

Synopsis – The Reasons We Stay

Jon and Ari are married. That's where their story starts - not where it ends.

After the wedding, after the vows, after the firework of love - what remains?

After surviving a serious illness that nearly tore them apart, they leave behind their high-profile modeling careers to travel the world. Searching not for perfection, but for a way to live without fear.

For Jon, who holds everything together with control and precision, love is an anchor - but also a quiet terror. The fear of losing Ari, of being left behind.

For Ari, who spent his life performing for others - first as the golden boy his parents wanted, then as the man society expected - love is freedom, but also the first time he's had to ask himself who he really is, when no one's watching.

Their journey leads them to Mexico, where they meet Diego and his sprawling, chaotic family. Welcomed onto their ranch in the lead-up to Día de los Muertos, Jon and Ari find themselves drawn into the rhythms of family life - observing, listening, slowly becoming part of the fabric without forcing it.

As they navigate the warmth and tensions of Diego's home, they form an unexpected bond with Lucas, Diego's younger brother - a guarded sixteen-year-old grappling with his own identity. Lucas's quiet questions force Jon and Ari to ask their own - about who they were, who they are, and who they might become.

A stray dog, blue-eyed and stubborn, becomes a quiet symbol of the life they are building - not because it was planned, but because it is right.

The Reasons We Stay is a story about love after the grand gestures.

About the quiet work of choosing each other, every day.

About the fear of losing what you love most - and finding the courage to stay anyway.

The bus ride was exactly as bad as Ari had predicted. Worse, even.

Ari, however, was handling it alarmingly well.

Too well.

He sat completely still, staring out the window, arms crossed over his chest. The picture of patience.

Which meant he was up to something.

I turned my head slightly. “You’re too quiet.”

Ari didn’t blink. “I’m meditating.”

“Liar.”

His lips twitched. “Maybe.”

“You’re plotting something.”

Ari exhaled, turned slowly. “Jon,” he said, calm as a monk, “this journey is simply another lesson in patience. We must accept discomfort as part of the human experience, transcend it, and - ”

I stared.

Ari leaned in, voice dropping. “Also, the guy behind you has been staring at your ass for three hours.”

I snorted.

Ω

The plane was too small.

Ari didn’t do well with small planes.

I saw it the second we boarded - jaw tight, fingers flexing before gripping the armrest like it might save him.

“You good?” I asked.

“I’m great,” he lied.

“You look like you’re about to negotiate with God.”

His knuckles whitened. “Jon.”

“Yes?”

“If you say one more word, I’ll crash this plane myself.”

I huffed a quiet laugh, stretching out as much as the seat allowed.

Ari glared. “Do you know how many people die in small planes?”

“It’s a non-zero number,” I finished for him, grinning.

Despite himself, his mouth twitched.

We landed. His hand found mine - steady, certain. That was all it took.

I squeezed back. We were here. Together.

When I finally turned to him - really looked - his expression was knowing.

Not upset. Not impatient.

Just reminding me.

Later, in our room, Ari closed the door behind us and leaned against it for a moment.

I exhaled.

His eyes found mine, steady, knowing. We hadn’t touched properly in days. Not really. Not the way we needed, the way that would remind us that we were still here, still us. I’d felt it in every brush of his hand, every glance held just a little too long - the tension building, quiet and patient.

Later, in our room, Ari closed the door behind us and leaned against it for a moment.

I exhaled.

We hadn’t touched in days. Not properly.

Not in the way that mattered.

But I’d felt it in every brush of his hand, every glance held a little too long - this quiet pull back to each other.

To us.

The hotel room was small - meant for passing through.

Bare walls. A bed that creaked under the weight of our bags.

But it was quiet.

And it was ours.

Ari looked at me.

And I saw everything.

The miles behind us. The exhaustion. The longing.

And the thing that was always there.

Love.

Desire.

The need to feel safe again.

He crossed the room - three steps, no hesitation.

His hand found my waist, his fingers my jaw, tilting my face down to his.

I let him.

I always did.

Because with Ari, it was never about control.

It was about finding our way back.

Our mouths met - soft at first, testing, remembering.

Then deeper.

Not desperate.

Just sure.

Him.

Me.

Still here.

His warmth pressed into me, his scent familiar - salt, skin, something that was just him.

My chest loosened. My shoulders softened.

This.

This was home.

When he undressed me, it was careful.

Not hurried.

Not hungry.

Just... steady.

Every button undone, every inch of skin revealed was a wordless promise:

I see you. I want you. We are okay.

We fit together like we always had.

His weight settled over me - solid, certain - pressing me into the bed, into this place that had held us through everything.

The rhythm wasn't perfect.

It didn't need to be.

It was him.

It was us.

His breath on my neck.

My hand in his hair.

Our bodies finding each other after too many days apart.

When it was over, he stayed.

His chest rising and falling against mine.

His fingers tracing lazy circles over my ribs - absent, gentle, anchoring.

I closed my eyes.

I was home again.

For the first time in days, my head was quiet. No racing thoughts, no tension pulling me apart.
Just Ari. Just us.

I held him, our breaths slowing together, our bodies tangled. And I knew - this was why we were here.

This was not about the city. Nor the journey.

"Jon," he whispered, his voice barely audible. "I love you."

I tightened my hold on him, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. "I love you too," I murmured, my voice rough with emotion. "Always."

We lay there for a while, our bodies tangled together, the hum of the city outside a distant reminder of the world beyond this room. And for the first time in days, I felt like I could breathe.

Ω

I woke slowly. No jolt, no sharp return to consciousness - just a quiet drift upward, the weight of sleep still lingering at the edges.

Ari was warm against me, his body draped in that way that made it impossible to tell where he ended and I began. His arm rested heavy across my ribs, his breath slow against my shoulder.

For the first time in days, I felt - settled.

Not fixed. Not weightless. But *here*.

I exhaled, stretching my legs beneath the sheets.

The hum of Mexico City filtered through the walls - muffled voices, the occasional blare of a distant car horn, the steady undercurrent of a city already wide awake.

I should get up.

There were flights to book, things to arrange, an entire next step waiting for us. But Ari's fingers curled slightly against my skin, grounding me before I could slip back into that mode.

I glanced down at him.

His eyes were open - just barely, heavy with sleep - but there was the smallest hint of a smirk on his lips. He'd caught me thinking.

"You're doing it again," he murmured.

I huffed, pressing my head back into the pillow. "Doing what?"

"Living in your head instead of here." His fingers traced a slow, lazy line against my ribs.

"But I'm here. You're here. So..."

I turned toward him fully. Took in the familiar lines of his face, the sharp blue of his gaze - the quiet, *unshaken certainty* in the way he looked at me.

