

HAREM OF DADDIES

Captured
by Her
Daddies

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAYLAH ROBERTS

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LET'S KEEP IN TOUCH!

Don't miss a new release, sign up to my newsletter for sneak peeks, deleted scenes and giveaways:
<https://landing.mailerlite.com/webforms/landing/p716g0>

You can also join my Facebook readers group here:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/386830425069911/>

BOOKS BY LAYLAH ROBERTS

Doms of Decadence

Just for You, Sir
Forever Yours, Sir
For the Love of Sir
Sinfully Yours, Sir
Make me, Sir
A Taste of Sir
To Save Sir
Sir's Redemption
Reveal Me, Sir

Montana Daddies

Daddy Bear
Daddy's Little Darling
Daddy's Naughty Darling Novella
Daddy's Sweet Girl
Daddy's Lost Love
A Montana Daddies Christmas
Daring Daddy
Warrior Daddy
Daddy's Angel
Heal Me, Daddy
Daddy in Cowboy Boots
A Little Christmas Cheer
Sheriff Daddy
Her Daddies' Saving Grace
Rogue Daddy
A Little Winter Wonderland
Daddy's Sassy Sweetheart

MC Daddies

Motorcycle Daddy
Hero Daddy
Protector Daddy
Untamed Daddy
Her Daddy's Jewel
Fierce Daddy
Savage Daddy

Boss Daddy

Daddy Fox

A Snowy Little Christmas

Harem of Daddies

Ruled by her Daddies

Claimed by her Daddies

Stolen by her Daddies

Captured by her Daddies

Haven, Texas Series

Lila's Loves

Laken's Surrender

Saving Savannah

Molly's Man

Saxon's Soul

Mastered by Malone

How West was Won

Cole's Mistake

Jardin's Gamble

Romanced by the Malones

Twice the Malone

Mending a Malone

Malone's Heart

Men of Orion

Worlds Apart

Cavan Gang

Rectify

Redemption

Redemption Valley

Audra's Awakening

Old-Fashioned Series

An Old-Fashioned Man

Two Old-Fashioned Men

Her Old-Fashioned Husband

Her Old-Fashioned Boss

His Old-Fashioned Love

An Old-Fashioned Christmas

Bad Boys of Wildside

Wilde

Sinclair

Luke

Standalones

Their Christmas Baby

A Cozy Little Christmas

Haley Chronicles

Ally and Jake

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Princes of Escana:

Kassim

Matek

Tavi

Aric

Alpha Team:

Caleb

Aleki

Wolfe

Beta Team:

Judd

Hux

Beck

Owen

Princes' cousins:

Ryiad

Jonan

Derik

Trin

Jeric

Princes parents:

Isobelle

Serin

Baler

Frost

Littles:

Vivi – Alpha Team’s Little

Pippa – Princes’ Little

Alina – Cousins’ Little

Chloe– Beta Team’s Little

TRIGGER WARNINGS

Our heroine has had a hard life. There are trigger warnings for self-harm, eating disorders, and human trafficking.

PROLOGUE

The weird man was back.

Chloe didn't like when he came to visit. He smelled funny. And he had a weird accent.

Although he was better than some of the other men. At least he didn't yell at her ... or worse.

She didn't like the way her mommy acted when any of her men friends came around. She'd go into her bedroom for hours, and Chloe would have to stay quiet and hidden. It was safer that way. Then no one could hurt her.

She wouldn't come out of her hiding place.

Even if she was hungry ...

Even if she hurt herself ...

She wasn't to say a word.

Sometimes, when her mommy was in a good mood, she'd give her some candy first to help her remember to keep silent. Chloe didn't need the candy to help her, though. Chloe rarely made noise.

She'd learned that was the only way to survive.

Lord Jonathan Fothersam the Fourth was a narcissistic asshole who also thought he was God's gift to ... well ... everyone.

He was arrogant, rich, and a jerk.

Unfortunately, he was also her boss.

"Can you believe this place?" he asked Chloe as they sat in the private plane Prince Kassim had sent to bring them to Escana.

That hadn't sat well with Jonathan. He didn't like when someone had something he didn't.

They were currently reading through the information that had been supplied on Escanaian customs and laws.

It was ... interesting.

"Can you believe they kidnap women and that it's legal? Preposterous. And multiple men with one woman. That ought to be illegal. Obviously, they do not care about women at all."

Like he did? He only ever saw women as a means to an end.

Chloe had to admit that the tabloids in the UK made Escana sound awful, but she'd learned not to trust what she read.

The tabloids loved Jonathan. They thought he was charming and handsome.

Idiots.

“Disgusting,” he said.

She glanced around, looking for the flight attendant. The last thing they needed was for her to overhear Jonathan, who was currently sipping some expensive bourbon. She had to make sure that he didn't drink too much. He tended to lose control of his tongue and temper when he drank.

“Hopefully, it doesn't take too long to convince these backward idiots to open up some trade lines. It is in their best interests.”

And his.

He wasn't doing this out of the goodness of his heart.

“At least you were given an opportunity to meet with them,” she said.

He snorted, taking another gulp of bourbon. “Only because my father was good friends with one of their grandfathers. But I'm sure once they see how my proposal benefits them, they will agree to the terms. Nobody says no to that much money.”

She glanced around the private plane. She didn't think they were hurting for money.

Looking over their itinerary, she saw it was a mix of meetings with heads of companies, tours of different businesses, as well as some more casual outings and dinners which Jonathan would likely hate.

“Lord Fothersam?”

He looked up with a charming smile as the flight attendant came over. “Yes, dear?”

“Can I get you anything else? We'll be landing in twenty minutes.”

“No, we have everything we need. You sit down and rest. You have been doing such a good job of taking care of us. Has she not, Chloe?”

The flight attendant blushed and smiled.

“She has,” Chloe said, hoping that Jonathan didn’t set his sights on the young girl.

Surely, he wouldn’t. He was trying to impress the Princes, not show them his true side.

She turned back to the information they’d been given.

“They don’t just kidnap women and keep them, though,” she said after the flight attendant left. “They go through a period where they court them.”

“Don’t be naive, Chloe. It is obvious women have very little choice here. Multiple men sharing one woman? Shocking, just shocking,” he muttered.

Chloe raised an eyebrow, feeling safe to do so since he wasn’t looking her way.

She figured he wouldn’t feel that way if it was the other way around.

“It seems to work for them. From some of the reports I’ve read, the women in Escana are cherished.”

And satisfied, she was betting.

“That’s what they want you to think. The men probably have to share because they don’t have any real skills in the bedroom. It must take three or four of them to satisfy their women. Unlike British men, huh?”

She barely held back a grimace.

Gross.

Reaching out, he grasped hold of her arm.

She held herself still. Sometimes, sudden touch still startled her. However, he hated when she tried to pull away from him.

“Just remember, this is important. Do not do anything to embarrass me. We need to give these uptight pricks everything they want so they will open some trade routes with us. This is very important, understand?”

“I’m here to help in whatever way you need, Jonathan,” she murmured quietly.

“I knew I could rely on you, Chloe. You’re always so loyal, are you not?”

Right. So loyal.

“You know everything I do is with your best interests in mind,” she replied. How she managed to keep a straight face while spouting that bullshit, she had no idea.

Her acting skills knew no bounds.



AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER, they drove up to one of the most beautiful buildings she’d ever seen.

This was the palace? It was magical. Like something out of a fairy tale.

“It’s gorgeous,” she whispered.

“Rather garish, if you ask me,” Jonathan said beside her, shooting her a look.

Drat.

She stiffened. She needed to be more careful.

Jonathan was in a mood because the only person to greet them as they’d disembarked the plane had been a driver.

He was going to sulk about that slight. She swallowed, not wanting to think about the temper tantrum that could develop at any moment.

The door opened on her side and a hand appeared.

It was attached to one of the most gorgeous men she’d ever seen. He had blond hair that was shorter at the sides and longer on top. He smiled down at her.

“Well, hello there, darlin’,” he drawled. “Welcome to Escana.”

“Are you the welcoming committee?” she asked, smiling without thinking.

“You know, I told the Princes they should make me the welcoming committee, but they didn’t go for the idea. I think it’s because I’m too charming. And handsome.” His eyes danced. It was clear he didn’t take himself too seriously.

A throat cleared loudly behind her.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

She’d forgotten about His Lordship.

This was going to go down like a lead balloon. She pulled into herself.

The blond-haired man’s gaze slid to Jonathan. Something unreadable filled his face. What was he thinking?

“You must be Lord Fothersam,” he said easily. “Names Huxley Coalsen the Third. I’m part of your security team while you’re here. But call me Hux.”

A security team?

“Now, if you would allow me to help you out?”

She peered up at him, realizing it would seem rude if she didn’t take his hand but he really should have opened Jonathan’s door first.

Well ... not like she had much choice now. She slipped her hand into his, nearly gasping at the feel of his warm, slightly rough skin.

Holy. Heck.

Jonathan’s skin was as smooth as a baby’s bottom. Not that she made a habit of touching him ... but sometimes these things were unavoidable.

But this guy ... wow. Now she was imagining what it would feel like to have him touch her in other places.

Right. She had to stop. That would never happen. And the last thing she needed was for Jonathan to realize what she was thinking.

So as soon as she was out of the car, she let go of his hand quickly, moving away.

He shot her a querying look but turned to Jonathan as he got out.

“Lord Fothersam, nice to meet you.” He held out his hand and Jonathan shook it with a smile.

No one else would likely see the anger in his eyes.

“If you’d like to come this way, we just have a security briefing for you both before you meet Prince Kassim.”

“A security briefing,” Jonathan said. “I didn’t realize there would be so much red tape to get through, especially when our families are so close.”

Dear. Lord. He was close to losing it.

“Unfortunately, things have changed slightly, and we take any security threats seriously.”

“But surely I’m not considered a security threat. Or Chloe.”

“Just being cautious,” Hux said cheerfully, but there was a guarded look in his eyes. This man wasn’t all smiles and charm. “I’m sure you can understand that. It’s for your benefit as well as ours. We want to keep you all safe. That is always uppermost in Prince Kassim’s mind. Caleb, the head of his security team, makes all these calls for him.”

Oh, he was good. Very diplomatic.

“Please, follow me. Hopefully, you’ll find your suite here as good as what you’re used to in London.”

“I am sure it will be fine. This is as much about visiting with old friends as it is about business.”

And the bullshit continued.

“Your bags will be brought in, then screened by a member of my team,” Hux said.

“Screened?” Jonathan asked in a sharp voice.

Crap.

“That’s fine,” she said hastily. “We have nothing to hide.”

What about Amy the Alpaca?

Shit.

She bit at her lip. Surely, it wouldn’t be considered weird to carry around a stuffed toy. Lots of people did that, right?

Five-year-olds, not twenty-seven-year-olds.

“We’re just screening for explosives and drugs. Don’t worry. No one is going to paw through your undies.” He winked at her.

Oh dear Lord.

She had to fight hard not to blush.

“My ... undies ... quite.” Jonathan was barely holding back a sneer.

She watched his hand twitch.

Shit.

They followed Hux into the palace.

Jonathan grabbed her arm as Hux turned down a hallway. “Remember, you work for me. And I don’t pay you to flirt with the help.” He let go of her arm as quickly as he’d grabbed her.

But the reminder was enough to wipe any smile off her face.

She wasn’t free to flirt. She wasn’t free to do anything.

She was owned by the narcissist currently walking in front of her.

After walking into a small meeting room behind Hux and Jonathan, she came to a sudden stop.

Holy. Crap.

Did they breed them hot around here or what? Okay, she knew that none of these men had likely been born here in Escana. Hux had a Texan accent. She could easily imagine

him riding on a horse wearing cowboy boots and that cheesy grin.

There was a muscular guy in the corner, pouring some coffee. He had his light-brown hair closely cropped. And when he moved, his T-shirt stretched over his broad back. Turning, he stared at her, then at Jonathan for a long moment, giving nothing away.

Another man sat at the table behind a computer screen. He didn't look up as they entered. But that gave her a chance to take in his short, dark hair. He was wearing a white shirt that looked crisp against his tanned skin.

When he finally glanced up, she sucked in a breath at the bright blue eyes that hit her.

Wow.

When his attention was on you, it was like no one else in the room existed. Finally, his gaze shifted, and she could breathe again.

Damn.

Had she been drugged? Sure, it was warm, but she liked the heat. She'd grown up in Florida. This feeling couldn't really be blamed on the temperature.

The last man was standing at attention.

The way he held himself screamed of a military or law enforcement background. Stiff and stern-looking, he studied her. He'd be gorgeous if he didn't appear so cold. He looked her up and down before turning away.

Whoa.

That was rude. She was used to being overlooked, most of the time she preferred it. Going unnoticed meant that no one would bother her.

But for some reason, his dismissal really rankled her.

She sucked in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. Whatever this man thought of her, it didn't matter. She was

here for a job, nothing more. And as soon as Jonathan had what he wanted, they'd leave.

“Let me make some introductions. This is Lord Fothersam and his assistant Ms. Reed. These are my colleagues and the rest of the beta security team that works for the Princes. Sitting down is Owen Kingston. Drinking coffee like he needs it to live is Beck George. And the grump is Judd Stark.”

“Hux,” Judd warned.

“Sorry, the not-grumpy leader of our merry band of men is Judd.”

Judd just sighed. “Let's get down to business. We'll have a security briefing and then we'll take you to see Prince Kassim. While you're here, there are some rules to follow. I'm sure you understand we take the security of the Princes, their intended bride, relatives, and the people of Escana seriously.”

Whoa. This guy was intense. They hadn't even taken a seat yet.

Chloe could feel Jonathan growing increasingly tense.

The explosion was imminent ... and she needed to make sure there were no witnesses around.

“Of course,” she said smoothly. “Lord Fothersam and I are more than happy to comply with anything you deem necessary. But is there really any need for His Lordship to be here? I'm sure you could explain everything to me while he meets with Prince Kassim.”

She gave Judd a pointed look. This sort of meeting was something Jonathan was going to find extremely insulting.

“No,” Judd replied.

Really? Just no?

“I'm afraid he has to stay. But this should only take a few minutes, right, Judd?” Hux asked with an easy grin. “And I know Prince Kassim is eager to meet with you, Your Lordship.”

“Please, call me Jonathan. And, of course. Whatever you need.”

Chloe observed him carefully as he took a seat, his hand twitching slightly.

Shit.

She sat as well while Judd sat across from them. When she looked up, Judd was glaring at her. Sheesh. What had she done to get on his bad side?

“While you’re both here, you’ll be under our protection. My team and I will see to your security and any needs you have,” Judd said.

Any needs?

Shoot, Chloe, get your mind out of the gutter.

It had been way too long since she’d gotten laid.

“I can assure you that we do not need security,” Jonathan replied. “I’m sure there’s no danger to us here.”

“The Princes insist,” Judd replied coldly. “Now, we have a document for you both to look at. It’s only around ten pages long, shouldn’t take you both long to read and sign.”

So. This was going to be fun.

The head of the security team was a jerk.

A grumpy, stuck-in-the-mud, follow-the-rule-book jerk.

And somehow, she still managed to smile politely up at him as she stood in the doorway to her suite. Even as he scowled back at her.

He needed something to loosen him up—like a knee to the balls. Satisfaction filled her at the thought of him writhing on the ground, cupping his crown jewels.

Or a blow job.

Fuck.

Then she'd be the one on the ground ... on her knees ... with his dick in her mouth.

Ew.

At least she tried to tell herself it would be gross. But the truth was that the shiver that ran up her spine was more due to excitement rather than disgust.

What was wrong with her?

This dickhead had been nothing but a jerk since they arrived in Escana yesterday. There was no way she should be daydreaming about giving him a blow job.

Nope. Not happening. Never. Ever.

Be calm. Be polite.

She knew if she was anything but polite that Jonathan would be upset. As he often liked to tell her ... she was an extension of him. Her behavior reflected on him.

“Mr. Stark, hello. How are you? Isn’t it a lovely morning?” Her fingers twitched with the urge to touch her hair. To run them over her clothes and ensure that she was properly presented. Shoot. She didn’t even have make-up on. But then, she hadn’t been expecting to see anyone.

The Neanderthal just grunted and moved so he was completely blocking the doorway and her exit.

She hadn’t realized that she’d be a prisoner here.

Well, more of a prisoner than she already was.

“Did you sleep well?” she asked.

Still nothing.

It was hard to keep her face pleasant and her voice mild. But she’d had a lot of practice. And she wasn’t going to let his rude behavior get to her.

Maybe after kicking him in the nuts, she’d stomp on him a little. That thought helped her fight back the irritation threatening to override her calm.

Be polite. You’re a guest.

Well, Jonathan was. She was simply an employee.

She still didn’t understand why Prince Kassim had given Jonathan a whole security team while he was here—seemed like overkill. Maybe if there had been some sort of threat ... but that wasn’t the case.

Jonathan had taken the news with a serene smile ... until the doors had closed on their shared suite last night. Then she’d barely managed to stop him from smashing the place.

The destruction of several expensive heirlooms would have been hard to explain. He’d been upset over having a team assigned to protect him. As well as the two hour security briefing he’d had to go through before seeing Prince Kassim.

Jonathan wasn't used to waiting for anything. He was used to people catering to him.

She attempted to peer around Judd's broad shoulders. It was early morning, the sun just starting to rise on the horizon. And she really wanted to go for a run while it was cool enough.

Especially while Jonathan was still sleeping. She had at least three hours before he woke up crabby and hungover.

The suite they'd been given was on the ground floor with doors out to the expansive balcony. It was an easy escape. Or it would have been if the behemoth standing in her way would move.

"I had a great sleep, thanks for asking," she said.

She hadn't. She'd been on alert all night after Jonathan's temper tantrum. Thankfully, he'd drunk himself into a comatose state.

"I didn't ask," he said finally.

Sheesh. Had the man never been taught any manners?

His eyes ran over her. "And you don't look like you slept at all."

She narrowed her eyes. "Are you implying that I look terrible?"

He leaned in. "I never *imply* things. I state them as I see them."

She gasped, unable to stop herself. It wasn't the insult that got to her ... she knew what she looked like. Too pale, too thin. Washed-out and bland.

She had a mirror, after all. But she'd never had anyone just come out and insult her to her face like this.

Well, no one other than Jonathan.

And he didn't count.

The head of the security team frowned slightly as though he hadn't expected that reaction.

Shit.

Be numb. A robot. You are representing Jonathan.

So she gave the asshole a bland smile. “Must be the jet lag, makes it hard to look your best. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going for a run.”

“No.”

“No?” she questioned in case she didn’t hear him right.

“No, you’re not excused.” His arms were crossed over his chest and he was staring down his nose at her like she was the most irritating thing he’d ever dealt with in his life.

Well, right back at you, buster.

She clasped her hands in front of her to stop herself from fidgeting.

And also, to stop herself from giving in to the urge to punch this asshole in the balls.

Tempting. So tempting.

“I’m not excused?”

Calm. Breathe. In. Out.

“Because ...?”

“Because I said no.”

Was this guy for real?

“And do people usually do what you say?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Stay cool.

“And you’re going to do what I say as well,” he added.

“Am I?” she asked in a low voice.

“Yes, because I’m in charge of you.”

“In charge of me ...” Her mind was scrambling to catch up with that statement.

Was he serious?

“Do you have a hearing issue?” he asked.

“Hearing issue?” What was he talking about now?

“You keep repeating what I say.”

Because maybe if she repeated it then he'd hear what an absolute dickhead he sounded like.

“I'm just having a little trouble understanding what you're saying.”

“Really? I thought I was being very clear. I'm in charge of your safety while you're here.”

“I think there's been a mistake. You're in charge of Lord Fothersam's safety, not mine.”

“There's no mistake. You're a visitor to Escana. You don't have a guardian and you're a guest of the Princes of Escana. I've been assigned to watch you just as much as Lord Fothersam. More, because you're female.”

She shook her head. “Don't you think that's sexist?”

“No. We take care of our women here.”

“I'm not yours.”

“Damn straight you're not. Or you'd know that running alone is out of the question.”

“No. Listen. This is my fault.”

“Is it? How is that?”

“You're obviously under the mistaken impression that I'm more important than I am. I'm not. I'm literally no one.”

He eyed her for a long moment. She gulped. Why did she feel like a bug under a microscope?

“Do you often call yourself no one?”

She sighed. Why wasn't he getting this?

“I don't often call myself no one, but I am. I don't require any security because no one would be interested in harming me. Thanks for trying to protect me. But it's really not necessary. Just concentrate on Lord Fothersam. He's the

important one. I'm just background noise." She smiled at him, certain that he was going to agree with her. "If you'll excuse me, I'll head out."

"Background noise?" he repeated slowly. "Interesting."

It wasn't.

"No, not interesting. That's the whole point."

Easy. Chill.

She had dealt with bigger assholes than this guy. He wasn't going to break her control.

"Have you been out here all night?" she asked suddenly. "There's hardly any crime here so I don't think that's necessary."

"Doesn't matter how much crime there is. My job is to keep you safe and that's what I'm going to do. And I will not allow you to stop me."

She barely bit back a sigh.

"I'm not trying to stop you from doing your job." There, that was civil, right? Sure, her voice might have been a bit tight, but he was so damn stubborn it was infuriating.

He raised an eyebrow, looking like he didn't believe a word coming from her mouth.

"I'm simply telling you that you're doing your job wrong."

She had to bite back a smile at the shocked look that filled his face.

"I'm not the person you're meant to be keeping safe. And I'm sure Prince Kassim will agree if we ask him. I'm going on a run now. And you can stay here and do your job as much as you like."

There. Now, he would let her go on her way.

She stepped forward. He didn't budge.

Honest to God ... this guy would test the patience of a saint.

"You can't go running alone. It's not safe."

“Well, staying here with you isn’t safe, either.”

“Why not? I will look after you.” He looked totally offended.

Men.

“I mean for you.”

Their gazes clashed, and for a moment, she let the mask drop, glaring at him hotly. His mouth parted slightly.

“Is everything okay here?”

She jumped with a small cry as someone spoke from behind Grumpzilla. The stubborn butt didn’t move at all. He just kept staring at her, waiting.

It was enough to shock her back into pulling the mask over her face. She couldn’t let Grumpzilla get to her.

“No, everything is not okay,” she replied, even though she couldn’t see the other man. “This guy won’t let me leave.”

“Uh, Judd? There a reason you’re blocking Ms. Reed from leaving?” the other guy asked quietly, sounding confused.

“She wants to go for a run,” Judd replied.

“It’s not against the laws of Escana, is it?” she asked, working hard to keep the sarcasm from her voice since she knew that it wasn’t. She’d studied the laws.

“Um, nope, it’s not,” the other guy said slowly. “Judd, you want to move so I can see her, man?”

Judd grunted but shifted to the side, staring between her and the man behind him. What was his name? Brick? No, Beck. Shoot. She must be tired. She never forgot names. It was her job to know who everyone was.

Beck was even more muscular than Judd. Which was saying something since Grumpzilla was well-built.

“Ma’am, good morning. You’re up early,” Beck said in an uber-polite voice.

Urgh, ma’am. Just great. Here she was checking him out and he thought she was a ma’am.

“Please, call me Chloe.” She gave him a tight smile. “And no, I couldn’t sleep any longer. Time difference.”

“Isn’t it like two in the morning where you live?” Grumpzilla asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

“Uh, yes, I guess.” She managed not to glare at him.

Just.

Beck shot Judd a look. “Guess your body doesn’t know what timezone it’s in.”

“No, and I thought that I’d go for a run since I’m awake. Only there seems to be a problem.”

