pull off what’s left of my blouse then reach for my bra.

“You wanted to soak in the tub,” he reminds me. “Now might be a good time.”

I shake my head. “Take me to bed.” I put my hand to his chest. “Then the tub.” I smile. “Then pizza.” I look up at him through my lashes. “Then bed...and bed...and bed.”

His smile finally makes an appearance. We go back to shedding clothes. When his shirt comes off, I understand why he kept it on. A dark tattoo covers one side of his chest. The death saint, patron saint of the cartel.

I shift my gaze to his face and find him watching me intently. Days ago, I may have acted differently, but tonight, things are different. I slip into bed, watching him undress as I move to my side .

He joins me, leaning over me, kissing me, letting me revel in his strength, and enjoying the fact he considers me his.

And now he’s mine.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Sage

“I’ve asked you all here for what is, in essence, a secret meeting,” Addler says, addressing everyone. “What’s said here should not leave the group.”

The six of us nod our heads.

“Derrick Stockton, Nicole Fuentes,” he says, going around the room. “Ezequiel Mata, Sage Donohue, Bill Connors, Elena Santos, and I’m Addler de Marco.”

We all nod or share a smile with the others in the room.

“In a couple of hours, Simon Kelly, Derrick’s brother, will be arriving to announce the construction division has been sold, and I’m the new owner. What we’re asking you to do is help check on locations where Kelly Oil & Gas has been doing business. Derrick and Nicole found an anomaly in the books. Money’s being manipulated within the organization. We need to confirm the work being done on paper is actually being done in the field before he can move forward.”

“What kind of work?” I ask. “Or how much money are we talking?”

“Millions, tens of millions, actually.”

“Holy mother of God.”

Ezequiel runs his hand down his face.

Bill drops his chin onto his chest.

Elena takes Addler's hand, squeezing his fingers as Derrick and Nicole glance at each other. Ezequiel and I keep our distance since nobody knows what's happening between us.

“And, unfortunately, we don't have much time to search,” Derrick adds, staring out into the darkness.

The sun is barely peeking over the horizon as we all head to our vehicles ready to search the locations for any anomaly that might explain the missing money. Then it's up to Derrick to take the information to his brother and maybe to the police.

* * *

Ready for more morally gray billionaires? Derrick's grappling with his newly revealed past and discovering Nicole has a secret of her own brings out his dark side in, read **CRUDE HEIR**

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Derrick

“Your father doesn’t want anyone to know,” she whispers into the phone, her voice barely audible. Her words hit me like a punch in the gut, a painful reminder of whose interests matter most to her. And they’re not mine.

Father. The term wasn’t part of my vocabulary until recently. Even though I’ve known the truth for several weeks, it doesn’t make the situation any easier to deal with. And now, here she is, dropping yet another bomb in my lap.

“Derrick, are you there?” Her voice trembles with concern and maybe even a touch of desperation. It should move me, but I just can’t bring myself to feel anything. After finding out my own mother has lied to me for my entire goddamn life, I’m having a hard time trusting anyone. And she, of all people, is at the bottom of that list. “Honey, I know you’re angry, but I need you to hear me out.”

“I’m here.” My reply comes out curt and detached, a reflection of the walls I’ve built around myself after her betrayal and the subsequent fallout.

“I said your father doesn’t want—”

“I heard,” I reply through clenched teeth, struggling to contain the mixture of resentment and disappointment building up inside. “Your boss is trying to keep a lid on whatever you’re about to tell me.”

It shouldn’t have come as a shock to learn my mother’s long-time employer is my father. But when that man is Texas billionaire Keith Kelly, the owner of Kelly Oil &

Gas, the revelation thrusts my life into the public eye, drawing the whole world's attention. The knowledge has bashed every pillar of my being until I don't even know who I am.

There's a brief pause on the other end of the line, as if she's trying to choose her words carefully. I tap my fingers against my desk, wishing this call to be over. "There's...an issue with the accounting in the Eagle Ford region."

My blood runs cold. "What are you saying? Theft?" It doesn't surprise me that he would want to keep something like that a secret.

"Yes." She says the word as if it hurt her physically.

"Oh hell." Why did this have to happen now? In Eagle Ford of all places? "Why would he want to cover this up?"

"I don't know," she says, her voice strained.

"How can he pull this shit and leave Addler hanging?"

"He didn't. The sale was supposed to be postponed. Keith is furious . He's on the phone with Simon now."

Selling the construction division was done to bring in a substantial amount of money. This was all part of the restructuring Keith had announced. I helped find the buyer, before I found out what was going on. Hell, I even got him the lease for the de Marco Ranch.

"How bad is it?" I ask, my body feeling hollow.