I swallowed. "So?"

Ari shifted closer, breath warm against my jaw.

"So maybe, for once, you just let yourself be here."

Ω

I hadn't expected to like Mexico City.

It wasn't intentional - I hadn't landed with some rigid refusal to enjoy myself - but big cities had worn on me in recent years. I assumed this one would be the same.

The endless movement, the weight pressing in from every direction, the way no one ever slowed down.

I thought I had outgrown that. And yet, by the time we stepped out of that café, full of something other than the endless parade of meat that had defined our time in Argentina, I realized something had shifted.

It was the air, maybe. Lighter than I expected, carrying the scent of fresh tortillas and roasted coffee.

Or maybe it was Ari. The way he moved through the streets like he had been born to belong anywhere.

The market was chaos - the kind that pulsed, alive with heat and color. Ari lit up, moving through it like he was brought up here. I stayed close, expecting to endure it, but found myself easing into the rhythm.

And then, the bracelet.

I wasn't searching, but it was there - a small wooden stall, an old man arranging his work with careful hands. A wolf, carved into wood. Simple, but steady. Its eyes - deep, knowing - held something that stopped me.

Blue. The exact shade of Ari's. The exact shade of mine. I reached for it before I could second-guess the instinct. Slipped it on.

It fit as though it had always been mine.

Later, I caught myself staring at it - thumb brushing over the leather, feeling the shape of the wolf beneath my fingertips. The market swelled around me, voices and colors, but I wasn't braced against it. Not this time.

I let it happen.

When I glanced up, Ari was watching me. His expression was soft - surprised, maybe - but he didn't say anything. He didn't need to.

We both felt it. Something shifting.

Ω

We ended the day at a rooftop bar, mezcal in our glasses, the sky burning gold as the sun sank beyond the sprawl of the city.

The air had cooled just enough to take the edge off, the hum of traffic fading beneath the rhythm of distant music.

Ari leaned back, drink in hand, watching the sky like he'd seen it a thousand times and would never tire of it.

The light suited him. It always did.

But today - it was different.

Shirt open just enough, sleeves pushed up, golden skin catching the last heat of the day.

The sun traced his jaw, caught the blue of his eyes, reflecting every shift in the sky.

I watched him instead.

The day had been good - better than I'd expected - but I still felt the weight of travel pulling at me.

The ache beneath the mezcal.

Ari, though, looked like he could go all night.

Sharp-eyed, easy, his long legs stretched lazily under the table.

He caught me watching.

"Did you hate today as much as you thought you would?"

I exhaled, tipping my glass to my lips.

"No."

He grinned.

"Wow. That's almost enthusiasm."

I shook my head, but I was smiling.

That was when Diego arrived.

He moved like he belonged - everywhere.

Self-assured, but with the ease of someone who had nothing to prove.

Broad shoulders, lean waist, black shirt open just enough to hint at muscle beneath.

His skin held the warmth of the bar lights, dark hair slightly tousled - like he'd just shaken off the heat of the day.

But it was his eyes that held me. Gray - sharp, cutting against the warmth of everything else.

He approached without hesitation, but without intruding either. Just a man who knew he belonged, and had noticed two others who did too. He'd been watching - not in that overt, predatory way, but with the kind of slow, measured interest that came from knowing he'd already made up his mind.

"You don't look like tourists," he said, stopping at our table.

I tilted my head slightly. "No?"

His gaze shifted between us, taking his time, like he was filing details away. "No. You look like you belong somewhere. Just... not here."

I let the words settle. He wasn't wrong.

Ari leaned in, resting his arms on the table, eyes bright with curiosity. “So what do we look like?”

Diego’s laugh was quiet, effortless. He took a sip of his drink. “Like trouble.”

Ari grinned. I smirked.

Diego’s eyes lingered on me - just a beat too long - before flicking back to Ari.

“And you?” Ari teased, tone easy. “You belong here?”

Diego shrugged, the motion as smooth as everything else about him. “For now. Just passing through.”

Another sip. Then, almost casually - like it didn’t matter:

“I’m on my way to Oaxaca.”

That pulled my attention. Ari’s, too.

“Really,” I said.

Diego nodded. “Family. Dia de los Muertos.” He ran a thumb along the rim of his glass. “It’s a big thing.”

Something passed between us, unspoken but understood. I glanced at Ari, the coincidence too big to ignore. He leaned back, smiling just enough to be unreadable. “Funny. We were thinking of heading that way ourselves.”

Diego’s gray eyes gleamed slightly. Not as a surprise, but in something closer to satisfaction. “Good,” he said.

The evening unfolded with the kind of ease you couldn’t force. The kind that only happened when the drinks were smooth, and the company was right.

The bar shifted with the hour - glowing now in the deep amber of the setting sun. Shadows stretched over the city below, the breeze cooling, though the mezcal stayed warm in my chest.

I’d expected tension - too many people, too much noise - but it never came. Something about this - Ari’s laughter, Diego’s measured confidence, the slow drift of conversation - settled me.

Ari stretched out, golden hair catching the last light, his body loose and easy. He tilted his head toward Diego, grinning at something he said.

Diego leaned back, watching us both with that same quiet intelligence - as if he already understood more than we were saying.

The conversation had started light, weaving through the usual questions - where we were from, how we liked Mexico so far - but eventually, naturally, it deepened. At some point, I pulled Ari into my lap, letting him settle against my chest. Diego didn't blink at the intimacy - if anything, he seemed to appreciate it, taking the newly vacated seat at my side.

Ari slung an arm over my shoulders, fingers idly tracing against my collarbone as he talked. "We've been traveling for a while now," he said, his voice easy, but careful. "Different places, different cultures. Trying to see the world the way other people do."

Diego's gaze flickered between us, interested but patient. "And what brought you here?"

I hesitated for only a second before answering, but Ari beat me to it. His voice was steady, but there was a weight beneath it.

"There was a time," he said, "not that long ago, when I almost didn't make it."

Diego's brows lifted slightly, but he didn't interrupt.

Ari's fingers tightened briefly where they rested on my shoulder, and I instinctively pulled him closer. I could feel the tension in his body, the ghost of something we didn't talk about often enough.

"I was sick," Ari continued, glancing at me for a brief moment before looking back at Diego. "And Jon never left my side. Not once."

I swallowed, the memory hitting harder than I expected, like it always did. That hospital room. The nights I thought I might lose him.

I exhaled slowly, squeezing Ari's waist before speaking. "And now I'm here because I don't want to keep running from it." My voice was steady, but quieter now. "I want to learn a better way to deal with it. To stop feeling like I'm just waiting for the next bad thing to happen. I want to understand how to hold onto what matters without letting the fear of losing it control me."