“You can’t run around by yourself in Escana,” Grumpzilla told her.

“Why not?” He still hadn’t really explained.

“It’s not permitted.”

“That wasn’t in the information packet we were given. Or that two-hour briefing you gave us.”

“It was twenty minutes at most,” he muttered, looking offended again.

“I really can’t go running?” How the heck was she going to survive her stay here if she couldn’t run? Sometimes she thought it was the only thing keeping her sane.

She relaxed by running herself into the ground. Until all the nervous energy was drained out of her and her brain emptied.

“Actually, ma’am—” Beck started to say.

Urgh.

“Chloe,” she interjected.

“Chloe.” He gave her another polite smile and she barely bit back a sigh. “There’s no problem with you going for a run, but I’m afraid that going alone is an issue. At least if you’re planning to leave palace grounds. As we explained in the security briefing, in Escana, women are usually escorted by one of their men or a guardian.”

“Of course, I remember.” She wasn’t sure that she did. She might have blanked out after the first thirty minutes. “That’s why I was only going to stick to palace grounds.”

Total lie.

But she was confident that they wouldn’t be able to tell. She’d been lying successfully to Jonathan for years. Every time the asshole drank gin, he got all dark and depressed. Then he’d start asking her if she hated him.

What she felt for Jonathan ... it was messy. She both hated him and felt indebted to him. He’d saved her and enslaved her.

Grumpzilla scowled. “You’re lying.”

She tried hard not to gape at him. There was no way he knew.

“Prove it.” She arched a brow.

Beck cleared his throat. “If she’s not going off palace grounds, then there isn’t a problem, is there, Judd?”

“It’s dark.”

Not exactly. The sun had risen further, giving the place a soft glow. It would soon get too warm for her to run.

And she really had to get out of here. The need was getting overwhelming. Like hundreds of ants marching across her skin.

“If I wait much longer, it will be too hot,” she said. “Can I go now if I promise to stick to palace grounds?”

Cool. Calm. Collected.

That was her motto.

“Yes,” Beck replied.

“No,” Judd said at the same time.

This guy was killing her.

Both she and Beck stared at Judd.

“Yes, ma’am, I mean, Chloe, it’s fine. Isn’t it, Judd?” Beck elbowed the other man on his side.

Judd didn’t flinch even though it seemed like Beck hadn’t held back.

“No,” Judd stated.

She didn’t know who’d pissed in his cornflakes this morning, but he didn’t get to take his attitude out on her.

“Don’t worry. I’m not in the mood for a run anymore. If you’ll excuse me,” she said to Beck.

“You’re not ex—”

She shut the door on whatever Grumpzilla had been about to say. She wasn’t interested. Instead, she turned and glared at the room.

Too much. This was too much.

The itch across her skin was getting worse.

She spotted the internal door that led into the palace.

Well, surely there wasn’t anyone guarding that door, right? If there was, she might have to mention to Jonathan that rather than being protected, they seemed to be under guard.

But why? Did Prince Kassim not trust them? He’d seemed friendly enough last night, if a little distant. Despite his annoyance at the way he’d been treated, Jonathan had been at

his charming best, and she'd thought the Prince had been friendlier by the end of dinner.

Although it had seemed a bit odd that they'd eaten with only him and not the rest of the Princes and their intended.

She'd been kind of looking forward to meeting Pippa, the commoner who was about to be a princess. But apparently, the Princes were notoriously overprotective of her.

Did she have time to check her appearance? God, she never used to be like this. It was a nervous tick. After years of Jonathan drumming into her that she had to be careful how she represented him ... she was left with this nervous habit of checking her appearance all the time.

She stopped briefly in front of a mirror. Okay, she was fine. She was going for a run, not to a meeting with one of the Princes. It didn't matter that she didn't have make-up on or that her hair was slightly messy.

Her stomach still bubbled nervously, but she ignored it.

Moving to the door, she unlocked it before carefully opening it. She felt like she was doing something naughty and her Little side welled up, wanting to giggle in delight.

She shoved that side of herself down. Way down. She'd learned to keep her Little locked away.

Because Jonathan could never know. He'd use it against her.

Just like every other weakness was used to control her.

This wasn't like her. She never let go of the tight hold she had on that part of herself. She rarely gave in to her temper and yet, she'd been close to letting it fly at Grumpzilla.

Taking a deep breath, she knew that she'd do better after a run. That was what she needed.

Thankfully, the coast was clear as she walked down the hallway to an exit that was far away from Judd Stark.



BECK ROUNDED on Judd as soon as the door slammed in their faces. That had been a bit of a surprise. Ms. Chloe Reed didn't seem like the door-slamming type. Nope, she was all cool, calm, and collected.

Which might be the reason that Judd seemed intent on poking and prodding at her.

But he had to remember that she was a guest here. Kassim had put their team in charge of her safety as well as the pompous dick that she worked for.

That was their job, but that didn't mean that they had to stand outside the suite all night or talk to her like he just had. That was over-the-top. Even for Judd.

“What the fuck, Judd?”

“She slammed the door in our faces! Did you see that?” Judd glared at the door in question, stepping toward it as though he was about to storm inside and have it out with the gorgeous blond.

Yeah, Beck had noticed how beautiful she was. Yesterday, he'd did his best to ignore her beauty. It had been easier since she'd been dressed in an outfit that probably cost more than his entire wardrobe. Plus, she'd been all made up and had this don't-touch-me vibe. And he'd had no interest in trying to crack her facade.

Until he'd seen her this morning.

Dressed all in black, with those tight workout pants and a small crop top that showed off a sliver of pale skin. Her blond hair pulled back in a high ponytail, making her look young and vulnerable.

Yeah, he'd definitely taken notice and his dick had sat up at attention. That asshole had no manners anyway. She'd stirred his protective instincts. Which surprised him. He hadn't felt protective of a woman since Ester left them all.

He slid between the door and Judd, pushing him back.

“What are you doing?” Judd demanded.

“You’re not going in there unless it’s to apologize.”

Judd gave him a look like he’d betrayed him.

Fucking moody bastard.

“Judd, you were just a jerk to that woman. We’re supposed to watch over her, not keep her prisoner.”

“I don’t trust them,” Judd said quietly.

Beck understood. Judd wasn’t a trusting person. “You don’t have to trust them or like them. But you’ve got to be civil, man. Kassim wants them kept safe while they’re here.”

Lord Fothersam was here as a favor to Kassim’s fathers, so they had to put up with his pompous ass for another ten days before they could send him back to where he came from.

Him and the icy blond.

“You have got to tone it down,” Beck said. “Or Caleb is going to pull you off this assignment.” Which meant they’d all be pulled off because they worked as a team. But God knew where they’d be assigned next. Because Judd was burning more bridges than the rest of them could build.

No matter what, though, he was their brother. Other people didn’t get that. All they saw was the prickly outer layer. But Judd had the sort of loyalty most people would kill for. Once he considered you his, he’d kill and die for you. At some stage, he’d saved each person on their team.

Their bonds had been forged in the fiery depths of hell. But they were made of graphene. Unbendable. Unbreakable.

That didn’t mean they wouldn’t tell him when he needed to pull his head in, though.

“You can’t tell me that there’s not something about the two of them that is off.”

“I don’t know. But we’ll watch them closely. However, it would be easier to do that if you didn’t push them away. You

get more flies with honey, huh?”

“I don’t want fucking flies. I want answers. I want everyone safe.”

“I get it. But if you fuck them off, they’re going to go to Kassim and then we’ll be off their detail and you won’t be close enough to figure out why they’re here.”

Hopefully, they were just what they seemed. Nothing had come up on their background checks. Lord Fothersam had inherited his wealth and title, he was a member of the House of Lords. And there had been very little on the girl.

No, not a girl. A woman.

Chloe.

She’d been raised in Florida by a single mom who’d died just before she turned eighteen. After that, there wasn’t much about her until she’d taken a job with His Lordship.

“You’re right. Fuck. What do I do?”

“Maybe apologize.”

Judd grimaced. “I hate fucking apologizing.”

“Believe me, man. I know.”

Shaking his head, Judd turned and knocked on the door.

No answer.

Shit. Either she was so angry she didn’t want to open the door, or ...

Before he could stop him, Judd opened the door and stormed inside.

“Fuck, man,” he whispered. “You’re going to get us arrested at this rate.”

“I was concerned for her welfare.”

So full of shit.

They heard snoring coming from one of the bedrooms. Then across the luxurious lounge area, the other bedroom was empty. The bed was made. If it wasn’t for her scent drifting

through the air, he might have thought she hadn't slept in there last night.

But it was there ... sugar cookies and cinnamon.

Delicious.

“We need to fucking find her.”

Beck sighed. “Just chill. I'll get Hux onto it.” They likely needed to smooth some ruffled feathers, and Hux was the best guy to do that.



CHLOE PUSHED herself until her muscles burned. Until everything else faded away.

Running was the only time she felt free.

When she could make the world disappear.

At least she would have been able to if not for the cowboy standing in her path. She slowed slightly as she came up to him.

“Should I pretend it's a coincidence that you're out jogging at the same time I am?” she asked dryly, eyeing his very short shorts and sleeveless top. Damn, the man was muscular.

How had he known where she was, though?

At least it wasn't Judd. She couldn't handle any more of Grumpzilla without wanting to strangle him. Slowly.

“No need,” Hux replied in his Texan drawl. Which she would find incredibly charming under other circumstances.

Hell, who was she kidding? It was still charming and she wasn't immune. Not by a long shot.

But she had to pretend that she was because if Jonathan had any inkling of her attraction ... yeah, she didn't want to think about that temper tantrum.

No, thank you.

She had enough issues to deal with as it was.

“Got a call from Beck who said Judd had his panties in a twist over you running on your own, so they sent me to come with you.”

“You like running?” she asked.

“Nope, can’t stand it.”

“Then why would they send you?”

“Beck doesn’t run. He’s too muscular. You should see him when he does, he looks like a hippo thumping along.” He laughed.

“He’s not that big.”

“All muscle, and that muscle weighs a lot. He needs to ease up on the weights. Anyway, Beck doesn’t run. Judd and Owen usually run daily.”

“So why not send one of them?” she asked.

“Because they don’t like you.”

Ouch. That was blunt.

“Don’t take offense, though,” he added cheerfully. “They don’t like anyone.”

Right. That made her feel so much better.

For some silly reason, she wanted them to like her.

Idiot.

“So, by default, it’s me you’re stuck with.” He smiled widely. “Lucky you, huh?” He held his arms out wide.

She barely held back a snort. Thought a lot of himself, didn’t he?

“Yes, lucky me. The thing is, I like to run fast and hard. And I’m not going to hold myself back just so you can keep watch over me when I’m perfectly safe. So why don’t you just run or walk on home and let me keep on?”

He sighed. “Listen, darlin’, if I could, I would. Believe me. I was tucked up in my bed with a cup of coffee and buttery toast, and I wish I was still there. But Judd has it in his head

that you're not safe, so here I am. Just doing my job. You wouldn't stop a guy from doing his job, would you?"

She didn't trust that smile of his. No one could be that friendly.

"I can't stop you from following me around," she told him. "But I'm not waiting for you, either." She dodged around him and took off once again.

His legs were longer than hers so maybe he'd be able to keep up. But it wasn't her problem if he couldn't. She glanced around as she ran, it was so beautiful here. She swore she could almost smell the ocean.

Behind her, she heard a groan and smiled as she pushed herself harder.

Maybe he'd give up and give her the peace and quiet she craved.

Only ... she wasn't sure that she was craving peace and quiet. She shook her head at herself. What was wrong with her? She'd been on her own for a long time. Well, other than Jonathan. But he kept her isolated. Which was probably for the best.

She didn't need anyone else.

She wasn't lonely.

And she didn't find these guys attractive or interesting.

Also ... she was a liar.

A stinking, rotten liar.

Hux was dying.

He was about to expire of a heart attack. And he blamed fucking Judd.

Go keep an eye on the pretty girl while she runs around the grounds. Get close to her. Be nice. Be her friend. Be charming.

Easy, right?

Not easy. Not fun. And he was going to fucking kill that bastard when he got hold of him. He'd like to see him sprinting for hours on end and see how he handled it.

What the hell was up with this girl? Was she a robot? How could she run like this without collapsing?

And what the heck was she running from? Because this sort of running wasn't normal or healthy. If anything, it screamed of desperation. Fear.

Which made him want to punch whoever was causing her to run as though the demons of hell were on her ass, nipping at her.

He tried to shake off his protective feelings. He didn't know her. Wasn't interested in her. Sure, he might flirt a little, but that was who he was ... that was the persona he'd carefully crafted.

The easygoing, charming cowboy. The oldest son of a rich Texas rancher without a care in the world. There was nothing he took seriously.

That's what he wanted people to think.

But there was another side to him that he didn't allow anyone but his brothers to see. And by his brothers ... he meant the three men he lived with, worked with. The three men that he planned on sharing his wife with one day.

They'd taken this job in Escana because it offered them the lifestyle they wanted. Of course, they'd thought they'd be moving here with Ester.

But he was glad they'd learned her true nature before coming here with her. She would have poisoned this place for them. Now they had a chance to build a new life ...

If any of them could ever trust again. Which didn't seem that likely.

He kept up with the girl. But only just. She was about ten feet ahead of him, moving along so easily and steadily that he wondered how often she did this. How often she tried to outrun her issues.

Wouldn't work.

That was something he knew well.

Shit, she was fit. And he would be a liar if he said that he didn't like watching her ass in those tights.

Yeah, he liked that a bit too much.

She's a guest of your boss. She's your charge while she's here. You're supposed to be watching over her. Not ogling her ass.

Fuck. Beck or Judd would have his head if they saw him now. However, they were the assholes who'd sent him to chase after her.

But fuck ... he wished she'd slow down.

Ten minutes later, she finally slowed. He tried desperately to pretend that he wasn't dying as he continued to run toward her. She'd switched to a jog as they reached the top of a cliff. Out beyond them was the ocean. They were at the edge of the palace grounds. Few people came out this far.

As she grew closer to the cliff, alarm filled him. There was no sign that the edge was unstable, but he still didn't like it.

"Get back from there," he barked.

She turned, looking shocked. Had she forgotten he was even there?

Ouch.

That was a bit of a blow to the ego. He wasn't used to being forgotten. Especially by women.

"Sorry?" she asked.

It was weird that she had no real discernible accent. He knew she'd been born in Florida, but she'd lived in London for the last few years.

Not the point. Focus.

Judd was always telling him he had focus issues.

"Get away from the edge," he told her firmly. He put away the smile and charm and made sure that his face and tone were stern.

She stepped back immediately.

"Good girl."

Her eyes were wide as she gaped at him like she'd never seen him before. Seemed that she brought his dominant side out.

"I ... what?" she whispered.

A light sweat coated her skin. Shit. How did she still look gorgeous even when she was sweating? He was a mess. His T-shirt was soaked and his face was likely purple by now.

"Come closer," he urged, holding out his hand.

Obviously, he'd spoken too softly because she simply stood there.

"Chloe, do as you were told."

With almost zombie-like movements, she walked closer to him. He had to fight the urge to give her a sharp slap on the

ass.

Fuck.

What was wrong with him? He didn't know this girl and she wasn't his to discipline. Or command.

But as far as he was concerned, she'd been in possible danger. And it was his job to keep her safe ... by whatever means he could.

Instead of spanking her ass for being so reckless, he reached out and gently grasped hold of her wrist. She jumped slightly, staring down at his hand in surprise.

Her heart was racing.

“What are you doing? Why did you call me over here? And call me ...”

“A good girl?” he murmured, staring down into her flushed face. Was she only red because of the run ... or for another reason?

Did she like being called a good girl?

He thought she might.

Hmm ... interesting. He hadn't picked her as a sub and that didn't mean that she was. Maybe she just liked being praised.

“Did you like being called a good girl, Chloe? Do you like being praised?” It was dangerous territory. He didn't know her. She was a guest here. He'd be in hot water if she complained to Kassim. Yet, he couldn't stop his mouth from running away on him.

Chloe swayed on her feet toward him. Was she hypnotized by his words? Was she about to step up against him? To lean into him?

Heck. Was he turning her on with just his words? His tone?

He let go of her arm and reached out to grab her as she swayed again.

Wait ... she wasn't fucking being hypnotized by his voice! She was about to pass out!

"Chloe! Chloe?" He put his arm behind her back and eased her to the ground.

"I'm okay," she said faintly.

"No, you're not. Are you feeling dizzy? Nauseous? Does anything hurt?"

"Yes," she replied as he helped her lie back on the ground, then raised her feet into the air.

"Yes? Yes to what?" he asked. Why the fuck hadn't he brought any water with him? She'd probably overheated. Had she even eaten this morning? Fuck.

Idiot. Here he'd been admiring her ass and cursing her out for making him run so long and fast ... and she'd pushed herself to the point of feeling faint. He should have seen that. Should have stopped her before it got this far.

"Where does it hurt?" he asked. What if there was something else wrong with her?

"Everywhere. Feels so good, though. Like the pain. Makes me feel alive."

Okay. There was a whole lot to unpack in that statement. And he didn't have time right now to really think all of that through.

He shot off an SOS text to the rest of his team, knowing they could track him through his phone to find their exact location.

"Okay, darlin', let's forget about that. Is there anything that feels sore? Like a sharp pain?"

"No."

"You still feeling dizzy?" He'd noticed that she was speaking more clearly. Grabbing her wrist, he took her pulse. Fast and faint.

"What ... why am I on the ground?" She squinted up at him. He did his best to shade her face.

“You nearly fainted.”

“I ... no. I was just feeling a bit dizzy. That’s all. Probably because of the way you were ordering me around.” She frowned up at him.

“Darlin’, you were about to fall over the edge of that cliff. If I hadn’t ordered you back, you could have seriously hurt yourself. Think about what would have happened if you got dizzy while you were standing at the edge?”

Anger filled him at the thought. What was she thinking, running until she was at the point of collapse? Putting her health and safety in danger.

Not acceptable.

Someone needed to be watching over this girl more closely.

What she needed was a guardian or a protector.

Maybe a Daddy.

Yeah, get that out of your head right now. She’s not a Little. Or a sub.

What he did know was that she was off-limits. Unattainable.

“I was fine.”

“Because I was here and I made you come back from the edge.”

“I would have been okay. You’re exaggerating the danger.”

“You have no sense of self-preservation, do you?” he asked her incredulously. “You’ve run yourself to the point of collapse. You had no idea if that ground was firm or not yet you stood right at the edge of the cliff. You need someone to watch over you, girl.”

She made a snorting noise before trying to sit.

“What are you doing? Lie back down.”

“I want to sit up.” She glared up at him in frustration as he held her gently down.

“Tough.”

“Excuse me?” she snapped.

He had to admit, he rather liked seeing her like this. Yesterday, she’d seemed almost detached. Polite but distant. As though she let very little affect her. Or interest her.

No one could say that about her now. There was fire in her eyes. Sure, she might be angry at him, but at least she was showing some emotion.

He was aware of someone pulling up on an ATV, but he didn’t look over. He knew it would be one of his brothers. Most people used golf carts to move around the palace grounds, but they were at the very edge of the property and the golf cart wouldn’t have handled the terrain.

It didn’t matter which of his brothers it was, all of his attention remained on the girl trying to incinerate him with her gaze.

Damn ... if looks could kill. He’d be gone.

Which would be a shame for the rest of the world to be deprived of his company.

Yep, that would just be sad.

“Let me up,” she demanded. “You’re acting like a bully! Bossing me around, holding me down, scolding me. What right do you have?”

Oh, didn’t she sound all high and mighty? But it just made him grin. He had a feeling that the cool, icy persona was just an act. That this was the real Chloe. Fiery and passionate.

And he liked it.

“And you’re acting like a brat.”

Her gasp was so loud that they’d probably heard it back at the palace.

“A ... a brat?”

“Yep, darlin’. A brat. I just stopped you from getting seriously hurt and here you are giving me sass.”

“Sass? I’m giving you sass?”

“Yep, you’re throwing out so much sass, I’m going to need an umbrella to protect myself.”

“You are unbelievable. I’m a brat because I don’t want you to boss me around and hold me down? I could have you arrested!”

“Arrested for keeping you safe? Darlin’, I’d like to see that happen.” He leaned in close to her. “Any judge would side with me. What’s more ... they’d probably tell me to spank your ass for being such a sassy brat.”

She sucked in a breath, then started coughing.

Shit. What was he doing? He shouldn’t be scolding or teasing her when she wasn’t feeling that great. And why wasn’t anyone stopping him? He’d thought by now that Beck or Judd would have stepped in.

“Whoa, darlin’. Easy. You’re all right.” He helped her sit up and lightly patted her back.

Shit. She was thin. He frowned. She felt fragile. When she’d been glaring up at him with fire in her eyes, it had been easy to forget that she was tiny and delicate.

That she could easily be hurt.

He rubbed her back and glanced over at whichever of his brothers had come in the ATV.

Shit.

No wonder Judd or Beck wasn’t stepping in to stop him from acting like a dick. Or to help take care of her.

Because it was Owen standing there, staring down at him. There was nothing on his face. He was blank.

Owen didn’t let people know what he was really feeling or thinking.

And he didn’t much care for anyone outside of the three of them. Oh, he could pretend. He was a pretty good actor. Not many people saw how ... different he was.

But anyone else would have stepped in to help by now.

“Owen, got some water?”

“Yep.” He still didn’t move. He was frowning slightly.

Fuck.

“Could you bring me some?”

“Why don’t you come get it?” Owen said quietly.

What the heck? What was his problem? Sure, he could be a cold, aloof bastard but he wasn’t usually contrary for the sake of it.

“Because I don’t want to leave her sitting on her own,” he countered.

“I’m fine,” she said. But she was slumped against him and he didn’t think she was okay. At all.

“Owen,” he said warningly. “Give me the water. She’s probably dehydrated and exhausted. She needs water and shade.”

The other man studied her for a long moment. Owen was the most suspicious of all of them. Even more than Judd. Judd was just louder in his disbelief.

Judd had a very thin social filter. Owen had more than a filter. He had a shield that was almost impenetrable.

“Don’t worry. I can get it myself.” She shot Owen a look over her shoulder that had the other man’s dark eyebrows rising.

Whatever had been on her face had roused Owen’s interest. That might not be a good thing.

“You’re not moving,” Hux snapped.

As both Owen and Chloe turned to look at him, he realized he was losing his grip on his control.

Actually, he thought he’d lost it as soon as she’d stepped up next to that cliff edge and he’d seen how vulnerable she was.

Why do you care?

She's a job. If she wants to get up, let her.

But Owen seemed to come to some sort of conclusion as he reached into the back of the ATV and drew out two bottles of water from the cooler that sat back there.

He walked over and handed one to Hux before giving her the other one. Hux had to hold himself back. He wanted to snatch up the bottle of water, undo it, then feed her sips. He wanted to ensure that she got everything she needed.

He stood up, distancing himself from her before the need overrode him.

Shit. He'd never felt this interested or been so driven to see to someone's health. He hadn't even felt like this with Ester. He'd let Beck and Judd take the lead on being her Doms. Her Daddies. He'd been more of a companion. The friend who was a lover. He'd made her laugh with his self-deprecating jokes and pranks. Although sometimes he'd annoyed her by taking things too far.

That was kind of what he did.

And Owen ... well, now that he thought about it he wasn't entirely sure whether Ester had liked Owen ... or been scared of him.

There were times she'd definitely gotten a strange look on her face when she was around him. And it wasn't often that he ever fucked her on his own.

Actually, had he ever fucked her on his own? Had things ever been okay between them?