"Millions," she whispers, making my stomach churn. "I don't know the exact total, but he just admitted it's what he discovered when he had the heart attack." If she

hadn't been there to call an ambulance when he collapsed over his desk, he likely wouldn't have survived.

"So now what?"

"Keith...Keith doesn't want anyone to know yet," she says, sounding exhausted. "So please be mindful of the information. He doesn't know I'm calling—"

My temper flares. Just like that, I'm embroiled in another one of her damn secrets. This is just adding salt to a deep and painful wound.

"I need to let you go, I'm late for a meeting." I don't wait for a reply, instead slamming my thumb on the button, ending the call abruptly. It's the first excuse to come to mind, and one that she, the ever-efficient corporate secretary, wouldn't question.

I toss the phone on the massive oak desk and push back so hard my leather chair creaks in protest. Now I have to figure out what to do next. I can't be the obedient son and keep my mouth shut. There's too much at stake and I'm the one responsible for dragging my best friend into this mess. I sit forward, staring down at the phone's screen.

The best course of action is to reach out to Addler. I need to give him a heads-up about the mess I unknowingly led him into. We have plans to meet later tonight for drinks, but there's no way I can hold off until then. Not with the knowledge, the secret my mother shared, churning in my gut. I pick up my phone, flip to the recent calls, and dial his number.

Addler picks up on the second ring. "Hey, bro."

His familiar greeting eases the tightness in my chest, if only for a moment. This is precisely why I need to be honest with him. He's the closest thing to a brother I've

ever had, even before I discovered I have a blood relation on my father's side. No, I'm not going to hide a damn thing from him.

I take a fortifying breath before speaking. "You still in the area?" I grab my keys from the top drawer and circle my desk, determined to drive out to meet him, wherever he may be. What are they going to do if I leave for the rest of the day? Fire me? I fucking doubt it.

"Yeah," he replies, the sounds of surrounding traffic filtering in from the background. "You caught me in the parking lot, about to take off."

"You have a few? I need to talk to you." I walk down the hall, aware of the glances coming my way. It seems like most of the women in the building have nothing better to do than watch and see who comes by. While I normally ignore them without much trouble, today, I need to be conscious of who's around. And the only one who poses a problem is nowhere in sight.

"Don't tell me." He lets out an exaggerated sigh. "You're not going to make it tonight." We used to be inseparable through boarding school and college. Wherever you found one of us, the other was never far behind. Now we're in different parts of the state, if that. And the one occasion we have to hang out, I'm about to end up screwing it up.

"It's not that." I step into the elevator and press the button for the parking garage. "We need to talk, and I can't wait." He just dropped a few million for a division of Kelly Oil & Gas that may have been front and center in an embezzlement scheme. I glance over my shoulder to make sure nobody's within earshot. This isn't a conversation I want to have over the phone or in public, where someone might overhear.

"Sounds serious."

“It is.” That’s an understatement of epic proportions. The loss was severe enough to nearly kill the old man when he discovered the extent of the damage to his precious company.

“Okay, I’ll wait for you here.” The distinct sound of a car alarm comes blaring through the line. “I’m parked on the fifth level.”

“I’m on the way.” I jam my thumb against the button that closes the doors. As the elevator descends, I brace myself for the inevitable shitstorm I’m about to bring down on our heads.

* * *

Derrick

Addler braces his hands firmly against the exterior reinforced concrete wall, his gaze fixed on the sprawling city below. “How much money are we talking about here? Thousands? Tens of thousands?” he asks, his brow furrowed in concern as he poses the question.

I exhale slowly, the weight of the truth settling on my conscience. “She said it was more along the lines of millions,” I correct him, my voice heavy with remorse. “The old man had a literal heart attack when he found out about the money being gone.”

He lets out a low whistle. “The company’s missing that much?” Clearly he’s as surprised at the amount as I was when she told me.

Be mindful of the information. The gravity of her warning echoes in the back of my mind. While I don’t expect anyone to be lurking in the shadows, I glance around the parking garage, hoping nobody’s close enough to hear us. It’s unsettling to think that someone could easily be directly below us, hidden from view, and we’d never know.

“Man, I’m sorry,” I offer the apology from the bottom of my heart. “I just got the phone call about it a few minutes ago.” Even then, she wasn’t supposed to tell anyone, but somehow, she felt it was necessary. I suppose I should be grateful she didn’t hold onto this for Keith’s benefit, also.

“Nah, I get it.” He shrugs nonchalantly. “Shit like this happens all the time,” he says with complete confidence.

“It does?” I’m genuinely surprised at the revelation. Though I’m still asking myself how something of this magnitude can even happen.