I paused. Susan's voice echoed in my ear - barely a week ago, back on the ranch in the Pampa, in the middle of nowhere.

"You need to go somewhere that teaches you to live with death, Jon. Not fear it."

The memory pressed in, gentler than I expected.

“A friend thought... maybe Mexico could be that place. Día de los Muertos. The way you carry it all - life, death - without letting it crush you.” It was easier than I thought it would be to say that out loud.

It actually felt relieving.

Aris thumb brushed against my neck in silent approval.

Diego studied us both, his sharp grey eyes flickering between us, absorbing everything – not just our words, but the unspoken depth between them. Then, he did something neither of us expected. He excused himself, standing with an easy, graceful movement, and disappeared toward the quieter side of the bar.

I barely had a second to wonder before Ari turned to me completely, shifting so we were face-to-face. His expression had softened, but there was something else there too – something bright, something proud. He leaned in, pressing a slow, deliberate kiss to my lips. I felt it instantly – the warmth of it, the weight of all the things Ari wasn’t saying but was putting into the touch instead.

I let out a quiet breath, lifting a hand to cup Ari’s face, my thumb brushing along the sharp line of his jaw. Then, I kissed him deeper, pouring all of that certainty right back into him.

By the time Diego returned, we were still close, foreheads nearly touching, breaths mingling. He let out a low chuckle as he dropped back into his seat. “You two really are something else.”

We turned, Ari smiled lazily, and I felt curiosity prick at the edges of my thoughts.

Diego didn’t waste time. “I just called my mother.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. “I told her about you two. And she agrees – you should spend Dia de los Muertos with us. In Oaxaca.”

Ari and I exchanged a glance, caught off by the offer.

“She’ll be at the airport to pick us up,” Diego added, the hint of a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. “If you say yes.”

For a moment, we were both quiet, letting the reality of it settle in. Then Ari grinned. “Are you kidding?”

I exhaled a laugh, shaking my head slightly. “Of course we’re in.”

Diego lifted his glass in a toast, his smile widening. "Then welcome to the family."

The bar had thinned by the time we finally stood. The city below buzzed with the slow hum of a warm Mexico City night.

Diego stretched, tossing back the last sip of his mezcal, grinning as if we'd known each other for years. "I'll see you at the airport tomorrow," he said, clapping Ari's shoulder before turning to me. "Don't overthink it, man. You already said yes."

I scoffed. "I don't overthink everything."

Diego raised an eyebrow. "Sure you don't."

Ari snorted, not bothering to hide it. I shot him a look. He just grinned wider.

Diego chuckled, stepping back, already half-turned toward the street. "Good night, beautiful strangers. Try not to steal all the attention in Oaxaca."

He slipped into the night like he belonged to it.

I let out a slow breath, rubbing a hand over my jaw. "You think he just collects interesting people and drops them into his life like that?"

Ari laced his fingers through mine, tugging me toward the exit. "No idea. But I like that he picked us."

The walk back to our hotel was slow. Neither of us in a rush. That quiet, easy kind of silence settling between us - the kind that only comes when everything feels right.

The city felt different now. Familiar, almost. Though we'd only just arrived. Not home - not like Kyoto had become, not like the ranch in Argentina - but it didn't need to be.

It was enough.

By the time we reached our room, the day had settled into our bones. Not heavy - just full.

When we slid into bed, there were no words.

Ari curled into my chest, fitting into me like he always did. My arm wrapped around him, fingers finding their way into his hair, stroking absently.

His breath slowed, settling. So did mine.

"You're smug about today," I murmured.

Ari didn't even try to deny it. "Mhm."

I rolled my eyes, but the amusement was there, warming the edges of my voice. “Why?”

“Because,” he mumbled, his voice thick with sleep, “you let go. Just for a little while.”

I exhaled, thumb tracing lightly along his cheekbone. “Yeah,” I admitted quietly. “I guess I did.”

Ari hummed, pleased. The sound softened into something closer to sleep.

I pressed a slow, deliberate kiss to his forehead.

“You said yes to Mexico,” he whispered, already halfway gone.

I felt my lips twitch. “I said yes to you first.”

Ari’s smile was barely there - just the faintest curve against my skin.

I held him tighter.

The window was cracked open, Mexico humming somewhere beyond the night. But here, in this room, in this bed, there was only us.

And it was enough.

Ω

The morning air in Mexico City was crisp, carrying the scent of tortillas and strong coffee through the streets.

Ari was already halfway out the door before I finished tying my shoes, dragging me into the bustle like a kid chasing something sweet.

To be fair, the food was worth it.

We settled into a small café, the kind that had been there forever - wobbly chairs, a menu more suggestion than rule.

Ari ordered for both of us.

I didn’t argue.

The chilaquiles arrived first - drenched in red salsa, topped with crumbled cheese and a fried egg.

Tamales on the side, café de olla steaming between us.

I took a bite. Exhaled through my nose.

Perfect.

Ari grinned over his fork.

“Told you.”

I shook my head, chewing.

“You’re getting way too much satisfaction out of proving me wrong lately.”

Ari winked.

“I’m just documenting your slow evolution into a man of culture.”

I snorted, but didn’t argue.

Our flight wasn’t until midday, so we lingered.

Coffee cooling between us, the city moving - fluid, unbothered - around our table.

It felt good. Easy.

Like I didn’t belong, and somehow belonged completely.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt both.

By the time we reached the airport, our seats secured, Diego was already at the gate - leaning against a pillar, easy, like he belonged everywhere.

He spotted us first.

That slow, easy grin.

Pushed off the wall, moving like he’d been waiting.

“You’re just in time,” he said.

“Any later, and I would’ve assumed you’d gotten lost.”

Ari smirked.

“You just wanted to leave without us. So you wouldn’t have to introduce your ridiculously attractive new friends to your family.”

Diego let out a low laugh, shaking his head. “Right, because that’s exactly how this is going to go.” I raised an eyebrow. “That bad?” He hesitated. Then he exhaled through his nose, Diego rolled his shoulders back like he was preparing for battle.

“No,” he admitted. “Not bad. Just... a lot.”

Ari nudged him.

“Go on, give us the rundown. Who are we up against?”

Diego snorted.

“You make it sound like a test.”

Ari didn't miss a beat.

"It's a Latin family welcoming two strangers into their home. That's always a test."

Diego laughed quietly, but there was truth in it.