Fuck, was he that far in his own head? Had he not noticed that things weren't right with the two of them? Ester had never said anything. And Owen ... well, he was such a secretive bastard he'd probably never have said anything.

Christ, Hux didn't know whether he'd say something if he was on fire and dying.

Even though he wanted to take charge of Chloe's care, he held himself back. He'd already made a dick of himself. He didn't need to make things worse.

However, it was nearly impossible for him to stand there and watch as her hands shook while she undid the lid on the water. He had to look away.

This need to take over. To look after her. It was like a compulsion. Or an illness.

When she gasped, his gaze shot back to her. What was wrong? Was she hurt?

But she seemed fine. Just upset ... about what?

“Oh, shoot. I’m so clumsy.”

Clumsy? Her? He hadn’t seen one instance of her being clumsy. In fact, she seemed poised, like every movement was thought out and precise.

She wiped at her top. He frowned. She must have spilled a bit of water down her top.

But so what? No one was going to care about a bit of spilled water. However, the way she kept wiping had an almost obsessive feel to it.

He was moving toward her before he could stop himself. He had to do something to make her feel better. But before he could reach her, Owen was crouching next to her.

Owen grasped hold of the hand she was using to wipe at her top. She froze.

Hux stood still. He knew that Owen wouldn’t hurt her, but he also wasn’t sure exactly what he was doing. She just stared at him, hypnotized, as he lowered her hand to her leg and then let go. Then he took hold of her hand that held the bottle of water, raising it back to her mouth.

Owen waited until she’d started taking sips of the water to stand and move back to the ATV. He sat in it and Hux watched him for a moment in shock.

What the hell had just happened?

What the hell had just happened?

Chloe lowered the water bottle, staring down at it. She could still feel Owen's touch as he'd held the water bottle to her lips. As he'd grabbed her hand to lower it away from where she'd been obsessively rubbing at her chest.

Silly. So silly.

It was just a bit of water.

But she was feeling out of sorts. Weak and vulnerable.

What the heck had happened? Had she really nearly fainted? Maybe she'd wobbled a bit. But surely she didn't need all this fuss over her.

She didn't like it. She preferred to be in the background.

But why would she faint? That had never happened before.

Okay, maybe that wasn't true. There were a few times when she'd pushed herself too far and she'd ended up sitting on the ground, her heart racing hard and the world spinning.

Had she really pushed herself that far? Perhaps the timezone changes and difference in climate had worked against her as well.

"How are you feeling?" Hux asked.

She frowned as she glanced up at him. Why did he sound so different? Almost cool. Standoffish. Not like Hux at all.

Mind you, it wasn't like she knew him. And he'd gone from all smiles and jokes to commanding and protective.

So maybe he wasn't who he presented himself to be anyway.

"Yes. I'm good." She set the water down and attempted to push herself up onto her feet.

"Careful," he warned, holding out a hand to her. "Don't move too quickly or you might faint."

"I'm not going to faint. I don't know what just happened, but I think you're both overreacting."

"You nearly passed out," Hux said, taking hold of her hand to help her to her feet. He let go of her quickly. As though her touch hurt him.

She tried not to get offended by that.

But it was hard. Was this the same man who'd called her a good girl in a voice that had dripped with approval?

Actually, it was best that side of him didn't reappear. Because that voice had the power to wipe away her control. It made her feel all gooey inside.

And she didn't do gooey. She couldn't afford to lose control.

So yep, she much preferred the Hux that couldn't stand to touch her.

Or at least that was what she tried to tell herself. That the ache in her belly wasn't a sense of rejection and sadness.

Silly Chloe.

She wobbled slightly and Hux reached out to grab her, but she drew back. His eyes widened, that blank look disappearing. She let out a deep breath. She shouldn't have moved, but he'd surprised her.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd been touched by someone who cared about her. That asshole in high school didn't count since he'd lied to her.

It would be nice to have a hug from someone who gave a shit about her welfare. Just one cuddle.

Then again ... one might not be enough. It would be hard just to have a small taste of something when she needed the smorgasbord.

Shit.

The heat was messing with her head.

“I’m going to start back,” she said as Hux watched her far too closely. As though he was trying to read what was going on in her head.

Good luck sorting that out, buddy.

Because she had no idea herself.

“Thanks for the water. And taking care of me,” she said stiffly. Even though she thought it had been overkill.

Maybe.

As she turned, she knocked the bottle of water over. She froze. Shit. Shit. Shit.

She was never this clumsy.

“Sorry.” She reached down and picked the bottle up. As she stood, the world spun and she had to take a moment to ensure that she wasn’t going to faint. Or vomit.

Because both things were a possibility.

“Sorry?” Hux asked. “It’s just water.”

Right. Of course it was. She rubbed at her forehead. She had a pounding headache. Maybe she should have drunk more water.

“Yeah. I ... I have to go.” She needed to lie down on her bed. After she had a cold shower. She felt unbelievably exhausted.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Hux asked as she turned away and headed back down the path.

Shit. She hoped she could make it back without passing out again.

“I told you, didn’t I?” Was she talking inside her head instead of out loud? It was hard for her to think. “I’m heading back.”

“How?” Hux asked.

How? Was he joking with her? “By walking.”

“Are you hearing this, Owen?” Hux asked. “She thinks she’s walking back.”

Owen just grunted.

“Darlin’, you’re not walking back.”

“I ... what? Why wouldn’t I?”

Hux just sighed.

“Get in the ATV, girl. You’re not walking anywhere,” Owen said gruffly from where he sat in the driver’s seat.

Hux sent him a surprised look that she didn’t understand. But her feet were moving before her brain caught up with the command. Where was she going to sit, though?

Hux gestured to the front passenger seat. “In you get.”

She climbed in as Owen turned to grab another bottle of water. He twisted off the top.

She stared at it thirstily. Why hadn’t she drunk that whole bottle before she’d knocked it over?

Idiot.

Then, to her shock, he held the bottle out to her. She stared at it numbly.

“Drink,” he prompted.

“Oh. Thank you.”

He just nodded, not saying another word. She glanced over at Hux. “How will you get back, though?” She couldn’t let him walk back while she rode. He had to be as tired as she was.

His eyebrows rose. “Don’t worry about me, darlin’. I’ll be fine. I’ll drag myself home, bit by bit. If I don’t make it back

by sunset, send someone after me, will you?"

Damn. Now she felt terrible. It was her fault he was out here and now he didn't have a way to get back easily.

"Here. Take my seat. I feel much better and can walk back."

Owen reached out to place his arm over her stomach. She froze. What was it about these men? Why did their touch feel so electric? So right?

It made her want to melt and at the same time, run. Far and fast.

Lord, this was confusing and she wasn't sure that she liked it.

Perhaps it was best to go back to an existence where she wasn't touched and no one paid her any attention.

"Get in," Owen said to Hux.

Hux jumped on the back, shaking his head at her as she twisted to look at him. "You always so self-sacrificing, darlin'?"

She didn't think she was ... was she?

She nibbled at her lower lip. Did she sacrifice her own needs for others?

Maybe. But that was her job, right? To give Jonathan whatever he needed.

However, there were times when she wished her life had taken a different turn. A life where she was free to do what she wanted.

"Hey, stop." Hux reached out to touch her face and she moved slightly back.

His mouth dropped open and she was aware of Owen beside her, silent and watchful.

Whoops.

Crap.

She didn't mean to do that. It's just ... these guys kept surprising her. What was with all the touching? People didn't touch all the time like this, right?

"Easy, darlin'," Hux said in a low, soothing voice. It felt so ... so healing. Like she was a million jagged pieces and his voice was helping to piece her back together.

Bit by bit.

Silly Chloe.

"I wasn't going to harm you. Just stop you from hurting yourself."

"Huh?"

Okay, that was a really intelligent answer there, Chloe.

"You were biting so hard on that lip, you were going to chew the skin wide open. Where'd your mind go just now, darlin'?"

Where did it go? It had gone somewhere stupid ... where she'd started wondering about what if. "Oh. Nowhere. And I wasn't hurting myself. I'm f—"

"Don't even say it," Hux said in an irritated voice.

What had she done now?

Jeez, he was prickly. And she'd thought Judd was moody.

At least Owen seemed more even-tempered. Even if his personality seemed kind of dark and mysterious. He just watched her like he was reading every one of her secrets.

Let's hope that wasn't really the case.

He continued to stare at her as she turned back around to face the front.

"Um, is something wrong?" Shit. Did she have something on her face? She reached up to wipe at her cheeks. "Is there dirt on my face?"

"No. Drink your water."

Oh, she'd forgotten about her water. She stared down at it in surprise and took a few delicate sips, careful not to spill it

down her front again. She'd already made enough of a fool of herself today.

And if there was one thing she hated, it was making mistakes and looking like an idiot in front of others.

She set the bottle down. There, that should make him happy. She turned to him, expecting at least a nod of approval.

But he slowly shook his head. "All of it."

"All of it?"

"Yep."

"I can't do all of it at once. I'll be sick."

She couldn't discern any visible response from Owen, but she had a feeling he wasn't happy at that.

"Put the lid on. Seatbelt."

She twisted on the lid, then pulled her belt over her. "Are you wearing your seatbelt?"

He studied her and she wondered what he saw. A messy, frazzled woman who couldn't even go for a run without collapsing and making an idiot of herself?

Was he going to put his seatbelt on? Or was he going to try and bullshit her that as a man he didn't need to wear one?

To her surprise, all he did was reach over and buckle his belt.

Okay, then.

Maybe she'd read him wrong.

As soon as Owen had belted up, he took off. She glanced back at Hux, worried that he might not have been holding on. But he seemed to be fine.

Sadness filled her as he kept his back to her. Logically, she knew it wasn't a rejection. It would have been uncomfortable and probably harder for him to hold on if he'd been facing forward.

But it seemed all of her nerve endings were exposed right now. She needed to build up her shields again. These men

were getting to her ... which was crazy. Stupid.

She'd never been in an ATV. There had never been an opportunity and she'd never have thought she would enjoy it. But as they flew over the land, the wind whipped at her hair and a sense of freedom filled her.

Much like when she went running. Only this way, she didn't have to push her body to its breaking point to gain the feeling racing through her veins.

She was surprised that she wasn't more concerned over Owen's driving. She didn't know him. He could be reckless. But he didn't do anything foolish. He was careful, slowing down as he got closer to the palace.

Turning, she smiled at him. "That was so much fun!"

He gave her a quick look, raising an eyebrow. But she thought she saw his mouth soften.

Maybe.

Perhaps not.

But she didn't care. Things felt lighter.

Until she saw *him* standing there ... waiting for her.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

She knew she wasn't presentable. He didn't like her running outside. He'd often told her that she should stick to a treadmill.

But he tolerated it as long as she ran where no one he knew would see her.

That wasn't quite the case right now. They'd passed a few people walking around once they got closer to the palace.

She gulped.

"You okay?" Owen asked.

She gave him a surprised look. Shoot. How had she almost forgotten that they were sitting there?

Jonathan was smiling. To anyone else, he probably looked relaxed and friendly.

But she saw the twitching in his right hand.

And she knew he was furious.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Cool. Collected.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

And mask.

“Of course,” she replied as they came to a stop outside the palace. She reached down to undo the seatbelt. Shoot. Why couldn’t she get the damn thing undone?

Calm.

Owen reached over to undo her belt.

“Thank you,” she managed to say.

Those ants were crawling across her skin again.

Damn it. That sense of calm and freedom didn’t last as long as she would have hoped.

Oppression surrounded her, pushing at her chest. As she turned to get out of the ATV, Hux was suddenly there, holding out his hand to her.

She knew she shouldn’t touch him. It would likely make Jonathan’s anger worse. But if she didn’t, that could be seen as a slight as well. And the idea of Hux being angry at her ... well, it hurt.

So despite the fact that it would probably send a hurricane of problems her way, she slid her hand into Hux’s and let him help her down.

He didn’t keep hold of her hand once she was standing. He stepped back and let go as though her touch was burning him.

Don’t be offended.

So he doesn’t want to touch you ... it doesn’t mean anything.

And it was probably better that he didn’t keep hold of her. That would just annoy Jonathan even more.

“Chloe,” Jonathan said, stepping forward. He was wearing a white linen shirt and dark pants. In his midfifties, he was actually getting more good looking with age. A full head of hair that was going slowly gray, charming on the surface, with power and money, women flocked to him.

But not her.

And against these two men, he completely paled into near non-existence.

Or he would have if it wasn't for that twitching hand.

“I woke up to find you gone,” he continued to say as he moved closer to her. “Are you all right?”

He ran his gaze over her. To someone else, he might have appeared concerned about her.

But she knew he was probably cataloging her state. That she was messy and sweaty. And everything he didn't like her to be.

“Yes. Sorry. I apologize for worrying you, I should have left a note.”

She'd meant to return well before he got up. What was he doing up already?

“That's all right, as long as you're okay. Did something happen?” He glanced over at the other two men. “It's probably not a good idea to run in a strange location alone.”

“I went running with Ms. Reed to make sure she was safe,” Hux said stiffly. “She grew a bit dizzy, probably the time difference and the heat. So Owen brought out the ATV to pick her up so she didn't have to run back.”

“Goodness, I'm glad you were there, then. Chloe, you have to be more careful.”

She smiled and nodded. She knew what she was supposed to do and say. “You're quite right.” She turned to Hux and Owen. “Thank you so much for your help today. I really appreciate it and I apologize for causing so much trouble.”

“No trouble,” Hux drawled, giving her a strange look.

Owen just sat there not saying anything. But she did notice that his gaze was focused on Jonathan.

Shit. She hoped the older man didn't notice.

He might take offense.

Then Owen turned his gaze to her. "Rest today."

Damn.

He was so bossy. But instead of getting all prickly at his commanding tone, her traitorous body melted.

It liked his bossiness.

Maybe because he was concerned about her welfare.

"Thanks again," she said. She needed to get rid of them both. Quickly. She headed toward Jonathan. Damn it, he wouldn't like that she'd been standing closer to Hux than him.

Sometimes, it was super tricky keeping on his good side. Doing everything he wanted. Usually she did much better than this ... she was just out of sorts this morning.

A rest actually sounded really good.

"Where's Beck?" Owen asked suddenly as she reached Jonathan.

He wrinkled his nose. It was a subtle movement, one the other two likely didn't even see, but he got his message across crystal clear.

She stank.

She was messy.

Dirty.

"I believe he went to check on whether he could track you both," Jonathan said. "Ah, here he is."

She watched as Beck moved toward them. He was a huge guy. But muscular. He looked like he could pick her up with one arm and carry her around.

Why did she like the idea of that? Why did the thought of him cradling her against that wide chest make her legs go

weak? Make her heart race and her body tremble?

You've got problems, Chloe.

Big problems.

“You might want to stop drooling, my dear,” Jonathan whispered.

Her spine went straight. Shit.

She really had to get a tighter hold on her emotions. This was ridiculous.

“Chloe, you're all right!” Beck's relief was clear and Jonathan hummed under his breath.

He'd remembered to call her Chloe. Only, ma'am might have been best under the circumstances.

“Yes, thank you, I'm sorry to have caused a bother,” she murmured.

“Beck! I'm heading out there, they must be ...” Judd slammed to a stop as he saw them all standing there.

His gaze went to hers immediately.

And he scowled.

She was beginning to think that might be a semi-permanent look for him. Or maybe it was just when she was around. Perhaps the rest of the time, he was a happy-go-lucky guy. Maybe he cracked jokes and was the life of the party.

She didn't think so ... but it was possible.

“Um, hi,” she said awkwardly. “Sorry for worrying you all. But as you can see, I'm fine.”

Judd's gaze moved over her again ... this time more slowly. Jonathan stood closer to her. Was Jonathan being supportive or possessive? Hard to know.

Then Judd turned to Hux. “Report.”

Hux sighed. “I'll tell you about it once I've showered. And drunk a gallon of water.” He looked over at her. “Which you also need to do.”

“Of course. I’ll go drink some now.”

“Why does she need to drink a lot of water?” Judd asked. “Did she dehydrate? Why were you at the edge of the palace grounds? How did you get that far?”

Whoa. He had more questions than a four-year-old in a candy store. Meanwhile, she was growing more tired and was aware of how badly she probably stunk.

“We ran that far,” Hux said. “Ms. Reed likes to run.”

Judd’s eyes widened. “That far? You must have been sprinting. No wonder you became dehydrated. Do you feel okay? We need to get Obian here.”

Who the hell was Obian?

Actually, it didn’t matter who he was, she didn’t want to see him.

“No, I’m fine. Really. I feel as good as new.”

Owen made a strange noise as she spoke and she moved her gaze briefly to him. What was that about?

“You sure?” Beck asked. He might be quieter than the others ... well, other than Owen, but his voice certainly commanded attention when he spoke. “Obian is the palace doctor. He can come check you over.”

“Oh no. No, I definitely don’t need that. Thank you all for everything. Sorry I was such a bother. I promise not to go so far tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Hux said, looking pained. “You’re planning on this torture tomorrow?” He seemed so panicked that she almost found herself smiling. Poor guy really wasn’t into running.

“If it’s too much, you don’t have to come,” she said in a slightly teasing voice.

Jonathan’s hand brushed against hers, reminding her that she shouldn’t show any preference to these guys, any interest.

“I can handle it,” Hux huffed. “I’m just thinking of you, darlin’. Don’t you think you should, uh, rest?”

“He’s right, Ms. Reed,” Beck said stiffly.

“Thank you, gentlemen, for being so concerned about my personal assistant. I can assure you I’ll make sure that she’s taken care of. I’d be lost without my right arm. But if you’ll excuse us, I need to get ready for the day and perhaps Chloe should get some rest.”

Judd frowned as Beck nodded, looking like he agreed. Hux took a step toward her, before stopping.

And Owen? He just watched. Very closely. Was it her imagination or did his gaze narrow as Jonathan put his hand around her wrist? His grip was tight. So tight that she nearly winced.

But she managed to put a small smile on her face as she waved goodbye to them all.

It should have been a relief to step into the cool, air-conditioned suite in the palace. To be away from them and this odd effect they had on her.

However, she knew better than that. As soon as the door closed behind them, she turned to Jonathan with a wince.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “I didn’t mean for any of that to happen. They sort of ambushed me as I was leaving. Apparently, they didn’t like the idea of me jogging alone, which is crazy since I go running in London all the time on my own. And Escana is meant to be a far safer place. I just overdid it and got a bit light-headed, that’s all. But it won’t happen again. I can go earlier when they aren’t around. And I won’t push myself too much. Just please, don’t say that I can’t go running while I’m here.”

That was her biggest fear. That he’d order her not to go running.

And while she theoretically could tell him to shove his orders ... she owed him her life.

So she wouldn’t do that.

“My dear, why are you acting like I’m an ogre?” He let go of her wrist and reached up to brush some hair off her face.

Do not move. Do not look scared of him.

It was hard. He was both her savior and the bogeyman under the bed for her. And that brought up a convoluted mix of emotions.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that. I guess I’m just ... out of sorts right now. I got a bit faint. I probably need some more sleep and something to eat.”

“Yes. A shower and some new ... clothes would work wonders for making you feel better, I’m sure.” He studied her, then moved his gaze to the windows. “I have a feeling your friends out there are going to stick close to you over the next few days.”

“I don’t ... they’re not my friends. I just met them. And I’m fairly certain they don’t like me.”

Which stupidly upset her. She didn’t normally care whether she was liked or not. She didn’t usually have this need to please people.

They were just ... different.

And it wasn’t something she should entertain or encourage.

“I wouldn’t say that at all,” he replied. “They seemed unusually interested in your welfare.”

“I’m sure they’d be like that with anyone. They feel responsibility for both of us since they’re charged with keeping us safe.”

“But they seem almost zealous in their attempts to keep you safe. I doubt they’d feel the same way about me.” He gave her a genial smile. He probably thought he was being reassuring or charming or something. “No, I think they are interested in you.”

That knot in her stomach wouldn’t dissipate.

“I’ll stay away from them as much as I can,” she promised. No idea how she would manage that. But she’d do what she could. “And I promise, I wasn’t encouraging any, uh, interest.

And I really think they don't care about me any more than they would another client."

Judd stared at her like she was a nuisance. Beck had this insufferably calm demeanor that she thought hid his real feelings. Hux was hot and cold. One minute bossing her around like he cared, the next snatching his hand away like he couldn't stand to touch her.

And Owen? Well, who knew? He was extremely difficult to read.

"No, you know what ... I don't think you should do that." Jonathan moved over to sit on the sofa.

"Shouldn't do what?" she asked, confused.

"Push them away."

Okay, she wasn't following. "You want me to keep them close?"

"Yes, dear. They seem quite taken with you and it means they'll pay less attention to me. Having them around is quite stifling."

This wasn't what she'd expected him to say.

And she wasn't sure what he was wanting from her.

"Do you want ... are you saying you want me to sleep with them?"

Because that was a hard pass. She wasn't ever going to do that. Not ... no ...

She swallowed heavily, feeling the bile rising in her throat.

He stood suddenly and she took a step back.

Shit.

His face grew frozen. "Are you scared of me, Chloe? Do you seriously believe that I would sell you out like that? That I would want you to whore yourself?"

Don't move.

Clearly, that hadn't been what he'd meant.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“I would never ask you to do that. You know that.”

She sucked in a slow breath. “I really do apologize.”

“I’ll forgive you, my dear. I know you’re not thinking properly. All I want is for you to maybe encourage this interest they have in you. Keep their attention on you and away from me. Understand?”

Not really.

But she found herself nodding anyway. Because asking questions would likely just annoy him and she seemed to have dodged a bullet.

How was she going to grab and keep the attention of men who she was pretty certain couldn’t stand her?

“**W**hat the hell was that?” Judd turned on Hux.

“What the hell was what?” Hux scowled at the other man.

“What just happened? Why does she look like death warmed up? What went on? Why’d you send an SOS?” Judd was winding himself up.

Owen stayed in the ATV. He didn’t have anything to add and he preferred to stick to the background. The shadows were his home.

Besides, Judd getting wound up tighter than a jack-in-the-box was nothing new. Or interesting.

There wasn’t a lot that was interesting in his life ... not compared to his earlier years. And he told himself he preferred it that way. He no longer had to beg, steal, or kill just to survive. He didn’t have to struggle each day.

A roof over his head, three meals a day, men that he trusted by his side ... that should all be a relief. It should be paradise.

But sometimes he missed that feeling of living on the edge. It had helped him feel alive. Living here ... it was almost like a cop out. A fake kind of paradise.

Not that the place was fake or the people in it. But the peacefulness of it all felt all wrong.

Because he knew he didn’t deserve it.

But he stayed. Because these men did deserve some peace. They'd lived through hell of their own. And he wouldn't take this away from them. Nor did he want to live without them.

So here he was ... living a life less interesting.

At least, he had been until she came along.

He didn't trust her. Nope. He hadn't trusted Ester either.

No, he'd always had his suspicions. And he regretted that he'd never voiced them.

But when you'd been raised to believe your voice didn't matter ... it was difficult to find it, even when something was really important. He'd been taught that being silent was better. It meant that he could go unnoticed.

Because he belonged in the shadows.

Then along she came.

What was it about her that had caught his attention?

He didn't know ... and until he did, he was going to keep a close eye on her.

Instead of just brushing things off or laughing away Judd's demands like he normally would, Hux got up in his business. Standing almost chest to chest with him.

Beck gave Hux a surprised look. But Owen had seen him with the girl. Knew that he had felt a pull toward her.

One that they couldn't give in to. Not just because she was their charge. But because there were a whole lot of unknowns about her. They'd all decided that if they wanted another woman to share, that they'd be better with a woman from Escana. Someone who wanted the same things they did.