His serious expression revealing a side of the business world I don’t normally see. “Yeah. You just don’t hear about a lot of them,” he explains. “Usually, the company doesn’t want the bad press. Sometimes they don’t want to look weak, or it’ll damage their reputation. Imagine a money manager who doesn’t notice someone stealing money. They’d lose credibility. People would pull their investments, and the company would take a hit.”

Realization washes over me as the gravity of the situation sinks in. “Oh hell. I never considered that.” I’ve always known the business world could be cutthroat. But it turns out the intricacies of these deals have repercussions that are a lot more treacherous than I imagined. I didn’t expect my best friend to get caught in this mess, especially not because of me.

“You never know why it’s covered up. But I’m not worried about this.” He assures me, gesturing toward the building. “Per the wording in the contract, I’m only responsible for what happens from Monday forward. So, whatever this is stays with Kelly Oil.”

A sense of ease courses through me as the knot in the middle of my back loosens slightly. “That’s a relief,” I confess, grateful he won’t be directly implicated in what could be a huge embezzlement scandal.

He turns, leaning an elbow on top of the half wall. “I have to admit, I wondered why they were selling an entire division so cheap,” he muses aloud.

“Cheap? Only you would consider shelling out a few million dollars cheap,” I retort, sarcasm lacing my voice. Of course, to Addler de Marco, sole heir to a South Texas billionaire, it’s probably just a drop in the bucket. His family’s rumored to have ties to the criminal underworld, though whether or not that’s true remains to be seen. But Addler is determined to use the money he has to grow the business legitimately.

“Hey, are you forgetting your newfound fortune?” he shoots back with a playful grin.

I grimace, the weight of the situation pressing down on me. “I can’t seem to fucking get away from it.”

“How are you doing with that?” Addler shifts to a more serious tone, genuine concern shining through.

Addler, one of my few friends, and I have gone through thick and thin since college. I’ve never met someone more driven. Meanwhile, my entire professional career feels like a sham now, as if every accomplishment was orchestrated by him, just looking out for the kid he didn’t acknowledge. Where the hell could I go right now without that following me?

“Ever since Keith Kelly had his heart attack, my world’s been upside down,” I confess. “He felt the need to make what he thought was a deathbed confession. So now, everyone knows he fathered a kid with his secretary.” The words tumble out with a mixture of anger and hurt, yet I can’t stop myself from spilling my guts to him. “People started doing the math and figured out I was born almost exactly nine months after Simon.” I pause, letting the implication sink in. “I can feel him hating me from the next floor.” I exhale.

“Shit,” Addler mutters, dropping his head back in exasperation.

“Well, he thought he was an only child, set to inherit the Kelly Dynasty. Now he’s finding out he’s only entitled to half,” I explain, bitterness creeping into my voice fueled by the memory of the hate in Simon’s eyes every time we’re face-to-face. “Not that I want a single dime of it.”

As we continue with our conversation, the sound of an engine catches my attention. A faded-red older-model compact car comes into view as it ascends the ramp. Nicole Fuentes sits behind the wheel. She’s likely coming back from running an errand for my newly found brother.

“You okay?” Addler asks, noticing my distraction as she drives past us and pulls into an empty space on the other side of the parking area.

“Just someone from the office,” I reply, my eyes fixed on Nicole as she steps out of the vehicle and goes around to the passenger’s side. She bends down, offering a nice view of that shapely ass then retrieves a tray of coffee cups. Turning, she shuts the door with a quick kick before she heads our way.

The woman’s trouble in high heels. As always, she seems like a complete contradiction. She wants to dress like Little Miss Sunshine, but the image doesn’t seem to fit. Every time I see her, she fidgets, as if uncomfortable in her own skin.

“I’m thinking I should head back and start looking into this,” Addler says, pulling me from my thoughts.

What? I’m astonished at the sudden change of heart. I push the sound of her heels clicking against concrete to the back of my mind. “Why? I thought you said this wouldn’t matter.”

A glimmer of determination flickers in his eyes. “It doesn’t matter to me, directly. But I might be able to preserve evidence if they don’t know I’m coming.” He shrugs. “It might be helpful if you go to trial, maybe even recover some of the stolen funds.”

He's right. Preserving evidence will undoubtedly benefit Kelly Oil if they decide to take legal action. The company would get the money back, but that has nothing to do with me. "Makes sense, but do you know what you're looking for?"

He nods confidently. "I have someone there who can help. In fact, I probably have the best person for the job."

"Well, I've done my part in telling you. Since you're off the hook with everything up to Monday, I'm washing my hands of the whole thing," I declare, a mix of resignation and determination in my voice.

"Of course you are." Addler has the balls to laugh despite my standing right in front of him.