"Okay. Fine. First - my mother, Juanita. She's... terrifyingly kind. She'll hug you before she knows your name. Runs the house, runs the family. If she likes you, you're in. If she doesn't... well, that's never happened. Carlos - my dad. Big guy, huge heart. Loves churros, loves old rancheras. He'll probably make you sing with him at some point."

Ari's eyes glinted, but he said nothing.

"The twins - my little Brothers - Lucas and Marco. Sixteen. Permanently unimpressed. They'll act like they don't care that you're both models. They care."

I made a mental note: Don't feed Ari's ego.

Diego glanced at the gate as the first boarding call echoed overhead.

"And then... my abuelos."

Ari perked up.

"We get grandparents?"

Diego shot him a look.

"Yes. And don't seduce them."

Ari grinned, but Diego pressed on.

"Bárbara - she's the heart of the kitchen. If she tells you to eat, you eat. No exceptions.

Santino - my abuelo. He and my dad have been fighting over how to run the Rancho since before I was born. He's old school. Carlos... isn't. It's a thing."

The final call came.

Diego exhaled, clapping us both on the shoulder.

"Last chance to run."

Ari smirked.

"I'm up to it."

With that, we boarded.

In Oaxaca, Juanita was already waiting at the gate.

She stood with that effortless warmth that told you who she was.

Diego had her eyes - sharp, but hers held something softer.

The moment she spotted us, her face lit up - like she had been waiting.

I barely had time to register it before Ari was in her arms, laughing, melting into the embrace as she murmured something soft and fast in Spanish.

I didn't need a translation.

You are welcome here.

Then she turned to me.

For a second, I hesitated.

I didn't know what to do with this kind of affection.

My mother's hugs had felt like handshakes - polite, brief, always with an exit in sight.

But Juanita didn't wait.

Her arms were strong, her hands firm against my back.

"You're family now."

I stiffened.

Words like that never belonged to me.

Ari, beside us, grinning so wide it hurt.

And I - against every instinct - tried to accept it.

The drive unraveled the city - bright murals fading into hills, houses thinning into open land, the air turning dry and sunbaked.

Diego stretched out in the back seat, one arm draped over the headrest, giving us a running commentary like someone who had grown up with these roads.

Ari was buzzing - leaning forward, asking a million questions about everything.

Food, music, his brothers, how far the ocean was away.

I was quiet.

This place had weight.

When we finally turned off the main road onto a long dirt path lined with wildflowers and gnarled trees, I exhaled.

The Rancho was exactly as Diego had described it - sun-bleached walls, archways throwing deep afternoon shadows, the scent of smoke, spices, and fresh tortillas carried on the breeze.

And it felt like we had arrived somewhere.

Diego let out a mock-suffering sigh.

“Well. No turning back now.”

Before we had even fully parked, a wall of sound hit us.

Shouting, laughter, deep, booming voices - and then Diego was gone, yanked out of the car before he could finish cursing, pulled into a chaotic mess of hugs, shoulder punches, and rapid-fire Spanish.

Ari beamed.

I braced myself.

Then - Juanita turned to us.

“Come, come,” she said, waving us forward. “You’re part of this now.”

Ari stepped in first, no hesitation, already grinning as he was swept up into another embrace. Juanita murmured something in Spanish, something that made Ari laugh, his face crinkling with genuine delight.

I moved more cautiously, my natural instinct still fighting against the pull of the moment. But Juanita, the force of nature that she was, gave me no choice.

“You, too,” she said, wrapping her arms around me, squeezing tight before pulling back just enough to look at me properly.

I felt the assessment in her eyes - sharp, knowing, the look of a woman who understood people with terrifying accuracy.

Whatever she saw there, it made her smile.

She cupped my face briefly, her hands warm and solid. “Welcome home, cariño.”

My breath caught.

The introductions were loud and overlapping, a blur of voices and movement, each one pulling us deeper into the fabric of the rancho.

Carlos, all booming laughter and broad shoulders, shook my hand so hard my arm nearly detached.

“You are strong,” Carlos declared, grinning at me like he was already imagining our inevitable arm-wrestling match.

Ari, beside me, was already being sized up by the twins.

Lucas and Marco, both looking far too unimpressed for sixteen-year-olds, exchanged a glance.

“He’s too pretty to be real,” Lucas said flatly.

Marco sighed. “Yeah. It’s rude, honestly.”

Ari, always one to take a challenge, smirked. “You should see me when I try.”

Bárbara, bustling up from the kitchen, wasted no time in grabbing my face.

“Too thin,” she clucked, sizing me up like a prized cut of meat. “We will fix this.”

Santino, the grizzled old patriarch of the rancho, merely gave me a once-over before narrowing his eyes at Carlos.

“I assume you didn’t tell him anything about who actually runs this place.”

Carlos threw up his hands. “Ay, viejo, let them breathe first.”

Santino grumbled something in Spanish. Carlos grumbled back.

Juanita sighed. “And so it begins.”

Diego leaned in, grinning. “You still have time to run.”

I, somehow, wasn’t even tempted.

Diego had explained it to us on the way - this wasn’t just a ranch, it was a family estate, built up over generations. The main house was where Juanita and Carlos lived, with a big open kitchen and a cozy living space where the entire family gathered at night.

Most of the other family members had their own small casitas, simple adobe homes scattered across the property, built to withstand the heat, their thick walls keeping everything cool.

But for guests, there was a converted storage house, once used for tools and equipment, now transformed into a comfortable place to stay.

“You guys get the room in the back,” Diego had said with a knowing grin as he led us through the dusty courtyard. “For, you know... privacy.”

Ari had smirked, obviously pleased with that arrangement.

Our room was simple, but perfect.

A wide bed with a heavy, handwoven blanket in warm earthy tones, soft white pillows, the fabric slightly rough but freshly washed.

Exposed wooden beams overhead, the scent of dry grass, earth, and a faint trace of smoke in the air.

A small window let in the golden evening light, showing the rolling hills in the distance. A ceiling fan turned lazily above us, and in the corner stood an old but sturdy wardrobe, next to a modest table with two chairs.

It was simple, but it had soul.

Ari flopped down onto the bed with a satisfied sigh, arms and legs sprawled.

“I already love it.”

I let my gaze sweep over the space once more - the comfortable simplicity, the quiet. No hotel suite, no sterile luxury yacht cabin. Something real.

“So do I,” I said quietly.

Ω

Bárbara wasted no time pulling us into the kitchen, her authority absolute, her warmth undeniable. I barely had time to roll up my sleeves before I was handed a knife and given a task, my protests dismissed with a pat on the arm and a confident, “You’ll be fine, mi amor.”

With one ear, I listened as Santino and Carlos got into it - again. Something about the way Carlos had mowed the grass. The old man was fuming, gesturing wildly, while Carlos, round and good-natured as ever, simply shrugged and took another bite of whatever Bárbara had forced into his hand.