Someone they all wanted. Although how they'd find someone to put up with all of them, he had no idea. They weren't easy men to be with.

Including him.

Maybe especially him.

“What the fuck do you mean, what happened?” Hux snapped. “Nothing happened. Are you implying that I did something to her?”

“What?” Judd stared at the other man in shock. “Of course not. Fuck. Why would you think that?”

“Everyone just chill,” Beck said in a low voice. “We can’t talk about this here. Hux, you need a shower and food. Judd, you need sleep. That means that Owen and I are on duty today.”

While Judd was their leader, Beck was often the voice of reason.

“I’m fine,” Judd protested. “I don’t need sleep.”

They all shot looks at him.

“There’s no need to be up all night keeping watch, is there?” Hux asked, running his hand down his face as he glanced over at the door. They all stepped closer to the ATV as though in unspoken agreement. “They’re not a risk or Caleb wouldn’t have agreed to their visit.”

“Still don’t like it,” Judd said stubbornly.

It might seem irrational, but Owen understood. The way he and Judd had grown up, they were inherently suspicious of outsiders.

Besides ... there was something about this guy. Lord Fothersam. Jesus, what a name.

Beck sighed, but nodded. “They’re still guests of the princes and if we make this an issue they might complain. And then someone else will be assigned to them.”

“Who?” Judd demanded. “Those idiot ex-MI6 dickheads? They’re not as good at their jobs as we are.”

Well, he didn’t know about that. Ian and Jack seemed good at their job.

“Maybe,” Beck said. “So let’s play this cool. They’re only here a short time.”

Damn. He didn't like the idea of that. And he could tell by the way Hux stiffened that he didn't like it either.

What would happen once the girl was gone?

This weird feeling in his gut would hopefully disappear.

Judd crossed his arms over his chest with a grunt. He definitely needed some sleep. Owen knew he took on everything himself. Everything that went wrong, he internalized as his fault. His failure.

"Fine," Judd said. "Agreed."

Beck let out a breath, rolling his neck back and forth.

"Owen, take the ATV back and then join Beck," Judd ordered. "You can watch the girl while Beck takes Lord Fothersam."

He was getting the girl? Interesting choice. And he wasn't sure it was the right one.

Then again, she was meant to be resting all day. Taking it easy.

He wondered if she would.

That sort of disobedience should be punished. And he was intrigued at the idea of delivering a punishment. Of putting her over his knee. Spanking her bare ass while she kicked her legs and begged to be set free.

Fuck. Yes. It was a bad idea to assign him to the girl. But he didn't say anything.

Wasn't his place.

"Owen, watch the girl closely in case she's not feeling well."

"She got dizzy because she pushed herself too far and fast," Hux said. "The girl can run. It was almost ..."

"Almost what?" Beck asked.

"Like she was trying to outrun someone. Or something."

Well, if anyone knew about trying to outrun your demons, it was the four of them.

The web between him and the girl just grew tighter.
And Owen didn't think that was a good thing.

C hloe felt awful.

She was so exhausted that her eyes felt gritty. As though there wasn't enough moisture in the air. And it felt almost difficult to breathe. Her stomach clenched. She felt nauseous and hungry all at the same time.

After her shower, she'd wanted nothing more than to lie down and rest for a while. But Jonathan had ordered them in breakfast.

As though they were staying in a hotel with room service.

She'd dropped her gaze with embarrassment as someone had delivered them breakfast and he'd been incredibly rude and dismissive. He'd even complained about how dirty the suite was when she'd thought it was spotless.

This is what he was like at home too. They'd gone through so many staff that currently there wasn't anyone to do all the cooking and cleaning except for her.

Perhaps that's why she was so exhausted. One run surely wasn't enough to have her feeling like she could crawl into bed and sleep for a year.

She hadn't been able to eat much. After breakfast, Jonathan had drawn her into a meeting with Prince Tavi. He was another man who was hard to read. Very polite and pleasant, but she got the feeling there was a darker side to him. They'd briefly met Prince Matek, but he hadn't said a word to them.

She was disappointed that she hadn't had a glimpse of Pippa. But she needed to get over that.

She wasn't a celebrity for her to ogle over.

As they stepped out of the meeting, Chloe jolted as she saw Owen and Beck waiting.

"Right, seems we're off to a couple of meetings in the city," Jonathan said to Beck. "Are you both accompanying us? Is that necessary?"

"Better to be safe than sorry," Beck replied easily. Not much seemed to ruffle him.

She wondered if he'd be that calm and collected during sex?

An image of her on her knees in front of him, sucking his cock, filled her mind.

Shit. What was wrong with her? She didn't like sex. Didn't want to give anyone a blow job.

So why would she think that about this guy who was so stiff and formal with her?

"Of course, of course," Jonathan said jovially. He acted like he didn't have a care in the world. But she knew he was annoyed that he'd been meeting with two of the younger princes and not Kassim.

He likely viewed it as a snub, but they'd let him into Escana when they rarely allowed outside visitors, so he surely had to see that as a win.

Problem was, maybe he'd taken that as a sign that this trade agreement was almost a given.

And he was having to work for it instead.

She sighed quietly, wishing she was feeling better.

Just make it through today. Things will get better.

Jonathan moved up ahead with Beck trailing him. Suddenly, she felt Owen move up beside her.

She shot him a startled look. "You move really quietly."

“I know.”

Right. She guessed he did.

They walked through the palace in silence for a moment and she racked her brain for something to say. She should make small talk. She was supposed to be keeping their attention on her and away from Jonathan.

Although Owen seemed pretty focussed on her anyway.

“Nice weather outside today.”

He turned his head to stare down at her. Then he moved his gaze back out around them.

Okay. That didn't work.

“That ATV ride was fun.”

“You want to talk?” he asked.

Um. Well. She didn't really know if she did. But she thought she should.

“I guess.” This felt like a trap.

“I don't do small talk. Pointless.”

Right.

“But we could talk about the fact that you're very disobedient.”

She sucked in a breath. Had he really just said that? Or was it her imagination? Was she finally losing her mind? She nibbled at her lower lip.

“Stop,” he commanded.

She froze.

“I like the way you obey me.”

Dear Lord. This man's voice was potent. It turned her insides to liquid honey.

Made her want things that were impossible. Like wrapping herself up in his arms, his safety.

He wasn't the biggest guy in their team. He was built far slimmer than Beck or Judd. But there was something about him ... something that screamed he would do whatever was necessary to protect someone who belonged to him.

"Didn't mean you should stop moving. Keep walking, little girl. Before someone notices and thinks something is wrong."

Something might well be wrong with her.

"When I told you to stop, I meant for you to stop chewing on your lip."

"Why do you care?"

"Wouldn't want you to harm yourself." His gaze was intent on her mouth and she stumbled over her feet, nearly falling. He had to reach out to grab her.

Jonathan and Beck were at the front door. There was a butler standing there, holding it open. Everyone was watching her stumble around like an idiot.

Her face burned as she carefully stepped to the side. But to her shock, he didn't let go. His gaze moved over her face.

What could he see? She swallowed heavily. "What is it?"

"You were told to rest." He let go of her and started walking to the door once more.

She was told to rest. What did he mean by that? Wait ... she hurried to catch up to him. "Is that what you meant when you said I was disobedient?"

Unfortunately, she said that louder than she'd intended to. And Beck was far closer than she'd realized. Jonathan was already outside. Shouldn't Beck be out there with him? Wasn't he guarding him?

But wasn't this what Jonathan wanted? For her to steal their attention away from him? She still wasn't sure why he wanted that ... and she didn't know that she should do it. It wasn't that she thought he was up to something bad ... but she also didn't fully trust him.

It could be just what he'd said. That he didn't want someone following him around, getting in his way.

Or it could be something else entirely.

She gulped as both of them stared down at her, Owen with a darkness that called to her soul in a way that wasn't healthy.

Beck with an intensity that was surprising given the rather formal, stiff way he had always treated her so far.

"Yes."

That was it? Yes?

She gaped up at him. "Um, you know you're not the boss of me, right?"

Owen just looked back at her, one eyebrow raised. What was with his eyebrows? It was like they were trying to have a conversation with her, only she didn't know the language.

"I don't understand eyebrow speak," she muttered.

"Eyebrow speak?" Beck asked.

Shit. That was embarrassing. She hadn't meant to say that out loud.

"The thing he does with his eyebrows. Like he's trying to say something just by moving one up. Instead of using actual words."

Owen just smiled.

It was a dark, wicked smile.

Girl, you are in loads of trouble.

"I can use my words. If that's what you want?"

Hadn't that been what she'd just said? Although now that she saw that grin ... she might be regretting that.

"But you might not like what I have to say."

Shit. What was she doing? There was no way she could win a battle of words. Or any other sort of battle. She wasn't even sure if he was being flirty or threatening. With this guy, it was difficult to tell.

“Owen,” Beck said warningly.

Owen shot him a gaze. And there went that eyebrow. It was a rascally sort of thing.

Whoa. Okay. Why was her Little poking out? What the heck? That was the second time in two days. She needed to get tighter control over herself.

“His Lordship is in the car. Go sit with him.”

Owen didn't seem daunted by Beck's order. He simply strode out of the door without looking at her.

Why did that make her feel sad?

Urgh, she was an idiot. What exactly was she hoping for? When he reached the car, though, he didn't get inside. Instead, he drew the door open and turned back to look at her.

Was he wanting her to go to him?

Then he did something that she never thought she'd find remotely attractive or sexy on a guy.

He crooked a finger at her.

Be still her silly little heart.

He was insane.

So why did her feet start to move of their own accord?

To her surprise, Beck reached out to lightly touch her arm. She sucked in a breath, surprised. He drew his hand back immediately.

“I apologize,” he said.

“It's okay. No need to apologize.”

He watched her carefully. “There might be times when we're guarding you that we might need to touch you.”

“Um, okay.” This seemed a weird time to talk about this. And hadn't they covered this in the two hour seminar yesterday?

Although maybe he knew she'd kind of zonked out.

“I just want to say that if you do feel uncomfortable with us, you can come to me. Or anyone here at the palace.”

She gave him a surprised look. Did he think she was worried about one of them being inappropriate?

His gaze flicked down to her then away. He seemed to have problems looking at her. She thought it was because he liked to be aware of his surroundings ... but she was also starting to wonder if it was her.

“I’m not uncomfortable.” Well, not for the reasons he was assuming anyway. She seemed to be unusually attracted to these guys.

Even Grumpzilla.

Beck’s gaze met hers briefly before flitting away again. It was odd. Did he not like to look at her? She knew she wasn’t the prettiest person in the world. But she wasn’t an ogre.

But was she making Beck uncomfortable? She took a half step away from him. Now, she felt terrible.

“If you want me to, I’ll talk to Owen about the way he spoke to you,” he blurted out while staring out at the horizon.

Oh.

Was that what he’d meant by her being uncomfortable? He’d heard some of what Owen had said and was worried about her?

That was ... really sweet.

Owen was his colleague. And she assumed they were friends. Why would he offer to speak to him for her?

He’s probably worried that you’ll complain about Owen’s behavior and get him into trouble.

Ahh, yeah. That was likely it.

“Owen isn’t making me uncomfortable,” she reassured him in a soft whisper. “I’m fine.”

She climbed into the car. The last thing she wanted was to create any issues.



BECK SAT in the back of the car with Lord Fothersam and his gorgeous PA. It wasn't his preferred spot. He'd much rather be up front in the passenger seat. But he'd thought it best to put Owen in that spot after he'd seen the way he'd fixated on Chloe. He'd been talking to her. Voluntarily.

Sure, Owen would talk to other people when necessary. But small talk wasn't his forte. And if he could avoid talking, he would.

However, that hadn't been small talk.

That had been ... well, he wasn't sure what it was.

But he was slightly worried that it was Owen's way of flirting. He'd never seen him like that before. And they'd all been in a relationship with the same woman. Surely, he'd have noticed Owen flirting with Ester.

Right?

Maybe he'd never flirted with her. He didn't really date.

Not that any of them did.

If they ever went out, Hux drew women toward him like flies, Judd scared them away with his scowl, Owen seemed to intrigue them against their better judgment.

And Beck? Well, he wasn't charming or mysterious or attractive.

He was just an average everyday guy.

Chloe was all made up again. Her make-up perfect, not a hair out of place, in beautiful clothes that looked expensive. She appeared unattainable. Completely out of his league.

But he remembered the way she'd looked this morning. Slightly messy, flustered. He'd even noticed a faint sprinkling of freckles over her nose that her make-up was covering now.

Somehow, that had all made her feel more human. Attainable.

But she wasn't and he had to remember that.

There was no way she'd be interested in a guy like him. Old insecurities threatened to rise, but he pushed them away.

He wasn't the kid that got picked on all the time anymore. He was a grown man.

Beck kept his gaze out the window as they made their way into the business part of the city. He'd seen His Lordship's face when he'd gotten into the backseat with them. Where did he expect him to sit, though?

Or did he want him to run alongside them like a dog?

Probably. Lord Fothersam didn't seem too pleased at the idea of having them guard him. But he didn't have any choice.

Her scent was teasing him, arousal filled him. What was the matter with him? She was a client.

Shit. She already had Owen acting weird. And Hux had been all bossy earlier. Should he have asked her if Hux had been inappropriate?

Or maybe you should mind your own business. You know they wouldn't do anything to hurt her.

No. But he didn't want her to feel intimidated or scared.

Ma would kill him if he didn't protect her. Although that wasn't the only reason. He'd always been protective over women, but after Ester ... well, he'd learned not to trust so easily.

She'd messed them all up in ways he didn't even want to think about.

Chloe was the first woman since Ester to stir him like this. To make him think that maybe it was time to try again ...

Damn, what kind of scent was she wearing? She smelled like sugar cookies. Sweet but not overpowering. And it made him want to strip her naked and explore every part of her body that scent clung to.

He needed to cool it.

She'd never look at him. She was breathtakingly gorgeous. And he was just him.

"Oh, wow, the ocean is so beautiful," she said with a hint of awe.

"It's just an ocean, my dear. Same as oceans everywhere. We've seen a lot of them," Lord Fothersam said dismissively as he stared down at his phone.

He wondered at their relationship. They were boss and employee. But it felt like something more. Or maybe it just seemed that way because His Lordship had insisted they be given a shared suite.

Judd had been certain that they had to be hooking up and that's why he'd asked for it. But Beck wasn't so sure. He was old enough to be her father, after all.

Not that an age gap mattered. But would she really be with someone like him?

Then again ... Ester had left them for someone fifteen years old than her, someone wealthy and powerful.

Chloe moved slightly and his gaze shot to her. Was she hot? Cold? Hungry? Uncomfortable?

Should he ask her what she wanted? Would she tell him? She seemed the type to downplay her own needs which is why he'd wanted to make sure that Owen wasn't scaring her half to death.

He seemed to have that effect on people.

Suddenly, Lord Fothersam raised his gaze, his lips twisting into a smile as he glanced out the window.

"But you're right. This ocean is very pretty. Too bad we don't have any spare time to spend going to the beach. I'm afraid our schedule is filled with appointments."

Was that disappointment that filled her face? Did she want to go to the beach?

How could he make that happen?

Okay. Chill. You're here to keep her safe.

You don't have to bend over backward giving her everything she wants.

But there was something in her that drew him to her, that made him want to make her smile. Something that he recognized in himself.

Loneliness.

That was crazy, though. Because he had no idea what her life was like.

And how was he lonely? He had his brothers. They were all he needed.

Or so he told himself.

“That’s okay,” she said. “It’s enough just to get to see it.” They turned around a bend in the road and the ocean was gone.

Irrationally, he wanted to knock on the privacy screen between them and the front seat and demand that the driver turn around. He wanted to see her smile as she stared out at the ocean.

To walk with her on the sand.

Chill.

They moved into the city, toward the business district. The car stopped at a red light and she practically plastered her face against the window as she peered out. “A fair? A fair is coming? I thought you didn’t really allow outsiders into the country.”

“We don’t. Or very rarely,” he allowed since they were obviously here. “It’s a fair put on by a group who live further inland. They travel here every second year.”

“Oh, what fun. I haven’t been to a fair in years.”

“Me neither,” he said. “There’s nothing quite like corn dogs at a fair.”

“You haven’t lived until you’ve had one,” she agreed.

They grinned at each other.

“A fair? That sounds rather juvenile,” Lord Fothersam stated.

Immediately, she pulled back in on herself. “Yes, of course it does. You’re right.”

Beck eyed her. Did what His Lordship said mean that much to her? Why did she care what he thought? He was her employer. He wasn’t in charge of everything she did. But he seemed to have tight control over her.

And Beck didn’t get why.

Why didn’t she tell him to fuck off?

They were headed to a large building that housed one of the biggest enterprises in Escana. Most of the country’s wealth came from the natural resources the country had. But there were some businesses here, all owned by Escanaians, producing items for domestic use.

He guessed His Lordship wanted them to produce on a bigger scale and start exporting and importing more items.

Beck frowned, leaning forward as they drove past a number of people standing on the side of the road, chanting with signs.

Shit.

The privacy screen went down between the front and back of the car. Owen turned to give him a look but didn’t say anything.

What were they doing here? Was it just a coincidence that they were a few blocks from their destination?

“Protestors?” Lord Fothersam asked.

What was going on with these people? They’d gone from a few to growing in numbers.

“What are they protesting?” Chloe asked as they drove past. The protestors didn’t do anything other than glare at the car angrily.

Beck sighed. “There are a group of people who are upset that the Princes aren’t marrying an Escanaian. They’re in the

minority, but they've gotten more vocal lately."

They were becoming more than just a bother. He didn't like it and he knew that Judd and Caleb thought the same. But Kassim didn't want to come down hard on them. He wanted people to have free will. To be able to speak without fear.

But these people needed watching.

"That's terrible. Poor Pippa," Chloe murmured as though she knew her.

Beck stared at her in surprise.

"Oh, um, I mean, the poor Princes' fiancée, she must feel, I don't know, rejected."

"Rejected?" Lord Fothersam scoffed. "She's marrying some of the richest, most powerful men in the world. I hardly think she feels rejected."

Chloe sunk into the seat at his words. "You're right. Of course."

Actually, Beck thought Chloe had it right. Pippa likely was taking this personally. He wondered if the Princes realized that.

He was sure they did.

"We're nearly there," Beck said.

"Good," Lord Fothersam said. "There's no need for you both to come inside. We'll be fine."

"It's our job to protect you," Beck countered. "We'll both be coming in."

His Lordship glared at him. Didn't like not getting his way, did he?

Something about him looked different. Beck studied Chloe. She was staring at ... his hand?

Beck glanced down and saw the way it twitched. What did that mean?

Then Chloe leaned in to say something to him quietly as the car came to a stop. His Lordship relaxed with a smile.

“Quite right, my dear. I just didn’t want to be inconsiderate and have you stand around all afternoon, likely being bored,” he said to Beck.

Yeah, right.

“Feel free to take a break if you need to, Brick. We won’t be going anywhere.” He climbed out as Owen opened his door.

“He’s not good with names,” Chloe said apologetically.

Beck reached over to grab her hand before she could slide along the seat.

He felt her startle, her gaze moving to His Lordship as though she was worried about his reaction.

From now on, he’d be watching Jonathan more closely. Chloe was his charge just as much as Lord Fothersam was. More so, because she was a female.

Here, women came first. Their safety. Their care.

“You don’t need to apologize for him.”

She gave him a small smile. “But that’s my job.”

He opened his mouth to ask her more questions, but His Lordship spoke up.

“Chloe, what is the hold-up?”

Now that he knew to listen for it, he could hear the underlying irritation in the other man’s voice. And he saw Chloe’s face tighten.

Yep, she wasn’t the ice queen he’d first thought.

“I need to go.” She glanced down pointedly at where he had hold of her arm.

He let go quickly. Even if that was the last thing he wanted to do.



CHLOE COULD BARELY KEEP her eyes open. This meeting was going on longer than she'd anticipated. Jonathan had met with several people in the company and last on the list was the CEO, Mr. Fical. Who liked to talk.

A lot.

"Chloe, why don't you take a break? You're looking a bit peaked."

She sat up straighter. Shit. She was? They'd seen her fatigue?

Jonathan was going to be mad. But when she looked over there was no twitching hand. He seemed almost genuine.

That was odd.

"I'm fine," she replied.

"I insist."

Then she realized that he wanted her out of here. For what reason, she had no idea. But she stood and bent down to grab her handbag. A wave of dizziness struck her as she stood.

Do not faint.

With a smile, she shook Mr. Fical's hand.

"I'll be waiting outside when you're finished," she told Jonathan.

"Go get a drink, dear. We'll be fine in here."

Right. Sure.

She stepped out of the room and immediately saw the CEO's assistant cozying up to Beck. She was reaching out to touch his arm.

Something blazed through her. Something that felt like jealousy.

Which was utterly ridiculous. These men weren't hers. Heck, they didn't even like her.

Sure, Beck had made sure she was all right. Which is more than anyone had done in years. Jonathan certainly never cared about her welfare. Even if he pretended otherwise.

But she had the feeling Beck was sincere.

As soon as she stepped out into the room, his gaze hit her. Damn, he was seriously hot. All of those muscles. His chiseled face. But it was the way he stared at her that really hit her.

Like he saw her.

No wonder the assistant was trying to get his attention. Yet, he seemed to only have eyes for Chloe.

Because that's his job.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, stepping toward her. He looked to the closed door then back to her.

“Nothing.” She smiled at him. Obviously, it wasn’t very convincing because his frown deepened slightly.

Did he ever smile?

Like you can talk.

He raised his eyebrows, clearly waiting for her to say something more.

Huh. Maybe she could talk eyebrow.

“I’m just taking a break for a moment. Bathroom,” she said awkwardly, stepping around him.

“I’ll call Owen in to escort you.”

“No need,” she said hastily. She didn’t need anyone following her to the bathroom. Let alone Owen. He was too intense. Dark. Slightly terrifying.

And yet there was this pull toward him.

We can talk about your punishment.

A shiver ran through her. How would Owen punish someone that belonged to him?

She knew that she wasn’t brave enough to try and find out.

Not that he could be truly interested in a woman like her. No doubt he was just messing with her.

Beck’s frown increased. “There is every need.”

She moved her gaze to the assistant, who was glaring at her. “How far is the women’s bathroom?”

“It’s just down the passage. You can’t miss it.” She gave Chloe a sickly smile.

“See? I’ll be fine.”

Beck looked torn. “I’ll stand in the corridor and watch you.”

Good Lord.

But she didn’t argue, just walked out of the assistant’s smaller office and down the hallway to the bathroom. She glanced back to find Beck watching her.

With a wave, she ducked into the bathroom. They were taking this bodyguard thing to the next level.

After using the toilet, she adjusted her clothing, then washed her hands. Another wave of dizziness rushed through her.

She really did need to rest. Maybe have something to eat. Her stomach rumbled just as the door to the bathroom opened. She turned with a bland smile that was wiped away as soon as she saw who was standing there.

Owen hit her with his dark gaze.

“Isn’t this the women’s bathroom?” she asked.

Had she somehow entered the men’s bathroom? How had she done that?

“Yes. So?” He strode inside, then turned and locked the door.

Drat. She should have done that.

“So ... you can’t be in here.”

“I can’t?” He raised an eyebrow. “Who is going to tell me no?”

Well ... she couldn’t argue that. She was thinking not many people told him no.

“You left the room without me.”

She gulped heavily. “I didn’t go far, and Beck watched me the whole time.”

“You didn’t lock the outside door. Anyone could have come in here.”

“Yes, they could have. To use the bathroom. No one is going to harm me!”

“You don’t know that. Next time, wait.”

“I had to pee!” He was insane.

“You couldn’t wait a few minutes?”

“No,” she lied.

“Hmm. Sounds like you waited too long to go then. You shouldn’t do that. You’ll get a urinary infection.”

Her mouth dropped open. “I ... uh ... what?”

“Next time, tell me straight away if you need the bathroom. I need to check it first before you go in and then wait outside.”

She ran her hand down her face. “There is no threat to me. No one is going to harm me. Now, could you leave me alone for a few minutes?”

“No.”

She glared at him. “Are you always this stubborn? And I thought Judd was the unreasonable one.”

“He is.”

Not from where she was standing.

“I want some privacy.”

“Haven’t you peed yet?”

“No. Please, leave.”

He tilted his face to one side. She noticed he was carrying a plastic bag. Is that where he’d gone? To get a drink or food? She felt bad that they’d spent so long just waiting around.

“It’s really not necessary for you both to guard us.”

He didn't reply. "Pee."

"What?"

Owen's eyes narrowed. "Pee."

"I'm not using the bathroom with you in here."

"Why not?"

"I have a shy bladder."

"Or you've been and are just trying to get rid of me."

She sighed, leaning against the counter. "Fine, I don't need to go. I just want some privacy for a moment."

"You have a headache. And you're light-headed."

How did he know? She thought she was pretty adept at hiding her pain. He opened the bag and drew out an electrolyte drink.

"You need rehydrating."

"I don't like those."

He just held it out to her. She took it with a huff. Stubborn man wasn't going to take no for an answer. It wasn't like he could force her to drink the stuff.

But if she'd been expecting him to move, she was sadly mistaken. He just leaned against the door.

"Uh, Owen, are you going to move?"

"Drink." He nodded at the bottle.

"I don't want to drink it." Oh, shoot. She'd just let her Little slip out. How did that keep happening? She'd very nearly pouted and stomped her foot.

He wouldn't know, though. There was no way he could guess. He probably just thought she was being a bit childish.

Something shifted in his face. And if anything, he seemed to become even more commanding, more dominant.

And she hadn't thought that was possible.

But there was an added look in his eyes as they pierced her, holding her in place.

“That’s tough, since you’re going to,” he told her, stepping toward her. “Your choices are to drink it yourself or have me feed it to you.”

Another shiver ran through her. He crowded her against the counter behind her. It was a mix of threat and promise. Her body melted.

What was wrong with her?

Just how broken was she that this turned her on?

He reached up a hand, moving extra slow so she saw him coming, and ran a finger over her cheek. “You’re pale. Tired. You were told to rest and yet you didn’t. So now, you have to pay the consequences.”

Grabbing her hips suddenly, he lifted her onto the counter. She wasn’t sure how she felt about sitting on the counter in a public bathroom. But it was all impeccably clean.

Then he took the bottle of drink from her and undid the top of it before holding the tip to her mouth. “Drink.”

She reached up to take hold of the bottle.

“No.”

“What?”

“You lost the option of doing it yourself.”

Dear Lord.

She pressed her thighs together. There was definitely something wrong with her. She should be kneeing this guy in the balls. Telling him to get lost and reporting him.

And instead, she was mesmerized by stormy gray eyes and a darkly intent face.

“Open your mouth.”

She could imagine him saying those words in a completely different situation.

His mouth moved to her ear. “You’re imagining me telling you that while you’re on your knees in front of me, aren’t you, baby? Are you thinking about my cock sliding through those plump lips? Do you think you can take it? Do you think you could take all of me?”

Her breathing grew faster, and she almost found herself asking him to do that. To let her suck on his dick. Bring him pleasure.

Thankfully, he stepped back, letting her take in a breath of air that wasn’t saturated with his scent. Her mind cleared.

“That was highly inappropriate.”

“Only if you don’t want it. And you do.”

Oh the arrogance of him.

It should have been a turn-off. But it wasn’t.

“You don’t know that.”

Why was she prodding the beast? Did she want him to prove it to her? To show them both how much she wanted him?

This was ridiculous. She didn’t have time for this. For anything that would steal her attention. That would make her drop her shield.

You can’t afford to do that, Chloe.

“Don’t I? Tell me, if I spread your legs and ran my finger up your thigh, then under your panties and through your lips, would I find you wet? Are your nipples hard? Are you imagining all the ways I could take you?”

“You ... I ... what ...” Dear Lord. She was in a lot of trouble here. Not only was she well out of her league with him ... but he was right.

She was imagining all the ways he might take her. And she wanted them all.

“Now, are you going to drink like a good girl or am I going to have to punish you?”

“You shouldn’t speak to me like this.” She tried to pull herself together. To reprimand him and mean it. But she couldn’t seem to find her cold mask. It was eluding her.

It was his fault. He wasn’t giving her a moment to just think.

“Who is going to stop me?”

It should have felt threatening. But her stupid body liked that he wasn’t put off by her cool tone. That he didn’t just see the person she put out there to the world.

He ran a finger down her cheek again. “I see you, baby girl. You can’t hide from me. You can’t run. Drink.”

This time when he held the bottle up, she let him slip it between her lips. Why did this feel sexy? It wasn’t. It was a disgusting electrolyte drink in a bathroom.

She took several sips before pulling away with a grimace.

“You can do better than that.”

She shook her head, her nose scrunching up. “Yuck.”

Drat. Shit. Crap.

She closed her eyes for a long moment. Why was she letting her guard down so much around him? Only, she wasn’t doing this. It was him. He was eroding her shield.

Before he could say anything or she could attempt to repel him, there was a knock on the door. She gasped and tried to lurch off the counter. He reached out a hand, placing it on her stomach to hold her still.

“Hello? Is someone in there?”

She stared up at Owen in shock. Crap. Someone was out there! What were they going to think when they found out they were in here together?

They’re going to think you were having sex in here.

When the truth was almost worse. Because this felt far more intimate than sex. Not that she’d had sex any time recently.

She swallowed heavily, pushing away the memories that threatened to drown her. This was why she didn't let down her shields. Because she couldn't trust herself. Because she couldn't have her demons bleeding out all over the place.

“Hello?” Another impatient knock.

“We're coming,” Owen told the person on the other side of the door.

She stared at him wide-eyed. The usual darkness in his voice wasn't there when he spoke.

It was like ... he was normal.

He lifted her down, holding her hips as she steadied herself. Then grabbing the drink, he put it back in the bag before reaching out for the door, unlocking it.

She caught a glimpse of an older woman on the other side, glaring at them.

“What were you both doing in there?” she asked. “Men are not supposed to be in this bathroom. That's a sackable offense.”

To her shock, Owen smiled at the other woman. “So sorry to keep you waiting. I'm the bodyguard. Unfortunately, she can't go anywhere without me.”

“Oh. Of course. I didn't realize.” For some reason, she was buying his act. Didn't she see that he was just pretending to be normal? To be friendly?

At least ... she thought this was the pretense. Which was the real Owen?

Shit. It seemed she wasn't the only one that wore a mask.

“Here you are.” Owen held the door for her. As soon as she disappeared, he turned to Chloe. “You need to sit down.”

She peered up at him as he led her back to where she assumed Beck was still waiting on Jonathan.

“Which is the real you?” she asked.

He raised an eyebrow at her.

“I don’t speak eyebrow. But I’m guessing this is the real Owen.”

There was no response, but she knew she was right. She licked her lips, feeling slightly woozy as they walked into the room. The assistant was at her desk, thank goodness. But she shot Chloe a nasty look.

Owen stiffened beside her. Had he seen that?

“Is there a problem?” he asked in that same light voice he’d used before.

That was really kind of creepy. Was that what people thought when they dealt with her?

But no ... because she never showed anyone the real Chloe.

Except for today ... when each of these men had probably had at least a glimpse of the real her.

Shit.

She needed to shore up her defenses.

“A problem? Of course not.” The woman fluttered her eyelashes at him.

Wow.

He really was a good actor. Did she not see the monster lurking under the surface?

A monster that Chloe wanted to run toward, not away from.

There was definitely something wrong with her.

“Good.” Owen turned to Beck who’d stood as they entered. Owen placed his hand on the small of her back and led her over to him.

“Everything okay?” Beck asked. “You were both gone for a while.”

“Chloe has a shy bladder,” Owen told him blandly as he directed her to sit.

She stared up at him in shock. She couldn't believe he'd just said that. Was he trying to embarrass her?

Beck groaned. "You went into the bathroom with her?"

"There could have been someone in there." They sat on either side of her. "You shouldn't have let her go in alone."

Beck stared at him in surprise. "Owen. Chill. There wasn't a reason to think she was in any danger going to the bathroom. I had eyes on her."

"You weren't close enough."

"I still had to babysit Lord Fothersam."

"She's more important."

Both of them gaped at Owen. But he refused to look at them. Instead, his gaze moved around the room.

Guarding her.

He wasn't doing this to be intimidating. He was literally looking out for her.

She's more important.

Those words ping-ponged in her head, gaining more and more momentum.

It wasn't true.

"I'm nobody."

She pulled in on herself. Why did she say that?

"Say that again, and we'll do more than talk about punishment," Owen told her darkly.

"Owen!" Beck reprimanded. "You cannot speak to her like that."

Owen gave him a dark look which made her nervous.

"Please don't fight." Her voice was a wisp of a sound, but they both heard her, turning their gazes to her.

Shoot. She should have stayed quiet. She liked being in the background. But she couldn't stand them fighting. Especially if it was because of her.

They were a team. She was just ... white noise.

“Owen, stand by the door for a while,” Beck ordered.

She tensed, expecting Owen to argue. But to her surprise, he just reached into the bag and drew out her drink plus a bottle of water.

“Drink.” He pressed them both into her hands and moved to the doorway. The personal assistant tried to say something to him, but he barely spoke back.

The woman shot her another look. Sheesh, what did she want from her? If they weren't interested in her, it wasn't Chloe's fault.

“Chloe?” Beck said quietly.

“Yes?”

“Can you look at me, please?”

She took a deep breath. She knew she needed to push her emotions deep inside her. Her Little side was just below the surface. For some reason, being around these guys brought that part of herself out. She wanted to hide behind Beck's big body and let him protect her from the outside world. She wanted Owen to command the world to kneel at her feet, while he stood guard over her.

But she slid everything into the box inside her, locking it up tight. Then she glanced up at Beck.

“Yes?”

Something filled his face. Concern? Pity? Understanding?

“I'm going to tell Judd to pull Owen off your guard detail, all right?”

She blinked, unable to stop her confusion from shining through. “Why?”

It was his turn to look dumbfounded. “Uh, because he's being inappropriate. Right?”

“Oh.” She should agree with him. Tell him that yes, Owen was being horribly inappropriate. But that would mean he'd be

pulled away from her.

It would be a good thing, Chloe.

He must have taken her silence for agreement because he nodded. “Consider it done. If you have any complaints that you wish to make—”

“I don’t,” she said hastily. The last thing she wanted was to get Owen in trouble.

Because he wasn’t the only one being inappropriate. She became aware of the drinks in her hand. He’d gotten them for her. She was certain of that.

She took several sips of water. She really was dehydrated. When she lowered her bottle, she became aware of his stare. Glancing up at him, she received a nod of approval.

The flush of happiness that filled her was bizarre and unwelcome.

Yeah, you keep telling yourself that.

Shit. Was he going to be angry with her? Was he going to think that she’d told Beck he was being inappropriate?

She opened her mouth to take the words back. But before she could say anything, the door to the back office opened and Jonathan stepped out. He was all smiles.

Something had gone right. The knot in her stomach eased.

“Chloe?”

“Yes.” She jumped to her feet. Too late, she realized she should have moved slower as the world spun. Beck stood and grabbed hold of her arm. She was too busy trying not to vomit to pull away from him.

“You okay?”

“Is everything all right?” Jonathan asked. There was a sharp note to his voice. Shoot.

When she was confident that she wasn’t about to pass out or vomit, she glanced up to find his gaze on the spot where

Beck had a hold on her. Jonathan's hand started twitching. She noticed his gaze turn disapproving as he looked at her.

Shoot. She hadn't had a chance to tidy herself up in the bathroom. Was her hair out of place? How was her make-up?

Panic started to well.

"Are you all right, my dear?" he asked, sounding all concerned.

Everyone's gazes turned to her.

"I'm fine. Can I help with anything?"

"I just wanted to fit another meeting in the day after tomorrow with Adeel. We have a lot in common and there are some more business ideas we'd like to discuss."

"Oh, of course." She drew her handbag around and pulled out her tablet. She moved to liaise with Mr. Fical's assistant, who looked like she'd rather walk across hot coals than talk to Chloe. She was certain she could feel someone's gaze on her ass as she bent over the desk at one point. She didn't know whose gaze it was.

And she was too scared to turn and look.

After booking in another meeting, she turned to leave. And found all three men staring at her.

Awkward.

This whole day had been a disaster from beginning to end. And she couldn't wait for it to be over.

“**Y**ou’re off Ms. Reed duty.”
“Excuse me?”

Judd gave Owen a firm look, not letting the chill in his voice put him off. The two of them had been through a lot. They’d known each other since they were kids. They knew each other’s secrets, hot spots, and weaknesses.

Judd knew how bad his life had been. Owen wore a mask of normalcy around other people, but underneath he was cold and brutal.

Judd also knew that he was capable of caring about people. That once he gave his loyalty it was unwavering. But he needed them to stay grounded. Without Judd or Hux or Beck, Owen wouldn’t be here. He wouldn’t have survived in the hell they’d grown up in. Few did. Those that stayed rarely lived past thirty. Fifty was considered old. Unless you got out, you would die.

The three of them kept Owen from falling into the darkness inside him. Judd wanted to ensure that never happened. However, lately the other man had been worrying him. He’d been more distant than usual. Spending a lot of time alone. Which was never a good thing for him.

“Beck told me about today.”

Judd nearly winced as Owen’s eyes grew icy. “And what did Beck say?”

Fuck. He shouldn't have said Beck's name. Shouldn't have given Owen a target.

"I don't know what's going on between you and Ms. Reed, but you need to keep things strictly professional."

Owen gave him a knowing look. "Have you had this conversation with yourself? With Hux?"

"To be honest, if I thought I'd have to have it with anyone it would be Hux. Beck said you threatened to punish her."

"She didn't do as she was told."

Judd ran his hand over his face. "We're protecting her. Nothing more." Yeah, he needed to tell himself that too.

Owen just stared at him.

"So you're off her duty and primarily watching him."

"I don't like him."

"You rarely like anyone," Judd pointed out.

"I dislike him more than anyone else."

"It doesn't matter how you feel about him ... how any of us feel. This is the job. I'm not sure what you're doing with her ..." He trailed off, hoping Owen would explain.

It wasn't like him to play games with people. But that had to be what was going on. Owen never showed interest in other people. Neither women nor men. Judd was pretty certain Owen had just gone along with their relationship with Ester because it was what they'd wanted. Not him.

A feeling of shame flooded Judd. He should have checked in with Owen. Made sure he wanted Ester. Instead, he'd been swept away in his desire for her. His want.

You're a shitty leader and a worse brother.

You'll always be the poor boy from the slums that no one wanted.

"Just stay away from her."

Owen stood without saying anything. Judd watched him as he walked from the room. That was almost too easy.

“I will when you will,” Owen told him before he left the room.

Shit.

And here they all thought Judd would be the reason they got fired.

This girl ... she was going to be their downfall. He could just feel it.



HANDS REACHED FOR HER.

Hot breath coated her skin.

Hungry eyes.

Leering faces.

Chloe sat up, gasping for breath. Just a dream. It wasn't happening. No one was hurting her. She was safe.

Confusion hit her as she looked around.

Where was she?

She didn't know this place. Oh God.

Breathe. In. Out.

Air wasn't getting into her lungs. She searched around for anything that would ground her.

Amy. She needed Amy. Her hand reached out and she found her soft toy hiding under the pillow next to her head. She drew the toy close, hugging it and rubbing it against her face. Her heart rate started to slow. Fear ebbed out of her and she was able to think.

She glanced around, her eyes now adjusted to the dark.

Familiar objects filled her vision.

The palace. She was in her suite in the palace in Escana.

Why did she have to have that nightmare tonight? It had been months since her last nightmare.

Maybe because the ice is melting ... your barrier is cracking.

It's them.

When they got back to the palace yesterday, Jonathan had told her that he had some work he'd be doing in the office he'd been given in the palace and that he didn't need her help. It had been a reprieve she hadn't been expecting.

So she'd taken herself off for a nap to try and ease her headache. And ended up sleeping until now. Getting up, she stretched and checked the time.

Four a.m.

Moving to the bathroom, she washed her face and took a look at herself in the mirror.

She looked tired. But it was more than pushing herself too hard or a change in timezone.

This was a bone-deep fatigue. She was tired of this life. Of living this way.

She breathed in deep. The anxiety was buzzing away under her skin. No way was she going back to sleep.

Their eyes never stopped watching her.

Bile rose.

No. No.

She shook her head. She wouldn't let the memories overtake her. What she needed was to run. Moving back into the bedroom, she grabbed some workout clothes.

Today, they were touring another two factories. She needed to get her head back in the game.

Walking into the living room, she paused as she saw a tray on the dining table. It had covered plates sitting on it. Pulling off the plates, her eyebrows rose as she saw a steak with mashed potatoes and baby carrots.

It had probably been delicious. Ten hours ago.

She pulled up another lid, surprise hitting her as she saw some pasta in the shape of jungle animals with a tomato sauce and cheese sprinkled on top.

Had Jonathan ordered this?

She was so confused.

Putting the lid back, she crept over to peer through the window. The sky was starting lighten, and she couldn't see anyone.

Did she risk it? Or go through the other door? Deciding it was best to go the other way, she moved over and opened the door. Then she walked swiftly along the passage to an outside door.

A deep breath escaped her. Free.

“You're up early this morning.”

A screech left her lips as someone moved from the shadows.

“Quiet or you'll wake someone.”

Irritation filled her. This guy. He was ... impossible!

“If you hadn't snuck up on me I wouldn't have screamed!” She started walking away from the palace so that they didn't accidentally wake anyone up.

That would be embarrassing.

Judd stopped her with his hand on her arm. She jumped slightly. But it wasn't fear she felt as he touched her.

Nope. Instead her silly body heated up, wanting to lean closer.

Stupid Chloe.

He's a jerk. There's no way you should find him attractive.

“You should be more aware of your surroundings,” he reprimanded. “It's dark. I could have been anyone. What if I'd been looking to hurt you?”

“How do I know you're not!”

He took a half step back. “You think I’d hurt you?”

No.

But that didn’t mean she should tell him that. Or trust him. That would be an idiotic move.

“You just snuck up on me in the dark,” she said. But there was no real heat in her voice.

“I’m here to protect you. If you’d contacted me and told me you were leaving the suite then I could have arranged to meet you. Instead, you’re sneaking around like a naughty child who can’t follow the rules laid out for her protection.”

Ouch.

She had to admit that he had a point. She had been sneaking around, knowing that they didn’t want her running on her own.

Chloe took a deep breath in. She hated being reprimanded. Especially when she was in the wrong.

“I apologize.”

“And what’s more, you ... what?”

“I said I apologize. I still think that I shouldn’t have to contact one of you when I’m leaving to go for a run. But I know that you feel I should and you’re just trying to do your job. I’m not trying to make it more difficult.”

There was silence from him. Her eyes had adjusted so she could now take in his handsome features. He often looked so cold and harsh. But in the soft light, he seemed almost approachable.

Judd opened his mouth and she braced herself for whatever dickish thing he was going to say yet.

He might look gorgeous and softer right now. But she knew that he wasn’t.

“You apologize?” he asked, sounding confused.

“Um, yep.” She clenched her hands into fists behind her back where he couldn’t see her.

“Apology accepted.”

Right. That hadn't been what she'd expected. What was going on in his mind?

“And you will promise next time that you will contact me before leaving your suite.”

She narrowed her gaze. And there he was.

“If I want to go running, I will contact you. Or one of the others.”

“You will contact me. Beck doesn't run and Hux is still recovering. His cardio needs work.”

“What about Owen?” she asked.

“Owen is no longer on your guard duty.”

Shit.

She felt a rush of disappointment. It was the right thing to do. She was far too attracted to the dangerously sexy man.

But she couldn't help but feel sad.

This is your fault. You didn't correct Beck.

“Owen didn't do anything wrong.”

“That's not what I heard.”

Her eyes shifted from him and she moved her weight from one foot to the other. “It was my fault.”

“What was?”

“I ... it doesn't matter. I'm going for a run.” She went to move past him, but he grabbed her arm again.

Shoot. What now?

She didn't want to talk about Owen and what had happened ... didn't want to think about how she'd reacted to his touch.

It was similar to how she reacted to Judd.

And he was a total jerk.

It made no freaking sense.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You don’t want to talk about stretching? Why not? Stretching before you run is very important,” he lectured.

Stretching? That wasn’t what she was expecting him to say.

“Stretching?”

“Yes, have you stretched yet?” He let go of her and pushed one foot back.

Damn, he was hot.

He was wearing shorts and a tank top that revealed his muscular arms and calves.

What is wrong with you?

She’d spent time lusting after each of these men ... but she didn’t expect to feel this attraction to Judd.

“I, uh, no,” she admitted.

“That’s not safe,” he chided. “You could injure yourself. You will always stretch before exercising.”

Good. Lord.

“How has no one run over you with their car by now?” she muttered.

“Have you always had such violent tendencies? You should get those looked at.”

“Was that ... a joke?” She peered up at him as she started stretching. She didn’t actually want to get an injury.

“Was what a joke?”

Okay, so she must have imagined that amusement in his voice.

“You’re incredibly bossy.”

“I know. It’s one of my best qualities.” He bent over to stretch and her mouth went dry at the sight of his ass in those shorts.

Holy. Heck.

This was all sorts of wrong. There was no way she should be lusting after Judd the jerk.

And yet her stupid body was stirring in a way that had her pulse racing.

Stop it.

She tore her gaze away from him as he moved.

“It’s not,” she said.

“It’s not? Then what are my best qualities?” He stood.

“Um, well, I ...” Shoot. That had her stumped. “I don’t know you well enough to know.”

She didn’t want to know him better, did she?

“I’m finished stretching.” She wasn’t really. But she didn’t want to stand around any longer while he bent his body in all different directions and drove her insane.

She took off at a jog in the same direction she’d gone last time. She felt this burning need to see the ocean. There was something soothing about seeing the endless water. And she could use some soothing right now.

Hux was right. She did run as though she was being chased.

But by who? Or what?

And why the hell did he care? He'd decided after Ester that he was done with women. He'd thought she was the one for him.

Just like you thought that about Mary.

Fuck.

Yeah, he had crap luck with women. Ester had tolerated him because she had set her sights on Hux. Turns out she thought she could lure him away from the rest of them. Because he had money and came from an acceptable family.

She hadn't cared that Hux's father was an abusive bastard. Or that she'd ripped up Judd's heart in a way he didn't think would ever heal.

Why would you ever think you were good enough for me?

Sometimes it was Mary's voice he heard in his head. Other times, Ester's. Didn't matter. Basically, they'd both used him until someone more acceptable than a guy who'd clawed his way out from the slums came along.

His dick was good enough. The rest of him was substandard.

And he was certain Chloe was no different. Look at the way she dressed and acted.

Her wardrobe probably cost more than he made in a year.

And she was so cool and collected. As though nothing anyone did mattered to her.

Only ... she wasn't always cool and calm. In fact, there had been plenty of instances of heat. And the way she was running right now ... it was like she was screaming for help without saying a word.