The twins, Lucas and Marco, leaned casually in the doorway, just long enough to prove they had shown up before slipping away, their escape perfectly timed to avoid being roped into kitchen duty.

And Ari - God, Ari.

His charm was effortless, his Spanish smooth and fast, making Bárbara laugh as he peeled and chopped like he'd been born into this. He stole a bite of something, dodged a playful swat, winked at me.

I tried to keep up. At first, the noise, the energy, the relentless warmth of it all threatened to overwhelm me. But without realizing it, I began to relax.

It was in the little things. The way I automatically reached for another plate without being asked, how I didn't flinch when someone clapped me on the back, how my shoulders eased without me noticing.

Ari saw it first.

My husband had been watching me out of the corner of his eye, like he'd been waiting for this moment, waiting for me to let go, to let this place work its magic. And when I caught him staring, that unmistakable spark of delight flashed in Ari's eyes.

I knew what it meant.

Ari saw me. Saw the shift happening. Saw that I was loosening up, returning to myself.

And I realized I wasn't afraid of it.

Because Ari was here. Because nothing bad could happen, not with Ari beside me.

Ω

It started small.

Ari, his usual smug, golden self, made an offhand comment about me clearly struggling with my assigned task, smirking as he deftly sliced through a pile of peppers with practiced ease.

I hummed in acknowledgment, not looking up.

"You're right," I said mildly. "This is almost as hard as watching you try to solve that logic puzzle on the plane."

Ari's knife stilled for half a second. He turned his head, brows lifting.

"Oh, you mean the one I solved before you even finished reading the instructions?"

I finally met his gaze.

"The one you solved incorrectly," I corrected smoothly.

Ari leaned on the counter, eyes sparkling. Game on.

“Jon, you’re embarrassing yourself.”

I exhaled, my mouth curving just slightly.

“Oh, love. That’s what you do every time you open yours.”

Bárbara, stirring a massive pot at the stove, snorted before she could stop herself.

The air crackled.

The conversation had shifted - no, evolved - from playful jabs to something sharper, more dangerous. An all-out battle of wits, an intricate dance of precision, strategy, and absolute refusal to lose.

Ari struck first.

“You always do this, Jon,” he sighed dramatically, shaking his head as if this was some tragic, well-documented pattern. “That thing where you act like you’re above the rest of us mere mortals, but deep down, you just can’t handle being wrong.”

I - cool, effortless, unreadable - picked up a knife and inspected the edge.

“Bold of you to assume I’ve ever been wrong.”

Ari’s mouth curled.

“That time in Kyoto,” he said smoothly. “You insisted that Sensei wasn’t watching when you tried that spin-cut - only to nearly slice off your own damn sleeve?”

My expression didn’t even flicker, but it was hard to keep my composure – Ari knew exactly what he was doing, which buttons to push. And I loved him for it. Because this – this was us. Not just jokes, not just pride. This was how we said: I see you, I admire you. I *fucking* love you.

“I was testing his reflexes.”

Ari let out a sharp, incredulous laugh. “Oh, so now it was a favor?”

“Of course,” I said, tilting my head as if this were obvious. “What kind of student would I be if I didn’t provide a live demonstration of what not to do?”

Ari didn’t let up.

He planted his hands on the counter, leaning in. And damn – those arms. The veins, the power – my husband.

“You’re unreal. You know that, right?” His voice was velvet and steel, amusement laced with undeniable admiration.

I arched a brow, taking a measured step closer.

“So you admit it. I’m beyond reality. A higher being. A superior mind.”

Ari scoffed.

“You’re like a cat that knocks something off a table and pretends it was part of some grand plan.”

My lips twitched.

“And you’re like a golden retriever that runs headfirst into a glass door and insists it *meant* to do that.”

Ari barked out a laugh.

“You really think that?”

My smirk deepened.

“I *know* that.”

Ari tilted his head, eyes gleaming.

“Jon,” he said, feigning concern, “I hate to be the one to tell you this, but you’re not nearly as mysterious as you think you are.”

I placed a hand over my heart in mock devastation.

“How will I ever recover?”

Ari didn’t miss a beat.

“I’d say with time and therapy, but we both know you don’t like talking about your feelings unless Susan makes you.”

My composure barely wavered – except for the flicker in my chest.

Damn him.

He knew me too well.

But I held his gaze – steady, unshaken. The surface calm. Like always.

Ari gave up.

He threw his hands up, looking to Bárbara for help, but the poor woman was halfway to crying, gripping the counter like it was the only thing keeping her upright.

I, satisfied, reached for my knife again.

“Looks like I win.”

Ari muttered something under his breath that Barbara absolutely did not need to hear.

Our voices steady, our expressions cool, but our eyes - God, our blue eyes burned.

By the time the storm passed, leaving both of us flushed but grinning, she wiped her face with the corner of her apron and sighed, still catching her breath.

Then, with unshakable certainty, she clapped us both on the shoulders.

“You two...” she said, shaking her head, voice warm. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen two people belong together more.”

I laughed, easy and natural.

But then Ari’s fingertips brushed briefly over the back of my hand, still laying on the cutting board. And damn. I felt that all the way to my heart.

Ω

Dinner at the Rancho was a battlefield of overlapping conversations, clinking plates, and Carlos’s booming laughter cutting through the chaos like a war drum.

Somewhere in the background, a record player crooned an old bolero, the crackling warmth of the sound blending with the scent of spice and smoke that filled the room.

Ari, as expected, had already woven himself into the fabric of the evening - grinning at Juanita’s teasing, easily navigating Bárbara’s sharp wit, and occasionally nudging my knee under the table whenever something particularly entertaining happened.

A touch.

A code.

We’re here.

We’re together.

I had settled into something quieter, absorbing the rhythm of it all, the ease with which this family moved around one another. It was a kind of closeness I wasn't used to, but one I found myself... appreciating.

That was, of course, until the twins decided to turn their attention toward us.

Marco, leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed, chewed slowly on a piece of steak. His expression was the epitome of calculated disinterest, but his eyes held something sharper.

"So," he said, in that slow, deliberate way that only a sixteen-year-old trying to assert dominance could. "You two are the famous Jon and Ari. I thought you looked familiar."

Lucas, seated beside him, nodded with a kind of exaggerated nonchalance that was almost admirable.

"Greek gods, right? That perfume campaign?" His lips twitched. "I saw the video. Very subtle. Just the two of you, half-naked, in a marble temple, ready to declare war – or *fuck* - on an Olympian altar made of silk."