And every instinct in his body was yelling at him to help her.

She doesn't need you.

She is fine.

But what if she wasn't?

He sped up to get beside her. The sun was starting to rise and they were getting close to the place where she'd collapsed with Hux. He had a backpack on with water and some protein bars.

Time to get her to stop.

"Ms. Reed, slow down."

If anything, she sped up.

He bit down his irritation. Why didn't she understand that he was in charge? Her health and safety was his responsibility.

And yeah ... he might be taking that too far. But as far as he could see this girl didn't take care of herself.

So while she was here under his care, he'd do it for her.

"Ms. Reed."

She ignored him, going faster. That wasn't going to deter him. He was used to running every day. He frowned. How to get her to obey? He didn't want to grab her and risk hurting her.

If she was his ... she'd be in big trouble for ignoring him. For pushing herself too far.

His hand longed to land against that pert ass in those tight workout pants.

Fuck. He needed to stop staring at her ass.

She was a guest of the Princes.

She wasn't his to discipline and fuss over. He needed to clear his head. They reached the cliff above the ocean and she finally slowed down. She stepped forward, moving toward the ocean.

"It's so beautiful," she whispered.

It was. But she was more beautiful.

"It's been so long since I sat on the beach. It just makes you feel like all your worries are insignificant, you know?"

He didn't really. He wasn't a person who sat around on the beach and listened to the waves or made sandcastles. Everything he did had a purpose. Was for a reason.

He didn't relax.

But maybe if she joined him ...

Fuck.

He was being ridiculous. She was a job, nothing more. And thinking this way would only land him in more heartbreak.

And he'd made a promise to himself that he would never be vulnerable again.

When he opened his eyes, she'd taken another step forward. Alarm filled him and he grabbed her arm.

She jolted away.

Removing herself from his touch.

Because she didn't want him touching her. Why would she?

He was just the bodyguard.

"Don't go near the edge," he said more harshly than he'd intended.

Her eyes were wide as she gaped at him.

"I wasn't going to."

“Yeah? Because Hux said you tried to fall over yesterday.”

“I wasn’t trying to fall over. I just wanted to see more of the ocean. You act like I’m too stupid to make my own decisions.” She was tense, her eyes sharp as she studied him.

He didn’t reply. He couldn’t afford to have feelings toward her. She was a client. A guest of the princes. And she’d be leaving soon.

Besides, she wasn’t interested in him. She couldn’t even stand his touch.

She turned away. But there was something about the way that she held herself that told him that perhaps he’d hurt her.

Regret filled him.

But he didn’t know how to fix what he’d done. He hadn’t really intended to hurt her. Except, maybe he had. He was messed up. But that was no reason to hurt her. So she didn’t like his touch? That was her right. So she wasn’t attracted to him?

Again, that wasn’t her fault.

This was all on him.

“Chloe,” he whispered.

But she just took off. Fuck. He hadn’t even gotten her to drink some water. She was pushing herself too much. He raced after her, but she was fast.

She wasn’t headed toward the edge of the palace ground. The terrain was rougher out here.

“Chloe, slow down before you hurt yourself!”

Suddenly, she let out a cry and stumbled onto the ground.

Shit. Fuck.

He pushed himself as fast as he could, coming to kneel next to her. She was on her hands and knees, whimpering.

The noise chipped away at the ice around his heart.

Fuck. This was his fault.

“Oh, little one. Are you all right?”

Of course she's not, idiot.

“Show me where you're hurt.”

“No, no, no. I can't believe I did that,” she whispered.

He frowned in confusion. It wasn't like she fell on purpose. Hell, if this was anyone's fault, it was his.

“Chloe, let me see your injuries.”

He helped her sit around on her bottom, taking in her disheveled appearance. She looked less like the ice queen and more like a girl in need of a hug and some kindness.

Maybe some magical kisses.

He pushed down that thought. He wasn't her Daddy or her Dom.

He was just the help.

“Let me see.”

She flinched. And he realized his tone had been harsher than intended. As he reached for her hands, she curled her fingers in.

“I'm fine.”

“Chloe.”

“I think I'll just walk back now.” She tried to push herself up, unable to hold back her wince as she pressed her hands to the ground.

“Hey, stop. You're going to hurt yourself.” He gently held her down, then quickly grabbed her wrists, bringing her hands around so he could inspect them.

She curled them into fists again.

Shit. He didn't like that. Didn't like any of this. She shouldn't be hurting.

“Show me, little one.”

“I'm not your little one.”

He closed his eyes, fighting back his first instinct which was to pull back. To say something he'd regret.

Since Ester, he'd turned into this cold, unfeeling bastard. Or at least, he'd tried to. He deliberately pushed everyone away, even his brothers to some extent, to keep himself safe. To stop himself from being vulnerable.

But it wasn't right to hurt her.

"I know you're not," he said softly. "And I know I've done nothing to make you trust me or want my help, but perhaps you'd be a better person and let me help you right now?"

She stared at him for a long moment. Her guard had slipped and he could see the pain and confusion in her eyes.

Maybe they both hid behind a mask. His was one of anger and defensiveness. Hers was coldness and control.

Hmm. That gave him something to think about.

But now wasn't the time.

"Why? You don't like me."

Shit.

"I apologize if I gave you that impression."

"You ... you apologize?" She gaped at him.

"Yes."

She studied him for a long moment. He itched to command her obedience. But he had no right.

Still ... he wasn't a man who was used to letting someone else take the reins. And she was hurting.

She called on all of those Daddy instincts he thought he'd buried deep. Maybe she could use a bit of care and attention.

It was the least he owed her

Right ... and that's the only reason you want to go all Daddy on her ass.

The urge to take care of a Little ... to see to all of their needs ... to have them look at him like he hung the moon and

stars.

Fuck. Yeah, he missed that.

“I was a jerk. I have ... baggage. And it was unprofessional of me to let my baggage affect how I treated you,” he told her stiffly.

“Unprofessional.” She curled up into herself.

Shit.

He was still doing it.

“Unprofessional and unfair,” he added. “The truth is ... I feel drawn to take care of you. And those feelings are difficult for me to fight. Or to acknowledge. I’m not good at talking about things that might make me vulnerable.”

Understanding filled her face.

He was relieved. But also upset. He didn’t like that she understood where he was coming from because it likely meant that she had felt that way at some stage.

Maybe still did.

“Apology accepted.”

His eyebrows rose. “That easy?” Apologies were never accepted that easily.

“Did you want me to make you work for it?”

“Well yeah.” Ester would have. She’d have had him practically on his knees, begging.

She shook her head. “I don’t need that. A sincere apology ... it’s more than I’m used to getting.”

“You deserve much more.”

“You don’t know me.”

“No, you’re right. I don’t.” He wanted to, though. But he forced himself not to say the words.

He felt ... awkward. What did he say or do? How did he take care of her without letting himself feel more than he should?

Just tend to her now. Then you can take a step back.

“Let me see your hands? Please?”

“Please?”

“Yes. Please.”

“You’re not suffering from sunstroke, are you?” she asked.

“No. But that reminds me.” He drew off his backpack and pulled out a bottle of water. “You need to drink. And I have a protein bar, too.”

“You came prepared.”

“I didn’t want you collapsing again. Instead, you fell over. Because of me.”

Chloe was surprised by the censure in his voice.

What happened was entirely her fault. She'd let herself get upset and had taken off without watching where she was going. The terrain had gotten rougher and she'd slipped.

Now her hands were stinging and so were her knees. But worse was the throbbing in her ankle.

Not that she intended to tell him that. It wasn't too bad. Maybe a slight strain. Still, he seemed the sort of person to overreact.

"Let me look at your hands and wash them off, then you can drink the rest of this," he said firmly.

She could tell he wasn't going to accept any arguments, so she uncurled her fingers, staring down at her hands.

Please don't let them be too bad.

Jonathan wasn't going to be happy if she came back bruised and broken.

She had to be perfect.

A whoosh of breath left her as she took in the scrapes.

"Okay, not too bad."

Not too bad? They looked raw and ugly.

She was marred.

"Hey, what's wrong? Shit, sorry, I didn't mean to imply that they don't hurt or anything. I know they must. Let's wash

them.” He opened the bottle and poured water over them both, washing away some of the dirt.

Then he held the water up to her lips. She reached for the bottle but he shook his head at her, drawing the bottle back. “No. I don’t want you using your hands until I’ve bandaged them up.”

That surprised her.

She’d never had anyone make a fuss over her like this. Well, unless you counted what happened after she collapsed yesterday. A sane person would have taken the day off today.

Then again, a sane person didn’t try to outrun demons that lived inside them like she did.

She drank some water. Judd didn’t seem to have a filter. He said what he thought even if the truth hurt.

And it often did.

He thought he was right all the time and was extremely bossy.

It was obvious he liked control. So did Owen, but in a different way. He was quieter. More observant. No less commanding, but not as abrasive. Or as defensive.

She got the feeling that Owen rarely cared what others thought. And that maybe Judd did too much.

Yet, they’d both tried to take care of her in their own way.

And then there was Hux ...

Lord. What was wrong with her? She couldn’t be interested in these guys.

He drew the bottle back, then rustled around in his backpack and brought out a First-Aid kit.

“You believe in being prepared, huh?” she murmured.

Her ankle continued to throb but she pushed that pain aside. She wasn’t going to think about it.

“Of course. If you’re prepared then there will be few surprises.”

“You don’t like surprises?” she asked as he put some peroxide on her cuts. She made certain not to move even though it kind of stung.

“No.”

To her shock, he blew softly on her palms. As though he was trying to ease the sting. She had to turn her head away to stop the tears from slipping down her cheeks.

Idiot.

A small bit of kindness and you fall apart.

“Sorry, little one. I know it hurts. I’m trying to be as gentle as I can.”

“Gentle isn’t really a word I’d use to describe you,” she tried to joke as he cleaned the other hand then blew on it.

“I don’t think I dare ask what words you would use,” he said back.

She surprised herself by grinning. She didn’t think he had it in him to joke around.

“Okay, let’s get these bandaged,” he said abruptly. And the moment was gone. Brisk, bossy Judd was back in charge.

Disappointment filled her. But she wasn’t sure why she cared so much. It wasn’t like she was interested in him. Or his friends.

Liar.

“It’s really not necessary,” she said, trying to draw her hands away. “They’re fine now.”

He scowled. “They’re not fine. Leave them there so I can bandage them up.”

“No.”

He let out a low rumbling noise. “Do as you’re told.”

“Or what?”

Yep, she was definitely losing her mind.

“Or I’ll take you over my knee and spank your ass until you can’t sit comfortably.”

Whoa.

Okay. She was not expecting that.

This is your fault. You prodded the beast.

“Fuck. I shouldn’t have said that.” Suddenly, he jumped up and walked away.

Shoot.

You idiot, Chloe.

What was wrong with her?

Maybe she was pushing him away because those glimpses of a caring Judd were far more dangerous to her mental health than Grumpzilla was.

She owed him an apology. She climbed onto her feet and put the bottle of water back into his backpack. Then she moved slowly toward him, partly because her ankle was protesting, and partly because she didn’t know what to say.

“I’m sorry, Judd.” It was simple, but she hoped he knew she was sincere.

He turned so fast that she stumbled backward and would have fallen on her butt if he hadn’t grabbed her, tugging her toward him.

Her breath caught as she stared up at him. Her breasts were pressed against his chest and her heart raced. She licked her lips and he watched her hungrily.

Was he going to kiss her?

Did she want that?

Then he moved back. And when she dared look at him, his face was devoid of all emotion.

“Why would you apologize?” he asked.

What? Why?

She couldn't ... her mind could figure out his question. Why was she apologizing?

"I'm the one who was unprofessional," he said stiffly. "If you wish to report me to the Princes, you are within your rights."

Oh. Okay.

The spanking thing.

Weirdly, she wasn't worried about that. She didn't know why. It *was* unprofessional. But in that moment, she hadn't seen herself as his job.

However, looking after her was just a job. And she would do well to remember that.

"Let's just forget it was ever said, shall we?" she murmured.

He nodded. "That is good of you."

It wasn't, though. She'd pushed until he'd snapped. It was her fault.

"I think I want to head back."

Walking wasn't going to be much fun.

"Your knees still need tending."

"They don't hurt," she lied. "I'm sure they're good."

"I'll send for the ATV."

"I'll be okay walking." She wouldn't be. She didn't know how she would make it. And she was worried that if she pushed too much that she would injure herself further.

Judd just eyed her for a long moment. "I have other things to do. I need to get back."

"Oh, r-right. Of course. Then p-please, go ahead." She closed her eyes as he turned away. He was turning her into a stammering idiot.

It was better that they got back quickly so she had a chance of showering and hiding her injuries before Jonathan woke up.

It wasn't long until the ATV rocked up to where they were and Hux was grinning at them. He waved enthusiastically, jumping off.

"We've got to stop meeting like this."

She winced. "I'm not usually so accident prone. Sorry to pull you away from what you were doing."

"Nothing is as important to me as looking after you."

Don't take him seriously. He's joking.

Still she could feel a slight blush filing her cheeks.

Idiot.

"Although I was in the middle of my daily routine of five hundred sit-ups. I'll have to do the rest when I get back. We don't want to risk the abs."

He raised his top, showing off his muscular abs.

"No," she said faintly. "Must save the abs."

Was she drooling?

"Hux," Judd barked. "Drop the T-shirt. It's inappropriate."

"Sir, yes, Sir." Hux let go of the T-shirt and raised his hand up in a salute.

She gaped at the serious expression on his face until he winked at her. "Like that? I was a Ranger for years."

"You were?" It was hard to imagine him following orders.

"Yeah, I enrolled because I thought the chicks would dig the uniform."

"Hux," Judd said again. Although this time his voice wasn't as much of a bark. "Let's go. I'll drive."

"Nuh-uh, oh fine and glorious leader. I'm driving."

Judd clenched his jaw. Mr. Control didn't like hearing that.

"Fine," Judd grumbled, sitting in the back.

"You can have the front," she offered.

“Oh, Chloe, when are you going to learn?” Hux said. “A queen doesn’t ride in the back.”

“I’m not a queen.” Far from it.

“Every woman is a queen.” Hux bowed and held out an arm. “Your chariot awaits.”

Judd groaned and she felt bad about keeping him from whatever work he had to do. So she scrambled to get into the ATV. They rode back in silence. Unlike last time, she didn’t get that rush of happiness, of freedom.

Maybe because her body felt beat up and exhausted.

As they pulled up by her suite, she reached for her seatbelt. She fumbled with it and Hux covered her hand with his, stilling her.

“I’m going to shower. Hux, you’re on duty,” Judd barked, jumping off the back and storming away.

She sighed without meaning to.

“Don’t take offense, darlin’. His bark is worse than his bite.”

She wasn’t so sure. But she let Hux brush her hand away and undo her seatbelt. However, he placed a hand on her thigh to still her before she could climb out of the ATV.

“Now, as much as I like being the white knight, riding to the rescue, I don’t like that you keep getting hurt.”

She gave him a surprised look. He’d gone from joking around to softly chiding her.

Inside, she squirmed.

She hated doing the wrong thing. Being reprimanded.

But he was right. She was messing up constantly.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’ll try to be more careful.”

“Not a matter of whether you’re careful or not, little darlin’,” Hux told her. “I’m just worried about you.” His gaze had turned serious.

Happy, easygoing Hux was easy to be around. To like.

But serious and caring Hux. Well, he could suck her into his vortex and she was certain she'd never find her way free.

"I'm fine," she said confidently. "Just having a few off moments."

"A few off moments, huh. Did you drink anything this morning? Have you eaten? What about last night?"

She bit her lip. Damn, it was nice that he cared. Had he left her that food in the suite? She almost didn't want to ask. And she knew that she couldn't give in to the urge to let him look after her.

"Hux, it's nice that you care. But I'm not your responsibility."

Not his responsibility, huh?

Why did he feel like she was?

Hux watched as she moved toward the suite.

There was something off about her. He eyed her. When Judd contacted him, he'd said that she couldn't run anymore. That she'd tripped and fallen.

But he hadn't said anything about her being injured. The knees of her pants were dirty. Had Judd checked her over?

Why was she holding herself so stiffly?

Did she just limp? Or did he imagine it?

He sighed. There was something going on with this girl. Something more than they could see. Sure, she usually looked like things didn't affect her.

But you just had to look closer.

Like when Judd just stormed off.

He knew how to throw a tantrum. Maybe someone should spank his ass. Hux snorted at the thought. After returning the ATV, he went back to the house he shared with his teammates. Judd was just coming out of his room.

He'd obviously showered and dressed.

"What are you doing here?" he snapped at Hux. "You're meant to be guarding His Lordship and Ms. Reed."

Hux raised his eyebrows. “I’m going to have breakfast. Which is what I was doing when you interrupted me before.”

“Someone has to watch them.”

Hux sighed. “It’s still two hours until they leave for the tours. I’m not standing outside waiting for her to shower and eat. Not all of us are that paranoid that we feel the need to stand guard all night.”

“I didn’t stand guard all night. And it’s not paranoia. Just mark my words. They’re up to something.”

“For God’s sake! What do you think she’s going to do? Build a bomb from her make-up supplies? And what the heck happened out there for you to just storm off like that on her? You hurt her feelings!”

“And I’m supposed to care about that? Protecting her feelings isn’t my job!”

“And God forbid you do anything that isn’t your job, right? Do you remember how to have fun anymore? How to do anything that isn’t work and obligation? Are you ever going to get over Ester, Judd? Or are you going to let her ruin the rest of our lives?”

They were both heaving for breath by now.

“Our lives? What the fuck do you mean by that? It seems her betrayal didn’t affect you at all!” Judd snapped.

“Because she wasn’t the one for us, Judd. And some of us already knew it even before she fucked us over.”

The front door opened and Beck walked in, frowning. It was surprising enough to pull Hux out of his stare off.

Was that ... did he have a black eye? Owen walked in behind him, looking nearly cheerful.

Now, that was just damn freaky.

“Well, if you knew it then why didn’t you say so!” Judd roared.

“Because in case you haven’t noticed, you’re fucking hard to talk to! Once you get something in your head, you don’t let

it go. And now you seem to think every woman is out to betray us. Chloe isn't Ester."

"Well, of course she isn't. She's nothing more than a job."

Hux ground his teeth together. "If she's just a job, then how come you're treating her so badly?"

"What do you mean, he's treating her badly?" Owen said in a low voice.

Shit. Hux glanced over at Owen, finding the other man had gone blank. But his eyes were narrowed in on Judd.

Fuck.

Beck shot him a quelling look. Yep, he knew he needed to help diffuse this.

"What did you do to my baby girl?" Owen asked, stepping forward. "She better be all right."

Now they were all gaping at the other man.

"Did you just say your baby girl?" Judd asked.

"Yes. Mine. What did you do?"

Hux opened his mouth and closed it. He didn't know where to go with this.

"Wait. Is that why you fucking punched me?" Beck said in a rare display of temper. "Because I got you pulled off Ms. Reed's guard duty?"

Owen just gave him a cool look. "We were sparring. You were too slow."

"Owen hit you!" Judd took in Beck, then turned to Owen. "What is going on with you?"

Owen moved forward until he was close to Judd.

Uh-oh.

Hux and Beck shared a look before they stepped forward, ready to intervene.

"What did you do to my girl?" Owen asked.

“Guys, let’s just chill and talk about this reasonably,” Beck said.

“I didn’t do anything to Ms. Reed,” Judd said stiffly. “And she’s not your girl. She is a guest of the princes. And under our security detail. Nothing more or less.”

“You don’t treat her like that’s all she is,” Hux said, before he could stop himself.

Beck shook his head at him.

Right. He was meant to be diffusing the situation. Usually, they were all pretty tight. Owen was actually the least likely to get into an argument. Mostly because he rarely cared about anything enough.

And he always backed Judd.

Except over Chloe, it seemed.

“What do you mean?” Judd snapped.

“It’s just ... you got upset with her over something and stormed off. Why would you do that if she was just a client?”

Judd’s jaw tightened.

“What did you do?” Owen asked. “Did you hurt her?”

“I didn’t hurt her! She fell over!” Judd said.

“She fell over?” Beck asked, sounding concerned. “Is she all right?”

Had she gotten to Beck too?

“I cleaned up her hands,” Judd said. But he seemed uncomfortable.

“I think she might have hurt her leg,” Hux said.

“What?” Judd barked. “She never said anything.”

“She wouldn’t,” Beck said. “She’s more closed off than Owen.”

“Why do you think that?” Judd asked him. “She seemed fine.”

“I don’t know. I thought I saw her limp slightly.”

“Did you check her legs?” Owen asked Judd.

“No.” Judd frowned. “She didn’t seem to want me to touch her.”

“Why did she fall?” Owen asked. “What did you do?”

“Why do you think I did anything?” Judd snapped back.

Because it was Judd.

“Did you cause her to fall over?” Owen drawled darkly.

Shit. Shit.

“I didn’t push her,” Judd said. He ran a hand over his face. “I might have said something to send her running and she slipped and fell.”

Owen moved so quickly that they couldn’t stop him. He had Judd pinned to the wall, his arm against his neck. Judd grabbed at his arm but didn’t try to move it.

“Don’t hurt my baby girl, Judd. With your words or actions. Or we’re going to have trouble. Got it?”

There were a few beats where they all just breathed. Was this it? The beginning of the end of them?

Then Judd nodded.

Owen stepped back and Judd just stared at him thoughtfully.

“You really like her?” Beck asked, sounding incredulous. “This isn’t a game or something?”

Hux got it. He wasn’t sure Owen had ever actually liked Ester. But none of them had realized that until after she left ... and he hadn’t been even slightly upset.

This was a strange display of emotion from the other man. Oh, he could fake it with the best of them. He had the outside world fooled. But the real Owen wasn’t given to displays like this.

“You should know I don’t play games,” Owen said.

“Shit. I do know that. Fuck, man. Sorry. I thought ...” Beck shook his head. “I still don’t know if it’s a good idea for

you to guard her if you have feelings for her.”

“I would do whatever it took to keep her safe.”

Hux looked from Judd to Beck. He cleared his throat. “You remember she doesn’t live here? Right? She’ll leave in a week’s time. We won’t see her again.”

Owen just hummed. That was his thinking hum.

And that could mean they were all in fucking trouble.

“We stick together as a team,” Judd said stiffly.

“A family,” Beck corrected. “We’re a family and we do things together. We don’t go off without talking to the others.”

“We were going to find another woman to share, right?” Hux asked. Panic filled him. They couldn’t split up. This was the only family he had. The only one he would acknowledge anyway.

His bastard father didn’t count.

He didn’t want anything to do with that asshole.

These three men were it for him. And he didn’t want anything to tear them apart. For the first time he felt a flash of resentment toward Chloe.

But it wasn’t her fault.

And maybe ... rather than being the catalyst to tear them apart she could bring them all together. The relationship between the four of them hadn’t really been the same since Ester.

That wasn’t Chloe’s fault either.

Owen obviously wanted her ... with a need that seemed a bit intense considering he’d only known her a few days.

Hux was attracted to her.

Beck was more difficult to read. He was polite to her as always, but he hadn’t seen a spark between them.

And Judd ... well, who the fuck knew? She seemed to annoy him. But Judd might like that. He was a weirdo.

“I don’t want the four of us to tear apart,” Hux said.

Judd crossed his arms over his chest. “That’s not happening.”

“Really?” Hux asked. “Because Beck has a black eye and Owen nearly choked you out.”

“He wasn’t choking me,” Judd replied. “And they were sparring.”

Hux took a few steps back to sit on the sofa. “You can deny it all you like, Judd. But things haven’t been right for a while. And maybe ... maybe that’s because we don’t have someone to pull us together. That we all want to keep safe, to cherish, to dominate.”

“And you think it’s this girl? After knowing her a few days?” Judd asked. “We don’t even know if she’s got an ulterior motive for being here. We know nothing about her! It would be madness to think that she could be part of our relationship.”

“No one is saying we have to propose,” Hux countered. “But we could try getting to know her, right? Here’s the thing ... we haven’t tried to find anyone since Ester. We go out and I’m the only one who is even friendly to the women we meet. Owen acts like they don’t exist. Beck is so detached and polite that he comes off as a robot. And Judd snaps at them until they want to murder him or run. Why can’t we see where things could go with this girl?”

“Because I don’t trust her,” Judd replied.

“Judd, you don’t trust anyone!” Hux threw his hands up as he stood and paced.

“I’m trying to protect us.”

“That’s the whole thing. You’re so busy protecting us that you can’t see that you’re pushing everyone else away. You’re so defensive and you’re always waiting for people to betray us. Beck is so guarded no one ever knows what he’s thinking. And Owen ... well, that’s self-explanatory.”

“You mean because I’m part psychopath with the ability to pretend to be normal.” Owen gave him a wide, normal-looking smile.

Hux shuddered. “Don’t do that shit with me, man. You know it scares me when you hide your freaky side.”

Owen returned to the same cool look from before. “I’m with Hux.”

“Huh?” Hux asked. “With me?”

“On the vote whether to try and get to know my baby girl, I vote with you.”

“We’re voting?” Truth was, he hadn’t really expected them to listen.

“Seems we are,” Beck said, eyeing Judd.

“I don’t think we should. Too many unknowns,” Judd muttered.

Hux knew he’d say something like that. He turned to Beck. He fully expected him to vote with Judd. Beck was ultra-cautious as well.

“Judd’s right,” Beck said. “We don’t know her. And I’ve barely talked to her.”

Disappointment filled him.

“But I’m willing to have an open mind. And I think it’s time we thought about trying to find someone again. Maybe it won’t be Chloe, but we can’t keep pushing everyone away. My momma always says that sometimes you just have to take a chance and keep the faith.”

Out of all of them, Beck was the only one to have a normal family. His mom called every week to talk to him and sent him care packages.

Hux felt jealous of that. Their closeness. All he’d ever had from his father was abuse and ridicule.

That bastard is no longer in your life.

“I want her,” Owen said quietly. “Not just anyone.”

“She’s leaving soon!” Judd protested. “She doesn’t know anything about being part of this lifestyle. She’s not a Little. Or a sub. And what if she’s not interested in us?”

“She wants me. I can tell,” Owen said confidently.

“And who says she’s not a Little or sub?” Hux said. “I get that she’s reserved, but I think she’s hiding a lot.”

“Like her real feelings toward her boss,” Beck said quietly.

“What do you mean?” Hux asked.

“I think she might be scared of him. Or, at least, she acts real hesitant around him. She watches him carefully. You haven’t noticed?”

“He hurt her?” Owen snarled.

“Why would she work for him, though?” Judd asked. “Surely, she could just leave.”

“It’s easy to get stuck in a situation that you can’t find your way free from,” Hux murmured. “We need to protect her if he’s hurting her. I’ve noticed she’s a little jumpy sometimes.”

“Not saying it’s physical,” Beck said. “And I could be wrong ... but something is off.”

That just made Hux more determined to spend time with her.

“Hux, you’re on duty with me today. You’ll take the girl.” Judd stormed off.

Shit.

This wasn’t going to be easy.

Her ankle was killing her.

They'd just finished their first factory tour and she wasn't sure how she would manage another.

And she had to pretend that it wasn't hurting or she knew Jonathan wasn't going to be happy. He'd likely forbid her from running.

Can't have his property getting hurt.

Shit.

She felt like she was unraveling. And the threads were coming apart so quickly that she didn't have a hope in hell of weaving them back together.

It didn't help that she wasn't sleeping or eating properly. Old demons had been stirred, making her anxious and jittery.

Today's meetings were even more boring than yesterdays. And she hadn't thought that was possible.

"We're going to have to make a change of plans," Jonathan said suddenly.

"What?" she asked, staring at him in confusion.

Hux was sitting back here with them, while Judd was up front.

"Adeel just sent me a message. He can't meet tomorrow but has time for me this afternoon. Can you tell the driver?" he asked Hux.

“Sure.” He lowered the screen and spoke quietly to the driver.

“What about the second factory tour?” she asked, bringing out her tablet.

“Move that would you, dear?”

Sure. She’d just inconvenience everyone by shifting an appointment last minute. She had to hide her annoyance, but by the time they pulled up outside the same building as yesterday, she had it sorted.

She followed Jonathan inside, trying to concentrate on her steps, and smiled through greeting Mr. Fical. Finally, she could sit. She zoned out as the two men started to talk.

“Chloe dear.”

She nearly startled, only catching herself at the last moment. “Yes?”

Shoot. She glanced around and saw it was only the two of them. Where had Mr. Fical gone? They’d come back to meet with the same guy from yesterday ... why, she had no idea.

“You’re looking exhausted.” Jonathan’s sharp eyes took her in.

“Sorry. I didn’t sleep well. I’ll do better.” She sat up straight, putting her hands in her lap.

“Nightmares?” he asked. He looked almost sympathetic.

That couldn’t be right. He didn’t have an ounce of empathy.

“Um, yes.”

Jonathan nodded. “You should have told me. You could have stayed back at the palace today.”

“I could have?”

Who was this and where was the real Jonathan?

“Of course. I’m not a slave driver, dear.”

“No, of course not.” He just worked her seven days a week, every week of the year.

No wonder she was exhausted.

“Why don’t you go out and have a coffee, get something to eat.”

“I, um, but you’ll need me, won’t you?”

“I can get by for an hour or so. This will be boring for you.”

All the meetings were boring, but she didn’t say that. Her suspicions were aroused but what could she say? That she found it strange that he never wanted her around when he met with this guy?

If he didn’t want her around then she couldn’t argue. And the truth was ... coffee sounded like heaven right now.

“If you’re sure.”

“I am.”

“Shall I bring you back anything?” she asked.

“No. I doubt that any café here serves a good cup of English breakfast. I’ll be fine until we get back and you can make me a pot.”

They’d brought their own teapot and loose leaf tea with them. She’d never gotten into drinking tea. Give her a good coffee any day.

She stood and gathered her things.

“I’ll call you when I leave. Make sure to take a guard with you. We wouldn’t want you to get hurt.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s not necessary.”

His gaze turned hard. “I insist.”

Right. Okay. She stepped out of the office into the reception room.

Jonathan was certainly working hard to get Mr. Fical onboard with what he wanted. But wasn’t it all moot unless the Princes agreed? Their word was law, right? No one could go behind their backs or against them. But maybe that was

making the people who lived here angry? What if they wanted open trade? To have tourism?

She just didn't know enough about what was going on to hazard an educated guess.

Her unease made her feel even queasier. And her ankle throbbled as she walked on it.

“Chloe? You all right?”

She glanced up with a small smile to find Hux watching her closely.

“Of course. Never better.”

Sometimes the lies came so easily that it was scary.

“Jonathan doesn't need me for this meeting, so I thought I would go grab a cup of coffee. Can I get either of you anything?”

“You can't go alone,” Judd barked.

Right. Too much to ask for some time alone.

“I'll be glad to come with you,” Hux said smoothly. “It will be a date.” He winked at her and to her embarrassment she could feel herself blushing.

He doesn't mean it.

He bowed, then swept his arm out. “Come, milady. I shall wine and dine you and you shall fall at my feet in gratitude.”

Fall at his feet, huh?

Do not think about that. Do not.

“I think she might like the idea of that,” Judd said, shocking her.

What the heck?

“Yeah?” Hux stared down at her, that wide smile of his slowly disappearing.

To make way for a heated stare.

Oh hell.

She was in trouble here. Because that look on his face ... it was melting her insides. Making her want more than she could ever have.

“Do you, little darlin’?” he asked, stepping closer. “Do you like the idea of me ordering you onto your knees in front of me? Of me telling you to—”

“Here I made you both some coffee. I thought you would both be getting thirsty.” The personal assistant came in pushing a tray with a coffee carafe, two mugs, and some milk and sugar.

Chloe immediately took a step away from Hux. She should be thankful to the other woman for interrupting them.

That was getting far too heated.

What had Hux been about to say? And why hadn't Judd tried to stop him? If anything, it had felt like Judd was egging him on.

Ridiculous.

Judd didn't like her.

But maybe they didn't need to like her to want to fuck her.

“Little darlin’?” Hux moved closer to her, wrapping his arm around her.

She couldn't help but stiffen.

Don't show any emotion.

Ice.

Nothing can hurt you.

Well, that wasn't quite true, was it?

“I'm going out. You've got coffee already, I see. I'll be fine on my own.” She slid free of Hux's hold and moved to the door.

What was wrong with her?

Why was she feeling so hurt? It was just a bit of flirting. It didn't matter. And so what if another woman was bringing

them coffee ... and trying to flirt with them. Chloe couldn't blame her.

"Not on your own, you don't." Judd slid in front of her.

She sighed. "Why not? I'm hardly a threat to anyone. I'm not exactly a secret kung-fu master."

"No one said you were a threat." He eyed her like he thought she was a bomb about to detonate.

Rein it in.

"We're here to protect you, Chloe," Judd told her.

She stared at him. She didn't exactly believe that. Sure, that's what they said, but she knew they were keeping an eye on her and Jonathan. There was absolutely no threat, so she thought it kind of ridiculous that they escorted them everywhere outside the palace.

However, it made more sense if they were worried about them doing something wrong.

"I'm just going to the closest coffee shop. I'm not going to do anything else."

"Pretty sure it wouldn't take you long to get into trouble," Judd replied.

Her mouth dropped at that.

"I never get into trouble."

"Hmm, you've been here three days and you've already fainted, fallen over, and given me a whole lot of sass. You're totally trouble."

"Sass? Sass?" She couldn't believe what he was saying. She never gave anyone sass.

"Sass." He moved closer. "The sort of sass that would end up in you over my knee if you were mine." He stepped past her. "Hux, you'll escort Ms. Reed to the coffee shop."

"Happy to."

"I just made you both coffee, though," the assistant said. "And I baked some cookies last night. Why don't you stay

here? I'm sure Ms. Robin is perfectly capable of getting coffee on her own."

"It's Ms. Reed," Hux said easily. "And thanks for the coffee and cookies, but I have to go. However, Judd is staying. I'm sure he'd love some cookies and coffee."

Hux quickly hustled them out of there as Judd glared over at them.

"Quick. Go quick before he makes me stay."

"What was that about?" Chloe asked as they hustled their way down to the end of the passage. She had to fight hard not to show how much the fast pace was hurting her ankle.

"Judd hates cookies and coffee and small talk. That woman has been trying to get him to notice her for the last hour and he hasn't even been aware of her flirting. But he'll get the full force of it now. And he's going to hate every second of it."

"Why? She seems, uh, nice."

"Nice? Darlin', she just messed up your name deliberately to make it seem like you weren't important enough to remember."

She winced. Yeah, she'd picked that up. She had just been trying to ignore it. Or she'd hoped that she'd misread what the woman was doing.

Benefit of the doubt and all that.

"Right," she whispered.

Hux brushed his finger down her cheek. She had to suppress a shiver—the urge to lean into his touch was riding her hard.

"I suppose that wasn't very ... nice," she said. "She could be having a bad day, though."

"No, little darlin', it wasn't nice at all. And you don't deserve for anyone to treat you that way. Okay? You don't make excuses for anyone else treating you badly, you hear me?"

She gazed up at him in amazement. She'd grown used to Hux being all jokes. But he wasn't. There was far more to him. And she wondered what easygoing Hux was hiding underneath the surface.

“How do you know?”

“How do I know what?” he asked.

“How do you know I don't deserve that? I might be a terrible person.”

“Hmm, that's true. It's always the cute, quiet ones you have to watch out for, after all.” He leaned in to whisper to her. “They're usually the kinky ones too.”

A shiver ran through her before she took a step back. Did he just want to sleep with her?

“I'm not looking for sex. Thank you, though.” There, that was polite and firm.

He stared at her for a long moment. Oh no, had she hurt his feelings? Then he started to laugh.

Was he laughing at her?

Her breath froze in her lungs. She hated being laughed at. Feeling like everyone was watching.

Taunts filled her mind.

Look at her ... she can't even afford clothes that fit.

Eww. I bet she has fleas. She's so dirty.

Filthy.

Disgusting.

Slut.

Whore.

“Whoa, little darlin', hey, look at me. Breathe, sweetie. Just breathe. In. Out.”

She opened her eyes to find him staring down at her with worry. He had her face clasped between his hands. She felt cold and he was blazing hot where he touched her.

“Hey, there you are.”

“W-what?”

She hadn’t gone anywhere. Had she?

Hux stared down at her intently. “What just happened? Where did you go right now?”

“Nowhere. I’m right here. But I ... I need to leave.” It felt like there were eyes on them, but she couldn’t see anyone watching them. Still, they were close to the elevators. Anyone could come along at any time and see her losing it.

Not acceptable.

Jonathan would kill her.

“Come on, little darlin’.” Hux leaned over and hit the down button for the elevator. He wrapped an arm around her and she stiffened and went to step away. “Nope. You stay where you are. You’re trembling and I’m worried you’re going to trip and hurt yourself.”

“I never trip.”

“So what happened this morning?”

Right. Shit. She was so clumsy. Why was she being so clumsy? This wasn’t her. She didn’t break down like this. Didn’t let the memories slip into her mind, at least when she was awake.

She’d built up shields so that people wouldn’t hurt her.

This was unacceptable.

The doors to the elevator opened and they stepped in. She felt jittery, anxious.

She’d made a fool of herself. She’d thought Hux wanted her.

Idiot.

Why would he? And he’d laughed at her.

She forced herself to draw away from him. She stood stiffly in the corner despite the way her legs trembled. Chloe

was all too aware of him staring at her, studying her. But she wouldn't look back.

Don't let any cracks show.

Cracks led to bleeding and once she started bleeding then she wasn't sure she'd be able to stop.

Everything might come out and she'd come crashing down.

She couldn't afford that. Her existence relied on her ability to repel things. To hide all those emotional scars.

"We getting out of the elevator, little darlin'?"

"What?" She looked around, surprise filling her as she realized that they'd reached the bottom and the doors had opened.

Shoot. It was pretty obvious that she'd completely zoned out.

She stepped outside, taking a deep breath. "I'll just go sit in the car."

"Don't think so, darlin'."

"I don't feel like coffee."

"Then we'll go for ice cream. Or shopping. Or for lemonade. But you are coming to sit down and talk to me."

"I don't have to do what you say."

He gave her a firm look, making her swallow heavily. For some reason, she found his stern side just as sexy as his funny side. "No, you don't. Unless you're in danger. Or your health is at risk."

She raised her eyebrows. She'd debate that but it didn't seem worth arguing over when she was winning.

"Right. Neither of which is applicable right now."

"Hmm, I don't know." A glint entered his eyes and she braced herself from whatever he was about to say next. He reached out and she made herself stay still.

He wasn't going to hurt her.

He wasn't them.

Truth was ... she was starting to like their small touches. It was so weird.

He put his hand over her forehead. "Yep, just as I thought. You're far too hot. Doctor Hux prescribes ice cream. Stat."

"I don't eat ice cream."

He gasped, staggering back in shock. "What?"

"I haven't had ice cream since I was a child."

"No ice cream. My God! This is an emergency. Get this woman an ice cream! Now!"

Her mouth dropped open at his theatrics. She stared at people walking around. There wasn't a lot. But still ... those that were there were staring over at them.

"Hux, you're making a scene."

"Because this is an emergency! Come on, we have to get you to the ice cream shop immediately." Suddenly, he grabbed her and threw her over his shoulder and then he took off at a fast walk.

Panic flooded her and she froze, her throat closing up.

It's all right. This is Hux. He will not hurt you.

She let out the breath she was holding.

"Hux, let me down." Her voice was croaky. Quiet.

"Nah. I don't think so."

Oh, he was infuriating. Irritation filled her, pushing away her fear.

"Put me down right now! Hux!" She wriggled around on his shoulder.

"Just stay still, little darlin'. We're nearly there." He gave her ass a small smack. She froze.

Was he insane? Anyone could've seen him do that. What if Jonathan found out?

Okay. She needed to chill a bit. No one knew Jonathan. There was no reason to think that this would get back to him.

“Hello. It’s all right. It’s just an ice cream emergency. She hasn’t had ice cream in years and she’s about to expire from lack of creamy goodness. No, no, it’s fine. I have it all under control.”

Oh. My. God.

Who was he talking to?

Was there seriously someone there?

“Glad to see you’re taking an ice cream emergency seriously,” said an amused female voice with an accent.

“Nothing worse than an ice cream emergency,” another woman said. She sounded British.

“Are you sure she’s okay over your shoulder?” a man asked. “She’s rather quiet. You didn’t kidnap her, did you, Hux?”

Great. Just freaking great. They had to be seen by someone he knew. And they were also getting a great view of her ass. Could she ask for anything more humiliating?

Suddenly a face appeared by hers. A gorgeous woman with dark hair smiled at her. “Hello, there. Are you all right? Are you feeling dizzy? You’re not going to vomit, are you?”

Well, she hadn’t been before. But now that this ridiculously gorgeous woman mentioned it.

Yep. She was about to vomit.

Suddenly, she was flying through the air once more. Thank goodness she'd worn slacks rather than a skirt. She'd only made that decision because she'd wanted to hide the swelling in her ankle.

As Hux set her down, her sore ankle gave way and she would have fallen if he hadn't grabbed her and hauled her into his side.

"Are you all right? Do you feel dizzy?" a woman asked.

Chloe couldn't focus in on her.

"She's lacking some vital vitamins and minerals," Hux said.

"Like what?" a man asked.

"Ice cream."

"Hux, ice cream is not a vitamin or mineral," the dark-haired woman told him.

"Well, it should be. Chloe, are you all right, little darlin'?" Hux turned her so she was facing him.

"I'm not your doll, you know," she told him, taking a deep breath then letting it out slowly.

"Oh, I know. You're way more fun. Although it would be fun to play dress-up, don't you think?" He waggled his eyebrows. What was he going on about?

“Hux, I can’t tell if you seriously want to play dress-up or that’s a euphemism for something else,” the first woman said.

“Hmm. I think it’s both.” He winked down at her.

It was almost impossible to be mad at him. Especially when he looked at her like that. His eyes were swimming with humor and a smile twitched at his lips.

Then she made herself turn to look at the people he was talking to.

And she had never had the desire to murder someone more than she had to kill him right then.

Because standing there, flanked by two handsome men was Pippa.

The Pippa.

The woman she’d wanted to meet for so long. Was here. In front of her. In the flesh.

“You saw my ass!” she cried. Then she placed her hands over her face. This was it. This was the moment she died of embarrassment.

“If only the world was a kinder place, then a hole in the ground would open up and swallow me down,” she cried.

“Whoa, darlin’, you okay? You kind of sound like you’re losing it, there.”

“Losing it? Losing it?” She gave a laugh and even she could hear the hysteria. “Of course I’m losing it! Princess Pippa is standing right there. Right there.” She pointed without looking. “I’ve been wanting to meet her and then, the first time I do, all she has is a view of my bottom!”

There was silence and her horror grew. Even though he was the cause of her complete and utter meltdown, she found herself turning into Hux and burying her face in his chest.

She didn’t even hesitate, which shocked her since she wasn’t used to initiating touch with anyone.

To her surprise, his arms instantly came around her. She’d be lying if she said that she hadn’t half-expected him to stand

there in horror. Or worse yet, push her away. But he held her tight. Almost as though he thought she was shattering.

Was this seriously what was going to do it? Because she'd often imagined the day she might finally crack.

And she didn't think that this would be what would send her over the edge.

God, his hug was nice though. Her body wanted more.

"Darlin' there's nothing to be ashamed of. It's a really cute bottom."

Seriously? Was he for real right now?

There was a combined groan from behind her.

"I can't believe you just said that, Hux," one of the men said.

"Hey, what are you trying to say?" Hux asked. "It is a cute butt. And I'll take on anyone who says otherwise."

"Why isn't the ground opening up? Why are my prayers never answered?" Chloe asked.

A light hand touched her back, making her jump.

"Sorry," Pippa said. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"Oh shit. That was Princess Pippa's voice. Oh shit, I said shit in front of her. Is there a punishment for that?"

"I'll make you a deal. You stop calling me Princess Pippa and I'll ignore the fact you said shit."

She snuck a quick look at the Princess before turning back to Hux's chest. "You said shit too. Are Princesses allowed to do that?"

"Only the super cool ones," Pippa replied with a grin.

"What should I call you? Your majesty? Your highness?"

"How about that red-headed chick that fell in love with four princes?"

"Seems like a mouthful, but okay."

Pippa chuckled. "I like you. What's your name?"

She liked her? She really liked her?

“How doesn’t she think that I’m a complete dork?” she muttered.

“You are not a dork, Chloe,” Hux growled at her. “Do not say things like that. Or you’ll find yourself in trouble.”

Whoops. She’d said that out loud.

And what kind of trouble?

“Wow, Hux, I’ve never seen you like this,” the dark-haired man said. He had a gorgeous tattoo on one arm. “Didn’t know you had it in you, man. Wait ... you said Chloe? Ms. Reed? His Lordship’s personal assistant? That’s who you’re cradling against your chest like a baby?”

Oh shit. She had to move. This man knew who she was. He knew who Jonathan was.

Move, Chloe.

But it was so nice to be held. And she felt so safe with Hux. Despite the fact that he’d laughed at her when she’d thought he wanted sex with her. She really didn’t want to look properly at Princess Pippa. That meant that this whole humiliating experience was real.

And she’d see her face.

And not her butt.

“Yep, that’s her.”

“Do you want to explain what’s going on?” the man with the tattoo asked.

“We’re going for ice cream,” Hux said. “She hasn’t had ice cream in over twenty years. It’s a crime. The woman needs ice cream.”

What she needed was not to have met the princess for the first time while she was ass up and head down over Hux’s shoulder.

“You’re taking Lord Fothersam’s assistant for ice cream?” the dark-haired man asked, sounding almost hesitant.

The other guy seemed like the strong, silent type.

“Yep. It was an ice cream emergency.”

“And you were carrying her over your shoulder because ...”

“It was an ice cream emergency. Plus, she has a sore leg.”

He knew about that? How? She thought she’d hidden it well.

“I didn’t want her walking on her foot and hurting it more.”

“Wow, that’s so sweet, Hux,” Pippa said.

“That’s what they say about me ... I’m the sweetest.”

Who said that about him? Who were these people? Why were they talking about her Hux like that?

Not yours.

But she’d like it if he was. In an alternate universe, she’d be with this man. She’d wake up smiling every morning and go to sleep giggling each night. And in between she’d let him take her for ice cream and tell her silly jokes.

But that wasn’t her reality. And she needed to get herself sorted.

So she’d embarrassed herself in front of the one person she wanted to impress.

Didn’t matter, right?

“Chloe? Are you okay?” Pippa asked.

Great. Now Princess Pippa was talking directly to her and she couldn’t move.

Turn around, Chloe.

“Uh, darlin’, you might want to talk now. I’m getting the vibe that Aleki thinks I kidnapped you or something. Or that I was forcing you to go get ice cream against your will.”

“You are forcing me to get ice cream. And you did kind of kidnap me.”