Ari, predictably, grinned, completely unfazed.

"Yeah, that was our understated look."

I raised an eyebrow, letting my voice drop into something smooth, deliberate.

"Trust me, that was the modest version. There's a director's cut that never made it to the final campaign."

For the first time, Marco and Lucas exchanged a glance - one of them intrigued, the other slightly more cautious.

"I want to see it," Lucas said.

Diego barked out a laugh, shaking his head. "You two are so fucking shameless. I respect that."

Bárbara, who had been stirring a pot nearby and was absolutely never unaware of anything happening in her kitchen, turned toward Diego with a knowing look.

"At least someone who can keep up with them."

Juanita, who had been sipping her drink in easy amusement, leaned in toward Ari as if sharing a secret.

“You know what that means, don’t you? If you can make Diego laugh, that’s your invitation to stay.”

Ari’s grin widened as he leaned toward me. “Did you hear that? We’re officially invited. Should I cancel our flights?”

I leaned back, tilting my head as if giving it serious thought.

“Wouldn’t be the worst idea. There’s food, there’s drama - ”

Right on cue, Carlos and Santino erupted into a heated discussion about, from what I could gather, the *correct* way to prepare beans. Their voices overlapped, both of them gesturing wildly, as if the fate of the universe hinged on this argument.

Ari turned to me, smirking.

“And a live telenovela right at the dinner table.”

Lucas exhaled sharply, shaking his head.

“I swear, you two do this on purpose. You’re way too perfectly in sync to be real.”

Diego leaned forward then; eyes sharp with something almost analytical.

“Oh no, this is real. I’ve never seen anything like it. You guys are the fucking final boss of relationships.”

Bárbara clapped her hands once, shuffling through the kitchen with the authority of a queen who ruled over an empire of cast iron and spice.

“Well then, let’s see if Greek gods know how to handle dishes. You two - kitchen duty.”

I sighed, rising to my feet and pulling Ari up with me.

“Come on, Poseidon, before she turns you into a statue again.”

Ari smirked, glancing over his shoulder at Diego.

“If we don’t return, tell the world we were beautiful.”

Diego lifted his glass in a slow, almost solemn toast.

“You’re more than that.”

I didn’t have an answer for that.

Instead, I followed Ari to the kitchen counters where Bárbara was already waiting, sleeves rolled up, ready to put us to work. And despite every instinct that told me I didn’t belong in places like this, in families like this - I realized I didn’t mind staying.

And that scared me more than I wanted to admit.

Ω

The door clicked shut behind us, muting the ranch's chaos. The quiet wrapped around us - thick, charged, like it had been waiting.

Ari leaned against the doorframe, smirking. "So," he teased, "you survived dinner. Didn't think you'd hold your own against the twins."

I crossed my arms, mirroring his grin. "Wasn't sure you'd make it without losing your shirt to Diego. Starting to think you enjoy it."

He laughed, low and rough - the sound that always hit somewhere deep. "Jealous?"

I stepped closer, fingers brushing his jaw. "I just don't share."

The shift was immediate. His breath hitched, his body leaning into mine. The teasing gave way to something heavier. A familiar dance.

I kissed him. Slow, then not.

His hands found my waist, pulling me in, and I let him. Let him push me back until my legs hit the bed. Let him climb over me, his weight settling into mine. I welcomed it - the heat of his skin, the press of his mouth, the way he knew exactly when to lead and when to let go.

It was always like this. A conversation without words. A push, a surrender. A claiming and being claimed in return.

Somewhere between laughter and breathless curses, we stripped what little we had on. I let him take control, until I didn't. Until I rolled us over, holding him beneath me, his eyes dark and daring.

"*Mine*," I murmured against his mouth.

Ari exhaled - sharp, like I'd hit something deep. His nails pressed into my back, harder this time.

"*Yours*," he gave it to me - not just a word, but something more. Something that nearly broke me.

I lost track of time - of everything but him.

When it was over, we stayed tangled together, his breath warm against my chest, fingers tracing idle patterns over my ribs.

The night settled around us. Outside, the faint hum of the ranch, the whisper of Mexico beyond it. But here - just us.

As it had always been.

And as it always would be.

Ω

The room was quiet when I woke, Ari's arm heavy across my stomach.

I stayed still.

Let it hold me, just for a moment.

His breath warm against my shoulder.

Yours.

Outside, the world was already awake - hoofbeats in the sand, voices near the house, the scrape of a knife against wood.

But here - just him. Just us.

Ari shifted, his breath steady against my shoulder. We weren't in a rush. Eventually, Juanita knocked once, then pushed the door open without waiting - not intrusive, just a quiet, effortless presence that had already decided we were family.

"Get up before all that beauty starves to death," she announced, completely unfazed by anything we might have been doing the night before.

Ari made a sleepy noise of amusement, stretching lazily, and I smirked, sitting up.

"No theatrics, Juanita," he said dryly.

"Oh, please," she huffed. "You're not that special. Now, get dressed and eat."

The kitchen was already a battlefield of flavors - thick, spicy chilaquiles, warm tamales, fresh pan dulce that still carried the scent of cinnamon, and queso fresco crumbled over roasted nopales.

Ari was immediately at home, piling food onto his plate with zero shame, already negotiating with Bárbara over who made the better mole.

I, more measured, took my time. And that's when I noticed it.

Lucas was too quiet.

Not in that easy, laid-back way I'd seen the day before. This was different.

Tighter. Held.

Like he was trying too hard to seem at ease.

I let my gaze rest on him a moment longer - one second too long.

He felt it.

He stood, muttering something about "checking on something outside."

Too casual.

I didn't call him on it.

But I noticed.

My gaze followed him, sharp and considering.

Ari didn't seem to notice - too caught up in charming Diego's abuela into giving him extra pan dulce.

But I did.

I thought I'd talk to him later.

I didn't know that later - he'd show me something I recognized.

Too well.

Ω

By the time we reached the heart of Oaxaca, the streets were alive - brightly colored stalls overflowing with fruit, baskets piled high with chiles in every shade of red, the air thick with the scent of sizzling meat and masa frying in oil.

The kind of energy that carried you forward.

And everyone knew Juanita.

Every few steps, someone called her *mi reina*, pressed flowers into her hands, kissed her cheek.

Juanita carried herself with the ease of someone who had spent a lifetime being loved.

But it wasn't her they stared at.

It was us.

Of course.

I felt it first - curious glances, low murmurs, smiles exchanged behind hands.

Not hostile, not even intrusive - just the kind of attention reserved for something that didn't belong but wasn't unwelcome either.

Two men who looked like they belonged on a marble pedestal trailing behind Juanita like obedient sons.

Ari, naturally, ate it up.

The first to approach was a fruit vendor, a woman with dark eyes and a long silver braid.

She assessed Ari like he was a rare find, then held out a slice of mango with a wink.

"Pruébalo, mi amor." *Try, my love.*

Ari grinned, accepting it with all the grace of a sun-kissed prince in a romance film, biting into the fruit like he was being paid to advertise desire itself.

I rolled my eyes.

The vendor laughed.

"Tan guapo." *So handsome.*

I was still shaking my head when a second vendor - older, sharper, with a mischievous glint in her eyes - grabbed my wrist.

She patted my forearm approvingly, as though testing the quality of an expensive cut of meat, then nodded, deeply satisfied.

"You need a strong Mexican wife."

Ari nearly choked on his mango.

I stayed cool. Used to it.

"Already taken," Ari said, slinging an arm around my shoulder.

Then, lower, for my ears alone, his voice slipping into that dangerous, intimate register that always unraveled me,

"But I'll pass the compliment along to him later."

The vendor cackled, slapping my chest before moving on.

Juanita, who had watched the whole exchange with the tired patience of a woman who had seen far worse, sighed through her nose.

“Dios mío.”

I let myself smile.

I didn't mind any of it.

The noise, the eyes, the messiness of it all.

It was loud and warm and alive.

And for once, I let it carry me.

That was when I noticed him.

Near the edge of the market, past the stalls, just by the worn stone steps that led toward town.

A shape, still, just beyond the crowd.

Not begging, not darting between scraps like the other strays Ari had already tried (and failed) to befriend.

This one was different.

Lean but not weak.

Sharp but not mean.

A survivor - but not yet beaten.

And those eyes.

Blue, focused, steady.

They weren't on the food.

They were on us.

Ari saw him first.

“Oh my God, Jon. Look.”

His voice carried that tone - mischief and inevitability - the one that always meant I was about to be dragged into something, whether I liked it or not.

I followed his gaze.

The dog stared back.

Not nervously.

Not with that hopeful, tail-wagging desperation of something searching for kindness.

Just watching.

Calculating.

Ari crouched, his voice soft, coaxing.

“Hey, buddy. You lost?”

The dog didn’t move.

But he didn’t leave either.

He stayed, weighing us like we were the ones being assessed.

I exhaled. I already knew where this was going.

“Ari.”

Ari didn’t look away, still holding out his hand.

“Jon.”

A vendor nearby chuckled, watching the scene unfold.

“That one’s too smart to beg,” he said. “He picks people.”

I glanced at the man, then back at the dog.

The dog was still staring.

“He’s looking at you, amigo.”

I met those eyes.

The dog didn’t blink.

Ari grinned, delighted.

“Congratulations, babe. You’ve been adopted.”

I exhaled slowly, crouching down.

Held out a hand.

The dog hesitated - then, after a long, deliberate pause, took a single step forward.

Ari whispered a triumphant “Yes.”

I sighed.

“We’re not keeping him.”

The dog, apparently unimpressed, sat down like he had all the time in the world.

Juanita, already ahead, called back over her shoulder.

“If he follows you home, it’s meant to be.”

I shook my head.

But I kept walking.

And he followed.

Until he didn’t.

We were halfway back to the Rancho when I noticed.

There was no sound, no glance back.

He was just - gone.

I stopped.

Ari did too.

“...Where’d he go?”

I scanned the road, but there was nothing.

Just the dirt path stretching back to the market, the faint glow of streetlights flickering on in the evening.

No blue eyes.

No quiet, watchful shadow.

Ari squinted into the fading light.

“Maybe he got distracted.”

But his voice wasn’t sure.

Neither was mine.

I forced my jaw to relax.

“He’s a stray,” I said, voice even. Measured. “Not our dog.”

Ari didn’t push.

He never did, not when it mattered.

He just nodded.

“Yeah. Not our dog.”

But it didn’t sit right.

I didn’t know why.

I couldn't explain why the absence of something I had never even agreed to take in felt like loss.

But it did.

And that bothered me more than it should have.

Ω

The night had settled slowly over the Rancho, thick with the scent of woodsmoke and the lingering warmth of bodies that had only just started drifting toward sleep.

Inside, Diego's family was still wrapping up the last conversations of the evening, voices ebbing and flowing in that effortless way that only happened between people who had been doing this for a lifetime.

Lucas had been there - but not really.

I had noticed it all evening.

The way Lucas laughed at the right moments but never quite joined in. The way his gaze drifted past conversations rather than settling inside them. The way he sat just a little outside of the group, close enough to belong but distant enough that no one would call him out for not speaking much.

He looked like someone who wasn't quite sure what to do with his hands. Like someone who was listening to something entirely different beneath the surface.

I had seen people carry things like this before.

It was never about what they said - it was about what they didn't.

And so, when everyone else started filtering off to bed, Lucas stayed.

Not because he was waiting for something. But because he wasn't quite ready to be alone.

I hadn't planned on saying anything.

But when Lucas finally broke the silence, his voice was low, careful - like he wasn't sure if the words would make sense once they were spoken aloud.

"You guys are... solid."

I didn't answer right away. Just kept watching the slow flicker of lantern light against the wooden beams of the Rancho.

We were solid.

But what did that mean?

It meant I knew exactly where Ari was at any given moment, not out of possessiveness, but because Ari's presence was as much a part of me as breathing.

It meant Ari could rest his head against my shoulder, mid-conversation, without thinking about it, and my fingers would find the back of his neck automatically.

It meant we didn't hesitate. Ever.

No second-guessing. No unspoken resentments. Just a constant, unwavering certainty in the space between us.

I nodded once. "We are."

Lucas let out a soft huff of breath, shaking his head like that was somehow a ridiculous thing to be true.

"It's weird," he admitted. "I always thought... I don't know."

He ran a hand through his hair, jaw flexing slightly, his usual composure cracking just a little.

I waited.

And then, quieter:

"I didn't think that kind of thing was real."

I finally turned my head, watching the way Lucas' fingers fidgeted against the step, the way his eyes didn't quite meet mine.

Not defensive. Not doubtful. Just... confused.

Lucas had seen things before.

He'd heard things before.

People fooling around, messing around, burning through each other just because they could.

Hell, he'd done it himself - what guy his age hadn't?

But this?

This was different.

The night before, he hadn't meant to hear anything.

He'd been heading back to the main house when he passed the small guest quarters at the edge of the Rancho.

The windows had been open - warm air, thick with the scent of woodsmoke clinging to the night.

He wasn't an idiot.

He recognized the sound of pleasure when he heard it.

But it wasn't just that.

That wasn't what had made him stop.

It was the way Ari had whispered Jon's name.

Not desperate. Not hungry. Not performative.

Just... full.

Full of trust, of love, of certainty - of something deeper than anything Lucas had ever let himself believe in.

And then - Jon.

His voice, low and steady, the way he spoke to Ari in the dark, the way his presence wrapped around him like something unshakable, undeniable - Mine.

Lucas had heard that word before, but it had always meant something else.

A claim. A power move. A guy marking his territory.

But this wasn't that.

This was something given.

A vow.

A home.

And then - quieter, but somehow louder than everything that had come before - Ari.

Breath still uneven, voice soft but so sure it made Lucas's chest tighten.

Yours.

Not surrendering.

Not losing.

Choosing.

Lucas had seen men take control.

He had seen them dominate.

But this - this was the first time he had ever seen someone give everything away and come out stronger.

The first time he had ever seen surrender look like power.

And it had gutted him.

Because suddenly, all the things he had told himself - that it wasn't real, that it wasn't possible, that wanting that would mean wanting something weak -

It all collapsed in on itself.

Because if Jon and Ari could have that - then it was possible.

And if it was possible...

Then maybe he had been lying to himself.

All along.

I wasn't sure how long we sat there.

The Rancho had finally settled into silence - only the occasional rustling of trees, the distant echo of a horse shifting in the stables, the hum of the night wrapping around us.

I hadn't moved.

I was still watching him - not demanding answers, not forcing him to speak, just waiting.

Lucas let out a breath, slow and controlled, then ran a hand through his hair.

"You know," he started, his voice quieter now, "I wanted to be pissed," he said, jaw tight. "I tried."

I didn't react at first. Just the slightest shift of my head - watching, listening.

Lucas let out a dry, humorless laugh.

"About last night," he clarified. And then, finally - "About what I heard."

There.

He said it.

I stayed still. But Lucas knew. He saw it.

Instead, I just held his gaze, steady and quiet, letting him decide whether or not to keep talking.

Lucas exhaled again, this time shakier. He looked down at his hands, studying the rough edges of his fingernails like they might somehow hold the words he needed.

“I didn’t mean to,” he admitted, voice lower now, more careful. “I was just - walking past your place, heading back to the main house. I didn’t even think about it. And then I heard - ”

He swallowed.

“And I stopped.”

It wasn’t a confession. Not exactly.

Just a fact. A thing that happened.

My gaze didn’t waver.

Lucas let out a slow, unsteady breath.

“I mean, I’ve heard people before,” he muttered, rubbing a hand over his jaw. “Sex isn’t exactly a mystery. I know what it sounds like.”

His voice dipped slightly, like he was talking as much to himself as to me.

“But that wasn’t - it wasn’t just that.”

I said nothing.

Lucas shook his head, fingers tapping lightly against his knee, like he was piecing something together in real time.

“I heard the way Ari said your name,” he admitted. “Like - like he knew you would catch him if he fell.”

His jaw tensed.

My expression didn’t change, but I felt it - that shift in the air, the weight settling between us.

Lucas let out a dry laugh, but it cracked at the edges.

“And then you - you said - ”

He stopped, ran a hand over his face.

But I saw it.

The word was still there, caught in his throat.

Mine.

A single word.

But it hadn't been possession.

It hadn't been control.

It had been given.

And *Yours* had come back -
with just as much weight.

That was what had undone him.

Lucas exhaled, sharp and shaky, his eyes flicking toward me, his voice low but firm.

"I didn't know you could have that."

I blinked.

Lucas shook his head, half in frustration, half in disbelief. "I didn't - " He gestured vaguely, like that might fill in the words that wouldn't come. "I've never seen it like that. I thought I knew what that kind of thing looked like, but you - you two - "

Another sharp exhale.

"I didn't know you could have that," he repeated, softer this time.

I was quiet for a long moment.

Then, carefully, I said, "Why not?"

Lucas let out something between a breath and a laugh.

"Because," he said, voice rougher now, like he was forcing himself to say something he didn't want to. "Because I thought - you know, if you let someone have that kind of power over you, if you let someone see you like that, then..."

He trailed off.

His mouth pressed into a thin line.

I didn't fill the silence.

I let it stretch, let Lucas sit in it, let the words settle between us like dust in the low glow of the lantern light.

Lucas swallowed hard.

“...then you weren’t strong anymore.”

His mouth pressed into a thin line again, like he hated the sound of it the second it left him. Like he’d carried it for too long, and saying it now made it worse.

I didn’t react - not visibly. But when I finally spoke, my voice was quiet.

“Do I look weak to you?”

Lucas didn’t answer right away.

Because Jon was Jon.

Lucas hadn’t known him long. A day, maybe a little more. Not enough to claim he understood him, not enough to say he had him figured out.

But in those short hours, he had seen enough.

Jon didn’t hesitate. He didn’t fumble. He didn’t bend under the weight of other people’s expectations - not in the way Lucas had always assumed men like him had to.

And last night - the way he had spoken to Ari, the way he had held him, the way he had let himself be held in return -

Jon had given himself over completely, without losing a single ounce of strength.

And that was what had destroyed every assumption Lucas had ever had.

Because somehow, Jon hadn’t lost control by surrendering.

Somehow, he had remained powerful, steady, unshaken.

Somehow, it had only made him stronger.

Lucas let out a slow, shaky breath.

“...No.”

I nodded.

Lucas laughed under his breath, looking away.

“I thought about being pissed,” he admitted again. “I really did. I thought - if you could have that, if that was real, then that meant - ”

His fingers curled against his knee.

“It meant I’d spent a lot of years lying to myself.”

It was the closest he would get to saying it outright.

I understood anyway.

Lucas exhaled sharply, shaking his head.

“*Fuck*,” he muttered, rubbing a hand over his jaw again.

“I don’t know why I’m telling you all this.”

I waited.

Steady. Certain. Weightless.

“You don’t have to know.”

Lucas paused.

It felt like the words settled deeper than they should have.

He turned his head slightly toward me, as if waiting for me to elaborate.

But that was it.

No lecture. No speech.

Just permission to not have it all figured out tonight.

Lucas let out a slow, unsteady laugh – but this time, it sounded less like defense.

And more like relief.

“Jesus,” he muttered, shaking his head. “No wonder Ari’s crazy about you.”

I smirked. “You should hear what he calls me in private.”

Lucas groaned, shoving my arm. “God, stop, I take it back.”

I let out a quiet chuckle.

And as Lucas pushed himself up off the steps, something in his shoulders seemed lighter.

I watched Lucas disappear into the house, the heavy wooden door closing softly behind him.