“For your own good. It doesn’t count if it’s for your own good.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” the other woman said.

“Ms. Reed? Are you all right?” that same male voice asked.

Oh, crap.

She was going to have to face them all.

Taking a deep breath, she turned. She was aware that her cheeks had to be bright red. She took in Pippa then dropped her eyes.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” she whispered to Hux.

“Ahh, you’re supposed to tell Aleki that I didn’t kidnap you so he doesn’t kick my ass,” Hux whispered back.

“No. The Princess. Am I supposed to curtsy? Bow? What’s the protocol? Why was there no protocol in Judd’s two-hour lecture? Oh God! Unless there was. I kind of fell asleep with my eyes open half way through.”

“Ooh, you’re gonna be in trouble for that when I tell him,” Hux said.

“I’ll tell him that you carried me over your shoulder. Then you’re gonna be in trouble.”

“Pfft. Not afraid of Judd.”

“Shall I tell Owen?” she asked.

He gaped down at her. “You have a mean streak, don’t you? I like that. I like it a lot.”

Oh, dear Lord. Why was he staring at her like that? And why was she engaging in the banter? It wasn’t smart.

But she was starting to think that she wasn’t smart at all.

“You two are like an old married couple,” the dark-haired woman said. “It’s so cute.”

“It really is,” the Princess added.

How had she forgotten about them?

“Hi. I’m Alina, by the way.” The dark-haired woman smiled and waved. “This is Aleki, and the silent guy is Ian.”

“Chloe. I’m so sorry,” she said faintly.

“For what?” the Princess asked with a grin. “For Hux carrying you over his shoulder? Hux, you should’ve been carrying her bridal style. It’s easier on the tummy.”

“Totally,” Alina added. “And far more romantic.”

“Um, there’s nothing ... we’re not ... oh, dear Lord.” She could imagine Jonathan’s wrath if this got back to him.

Then again ... he had asked her to keep these guys busy.

Which was easily done. But it sat like a lead balloon in her gut, making her feel queasy.

Could be from Hux carrying her, though.

“Thanks for the tips. I’ll remember that for next time,” Hux said.

“No!”

Everyone stared at her in surprise. Well, except for the big, blond guard. His gaze was moving around their surroundings, watching for a threat.

“Um, I ... well ...”

“Ms. Reed, are you okay?” Aleki asked. “Did Hux grab you without your permission?”

Hux stiffened but before he could say anything, she was shaking her head. As much as she should say yes, she knew she wouldn’t. Because she’d never want Hux to get in trouble.

“No, not at all. He had my permission.”

“To carry you over his shoulder?” Aleki asked.

“Yep! It’s all good. We were just having fun. Although it won’t be happening again, because we’re not, um, we’re not together or anything.”

“Hey now, I’m taking you on a date for ice cream,” Hux protested. “In some cultures that would be as good as an engagement ring.”

“What cultures would those be?” she asked.

“Plenty. I mean, it’s not as good as a goat. But I could get you one of those. I’ve always wanted a goat. I’ll call him goatie.”

“Original,” she said dryly.

“Well, I thought about calling him Judd. But I thought that would get confusing.”

“What about Grumpzilla?” she asked.

Hux grinned, his eyes dancing. “Why, little darlin’, is that what you call Judd in your head?”

Her eyes widened. What was she doing? It was official. She had lost her mind. Gone.

“No!”

“No one would blame you if you did,” the dark-haired man told her with a grin. “He’s totally a Grumpzilla.”

“I wouldn’t tell him that though.” Princess Pippa’s eyes were wide, but there was a smile twitching at her lips.

“No. I won’t tell him. It ... I’ve been looking forward to meeting you, Princess Pippa.”

“Please, I’m not a princess. Not yet and I’m not sure I’ll ever be used to it. I’m just Pippa.”

She wasn’t just anything. But as Pippa held out her hand, Chloe shook it reverently. She felt like she was meeting some famous movie star. Only it was better.

“Hello,” she managed to say. What was wrong with her?

“You’re staying at the palace, is that right?” Pippa asked.

Hux moved away, talking to Aleki quietly, and she felt the urge to get closer to him. As though she couldn’t stand being too far apart.

Get it together.

“Yes.”

Dear Lord. Why couldn't she string more than one word together at a time? She took a surreptitious step toward Hux. Why had he left her alone?

Obviously, she shouldn't be left on her own with a Princess. Madness.

“You're Lord Fothersam's assistant?” Alina asked. “So you live in the UK?”

“Uh-huh. London.”

Alina smiled at her. “I'm from London.”

“Oh.”

This was terrible. Even Ian was now staring at her in shock. Well, just a brief look before his gaze moved away again. He seemed awfully vigilant.

But when you were guarding two potential Princesses then you had to be on your toes.

“It's good you're so vigilant,” she blurted out to him.

Dear. Lord.

She couldn't talk to either of the women in more than one or two word answers, but here she was praising him for being good at his job.

Like he cares what you think?

“Uh, thank you?” His gaze moved over her again, looking like he was assessing her.

Probably trying to work out her straight jacket size.

Suddenly, Hux was beside her. She glanced up in surprise to find him glaring at Ian.

That was weird. Did he not like him?

“We better get going if you want to make your appointments,” Aleki said.

“Oh yes. We need to leave. It was so nice to meet you, Chloe.” Pippa smiled. “Are you coming to the fair on

Wednesday evening?”

“No.”

Dear Lord, Chloe. Say more than one word.

“They’re opening the fair one day early, especially for us. Kassim doesn’t want us there when it’s too busy so it’s just for the palace staff and us. Would you like to come too?”

“Yes.” She didn’t care what Jonathan said about the fair. She was going.

“Great! His Lordship is welcome too, of course. See you then.”

The two women waved as they walked away with their guards. She watched them until they disappeared. And then her legs practically gave out.

“Whoa, little darlin’, easy there.” Hux placed his arm around her to support her.

“I just met Princess Pippa.”

He let out a chuckle. “You sure did.”

Wonder filled her. “She’s amazing.”

“Yeah, she’s pretty nice.”

“Pretty nice? She’s just not pretty nice. She’s beautiful. And kind.”

“Funny, I didn’t pick you to go all gaga over her. She’s just a person.”

“She’s not just a person.” She glared up at him. “And her first meeting with me was a close up of my ass.” She smacked his chest with her hand. “Hux! How could you?”

“Hey! I didn’t know we were going to see them. I probably wouldn’t have done that if I had ... Aleki was ready to ream my ass. And he’s the easygoing one in Alpha Team! Actually, I lie ... I still would have done it.”

“Hux! She was talking to my butt!”

“Pretty sure she wasn’t talking to your butt. She was talking to you. It’s just that all she could really see was your

butt.” He started walking and she fell in beside him.

“How is that any better?”

“Well, it’s a really cute butt.”

“Hux! Oh no! This is terrible. I could barely string more than one word together when I was talking to her.”

“Yeah, I noticed that.”

“Everyone noticed. How humiliating. I can’t see her again. She must think I’m an idiot.” She shrunk in on herself. She hated the idea of people laughing at her. “I’m not going to the fair. That’s for sure. Can you let her know?”

“No.”

“No, what?”

He paused and turned her toward him.

“Look at me.”

Her eyes widened at his stern tone. He looked really unhappy.

With her.

A knot tightened in her stomach.

“No, I won’t tell her that because you’re going.”

“I can’t go! I just completely humiliated myself in front of her.”

“No, you didn’t. And even if you did then who cares?”

“I care!” She cared far too much. She wished she didn’t. But it was an overwhelming fear constantly eating away at her.

Laughter.

Taunts.

A shudder worked its way through her.

“Whoa, back you come to me, little darlin’.” Warm hands cupped her face, surprising her.

This is Hux. He won’t hurt you.

“What?” She stared up at him, confused.

“You know, I think that every time you go off into your head like that I’m just going to have to do something to bring you back.”

“Like what?” she asked suspiciously.

“Hmm. I don’t know. I could squeeze your nose.” He pinched her nose between his thumb and forefinger.

“I don’t think so.”

“Well ... I could squeeze your ass.”

Do not blush.

Do. Not.

“This is highly inappropriate.”

“Uh-uh, there you go, trying to pull away from me. I’m not having it. You try to put that shield between us and I might be forced to batter it down.”

“With what?”

He grinned. “Why, little darlin’, I don’t think you’re ready for that. But keep pushing and you’ll find out.”

She wanted to know.

And she knew that she was playing with fire if she kept pushing him.

However, she wasn't sure why he was talking to her like this. He'd laughed at the idea of him wanting to have sex with her.

Hurt filled her.

"I'm not telling Pippa that you're not going."

"Fine, I'll find a way to let her know."

"No, you won't." He led her into an ice cream shop.

Holy. Heck.

Not just any ice cream shop. The most amazing ice cream shop she'd ever seen. This place looked like it had it all. She wanted to press her face to the glass cover like a little kid and squeal in delight.

Shoot.

This place was awesome and she had to hide her excitement. Her Little side was fighting hard to come out. Hux seemed to bring that side out, maybe because he was so full of fun that she just wanted to join him.

Although he could be stern as well.

He moved behind her, wrapping his arm around her. She could soon become addicted to his touch. "You're going to the

fair because I know you really want to. And I don't want to hear you call yourself an idiot again. This is your one warning, little darlin'. I might like to play. But I am very serious about not allowing you to treat yourself badly."

Shit. Where had this man come from?

And why did she feel like melting in his arms?

"Now, come on. It's our first date. We shouldn't be all serious. What flavor do you want? I'm fond of licorice. Or pistachio. Lemon poppyseed. Ooh, donut flavor. Donut ice cream? I am there."

She took in the flavors. There had to be at least a hundred.

But coffee and candy really appealed.

Only ... she shouldn't.

"I don't want any. Thank you. Do they have coffee? Black."

"You don't come to an ice cream shop and order plain black coffee, little darlin'. Tell me what you want."

She shook her head.

"My treat," he cajoled.

"No, thank you." It was time to take back control. There was little she had control over. But what she ate was still something she had some say in. Although she knew that if she started putting on weight that Jonathan would have another reason to criticize her.

However, that was never likely to happen with the way she ate and the long runs she took daily to save her sanity.

"Hmm ... you know I have this urge to tell Judd what your nickname for him is."

She glared at him. "You wouldn't."

"What sort of ice cream do you want?" he asked, looking like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

"You said you wouldn't tell him."

"No, I didn't," he sang.

She thought back over the conversation. Shoot. He was right. He hadn't said that he wouldn't tell.

"I'll have the coffee and candy," she muttered.

"Good girl."

Do not react.

Do. Not.

Shit, it was hard to keep her face blank. To keep from showing how his words lit her from the inside out.

"Come sit down and I'll order it for you. Stay right there, understand?"

"I understand. Only a small ice cream. And a coffee."

"Doubling up on the caffeine. I like your style."

Chloe sat at a table. There were some other couples in the parlor, eating ice cream. At the table behind her, two men took turns feeding a woman bites of ice cream.

Longing filled her.

That wasn't something she could entertain. That life would never be hers.

"You're not supposed to look sad when you're eating, little darlin'. That just breaks my heart."

She forced herself to smile. "I'm not sad."

"Uh-uh, no lying. Or I'll tell Beck."

"Beck?"

"Yep. He's the big McDaddy out of all of us."

"McDaddy?"

"The daddiest of us all. Judd has big Daddy vibes too. He's a bit of a stickler for the rules. But he'll often go easy on the punishments. Especially if you cry. Judd is a sucker for tears and deep down, deep, deep down, he's a softie. Not Beck. Beck won't waver. He doesn't yell or get mad. He doesn't overreact. He's big on honesty and communication and respect. All the good ones."

“They’re both Daddy Doms?”

“Yep. Sure are.”

“What about Owen?”

“Owen’s ways are a mystery to all,” he said. “Seriously. I don’t know with that guy. I know he likes control in the bedroom. But he didn’t take a Daddy Dom role with our last girlfriend.”

Ouch. That hurt.

Silly Chloe.

Of course they’d had a girlfriend before. But it hurt to think about another woman laughing with Hux. Getting all of Owen’s intensity. Managing to make Judd chill out and smile. Having Beck open up.

One of the staff walked up to them carrying a tray with a huge sundae on it. She gaped at it. There were several different kinds of ice cream on it as well as whipped cream and a whole lot of maraschino cherries and sprinkles.

She’d never seen anything like it.

“That’s for you?” she asked.

“This is for us, little darlin’,” he replied, picking up a spoon.

She shook her head. “I wanted one small scoop.”

“Well, I thought you deserved more than that, especially after meeting Pippa. You must have burned a lot of calories with all the talking you did.”

“Hux!” She covered her face with her hands. “I can’t believe you just said that. That was terrible. I couldn’t talk.”

“You were starstruck. Do you want to be a princess?”

“Me?” She let out a scoffing noise as she dropped her hands. “Hardly. I am not princess material.”

“I think you are.”

Wow.

How was she meant to resist this guy when he said things like this?

He doesn't want you. Remember that.

“Now, open wide for the choo-choo train!”

She gaped at him as he brought the spoon toward her mouth, moving it up and down as he made choo-choo noises.

He wasn't for real, was he? He couldn't be. She looked around but the only people watching them were smiling.

“A choo-choo train?”

“You'd prefer an airplane? I can do that.”

The spoon was pressed to her lips. “Open your mouth.”

A shiver ran through her at the command, and before she could stop herself, her lips parted. The ice cream hit her taste buds and she closed her eyes for a moment.

That was so good.

How long since she'd eaten anything like this? Not just ice cream but any kind of chocolate or candy?

Sadly, she couldn't remember.

“Damn girl, you keep making noises like that and it's going to be really difficult for me to walk out of here without embarrassing myself.”

Huh?

She opened her eyes to find him watching her with a starved look on his face. Like a wolf who'd been hungry for too long.

She swallowed.

“That's a good girl for swallowing.”

“Hux, you have to stop.”

“Feeding you? Nah. I don't think I do.” He gave her another spoonful. Then he reached toward her face with his finger. She drew back.

“What? What is it?” she asked, alarmed.

“Shh. Easy. You’ve just got a bit of ice cream right here.”
He wiped it off and placed his finger in his mouth, sucking.

That was hot.

Then she realized what happened.

“Oh no. Am I a mess?” she asked, horrified. She grabbed a napkin to clean herself up.

He plucked it straight out of her hand.

“You could never be a mess. You’re always beautiful.”

“You have to stop flirting with me. I know you don’t want me.”

“Don’t want you?” he repeated.

“Yes, so please stop.”

“Why wouldn’t I want you?” he asked.

She shook her head. She was so confused. She stood. “I need to go back.”

“Whoa. No. I don’t think so.” He caught up to her at the door, lightly grabbing her arm.

She startled.

“Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

“Oh no. I was just surprised. Sorry.”

“If you need help, you can tell me, little darlin’.” He stared at her worriedly.

She had to fight hard not to beg him to help her.

To be her white knight.

Because that wasn’t in the cards for her.

“Sometimes, I just startle easily.”

“I’m here for you, if you ever need me.”

She took a moment just for her, a moment to be weak. Leaning forward, she pressed her forehead to his chest as she closed her eyes. What would it be like to have him to lean on all the time?

Even more amazing if she could have all four of them.

Heaven. It would be heaven.

“I’m here, little darlin’. I’m not going anywhere,” he whispered, holding her close.

She took a deep breath and stepped back. “I don’t understand you. You laughed at me earlier. When I said ...”

“When you said that you didn’t want sex.” Understanding filled his face. “Oh, baby, I wasn’t laughing at you. Well, not really.”

She didn’t want to hear this. Again, she tried to step past him and leave.

“Whoa. Nope. You don’t go anywhere without me, little darlin’. Don’t you remember I’m your guard?”

Right. Shoot.

“I’m not in danger.” She felt like a broken record, repeating that again and again.

“Doesn’t matter.” He moved slowly, brushing her hair back off her forehead. She was tempted to lean into his touch, ask for another hug. Was she starting to trust him? “Whether you’re in danger or not, my priority is to protect you. And I wasn’t laughing at you. I was laughing ... well, at the way you said it. So polite as you told me you didn’t want sex. Are you so polite and proper in the bedroom?”

“This isn’t ... we can’t do this. Maybe I don’t feel anything for you. Did you think of that?” She was desperately trying to pull herself together. She should push him away in order to protect herself from further hurt.

But she was pretty sure that it was too late.

He smiled gently. “Not even for a minute, darlin’.”

Great. So she wasn’t fooling him at all.

Good to know.

“Come sit down. Have your ice cream. Just live in the moment and try not to worry about the future.”

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

“If you let yourself get to know me, you might find you like me.” There was a hint of vulnerability in his face that shocked her.

He always seemed so ultra-confident. She didn’t think he would have doubts.

“Too late.”

“What?”

“I already like you.”

“Yeah?” he asked, a slow smile crossing his face.

“Yeah. But I don’t think it’s a good thing. My life ... it’s not simple. I don’t get to decide who I’m with.”

He frowned. “Why not? If His Lordship is doing something to threaten you, then you need to tell us.”

“It’s more complicated than that.” She rubbed at her temples. “I don’t ... I just want ... my head hurts.”

“Come on. Stop thinking about this right now. Stop thinking about everything and let me do the worrying. I’ll call the shots for a while.”

“Why would you want to do that?” she asked as she let him lead her over to the table they’d been sitting at.

“Well, when you make your own decisions you make very poor ones.”

“I do not.”

“Uh, you just ran away from a magnificent sundae that was being served to you by the most gorgeous, wonderful, smart man in the world.”

“In the world?”

“Maybe the universe.”

“When is he turning up?” she asked, pretending to look around.

He gasped, placing his hand on his chest. “There’s that mean streak again!”

“Sorry,” she whispered, feeling bad. Had she taken it too far?

He placed his finger under her chin. “Hey, I’m just kidding around. Okay?”

She gave him a small smile.

“I like your mean side. It’s hot.”

It was? She didn’t really think she had a mean side, though.

“It means you feel safe enough with me to joke around. You know what? I have an idea. Let’s eat up.”

He fed her a bite of ice cream. But she pulled away after two more. “I can’t. Sorry.”

“All right. Let’s go.”

She wasn’t sure where he was planning on taking her, but she followed him out the door of the ice cream parlor and down a few shops. And into ... a toy store?

“Why are we in a toy store?” she asked in confusion.

“I’m going to buy you something.”

“You’re going to buy me a toy?” she asked.

“Yep. What would you like? A squishy toy?” He picked up a toy that looked more like a pillow. It was a cat with a unicorn horn.

A catcorn!

“Or what about a baby doll? You want a baby you can feed and change their diapers? Or an older one to dress up? Or some Legos? Or do you want one of these cuddly kittens.”

She really wanted to touch the toy kitten he held out. It looked so soft. She adored anything that she could cuddle. Amy Alpaca did a great job, but she was small. What would it be like to have the giant unicorn he was now holding up in her bed?

“Oh this? Do you like this one, little darlin’?” He brought the unicorn over to where she stood, frozen.

He was a whirlwind, moving around, picking things up and putting them down. Trying to entice her.

She shook her head.

“No? Well, it would take up most of the bed, I guess.” He put the enormous unicorn down. “Ooh, these chairs look nice.” He jumped on one. She stared around them, waiting for a shop assistant to come tell him off. Should he be doing that?

The beanbags all looked like different animals. They were fluffy with faces on them.

“Come here. Try this one.” He was sitting on a bear. He patted the giraffe next to him.

She shook her head.

“You know you want to.”

“But I shouldn’t.”

“It’s okay. No one is going to tell you off if you sit in one. I promise. And if they try, I’ll protect you.” He patted his chest. “Me, big bad dude. Can protect little woman.” He leered at her.

She rolled her eyes at him. But she sat in the beanbag chair. It was enormous and it felt like it was hugging her. She let out a sigh. It was so good. She wondered if they had these in London? It would be awesome on those days she needed a hug and there was no one around. But she’d never sneak it past Jonathan.

“I think we should go,” she said, trying to get out.

Oh no.

Trapped.

She could roll off the chair but that would look ridiculous. She’d look stupid. Her breath came in sharp pants.

Stop being silly, Chloe.

“Chloe. Hey, look at me, little darlin’. Look at me.”

The command in his voice surprised her enough that she turned to look at him. He grasped one of her hands in his and a zing of warmth raced through her.

It helped cut through her panic.

“That’s it. You’re fine. I’m here with you. Tell me what you need.”

“I ... can you ...”

“Can I what?” His face was filled with patience. And kindness. More of the panic leached out of her.

What was wrong with her? Who panicked because they couldn’t get out of a chair? But it was so much more than that, she knew. It was years of being told that she wasn’t good enough. That she had to be better. Of being criticized over every aspect of her life.

“Help me up?”

“Of course I can.” He jumped out. How did he do that?

“Abs of steel,” she muttered.

“I do. Thanks for noticing though.” He held out his hands to her and she slipped hers in. He drew her up so easily that she fell against him.

Had he done that on purpose?

“Sorry. Don’t know my own strength.”

He was so naughty. She kind of loved it, though.

But she forced herself to step back. A flash of something filled his face. Hurt? But that couldn’t be right. She hated that she might have hurt him.

She took a chance and slid her hand back into his. It was becoming far too easy to touch him. “I’m sorry I’m emotionally stunted.”

“You’re not stunted. Well, maybe height wise. You still got some growing to do, little darlin’?”

“I’m not that short.”

“Pretty sure you’re so short that legally you need a booster seat.”

“I do not!” she protested.

“Uh-huh. We’ll see. Now, what toy are we getting?” he asked.

“I really don’t need one. We should probably go.”

“Doesn’t matter if you need it or not. Although I think you do.” He picked up a really soft-looking teddy bear. “Someone to whisper your secrets to. To cuddle at night. Wouldn’t you like that? A special friend.”

Damn him.

“You never said what you are.”

“Hmm?” He gave her a puzzled look.

“Are you a Daddy Dom?” She wasn’t sure, but there had been hints here and there. Well, more than hints.

“Most people don’t think I am. Or they think I’m not a proper Daddy because I try not to take things too seriously. Beck, they easily believe. Even Judd. Owen can fool people into believing whatever they want about him.”

“He can?”

“Yeah, most people think he’s just an ordinary guy. A bit quiet. But polite and friendly.”

Shock filled her. “Are they all nuts?”

“No. See ... he’s shown you the real Owen. He usually only lets the four of us see him.”

Whoa. She didn’t know what to make of that.

“Most people think I can’t be a Daddy Dom because I joke around a lot. I like to play. They think I’m not a real Daddy Dom.”

She could see the hurt in his face, hear it in his voice and she hated that someone had treated him like that.

“Who thinks that?” she asked fiercely. “I’ll set them right.”

A grin filled his face. “You going to defend my honor, little darlin’?”

“Sure will.”

A laugh broke out of him. Whoever said that to him were idiots. Why couldn’t he be who he wanted to be?

“Our ex-girlfriend was a Little, but she only ever called Beck and Judd, Daddy. I think she was scared of Owen. And me, well, it turns out that I was the one she really wanted because of who my father is and how wealthy my family is.”

Oh God.

She hated that. What was that woman thinking?

“What a bitch,” she said.

His eyes widened and he grinned. “Oh yeah, total bitch.” He tapped his finger against her lips. “Don’t let Beck hear you swearing like that, though. You might just get your butt spanked.”

“He doesn’t have that right.”

“Not yet,” he said.

She squeezed his hand that she was still holding. “Not ever, Hux. This can’t happen.”

“Well, little darlin’, you can think like that. But me ... I’m a believer.”

He was nuts.

But he couldn’t say that she didn’t try and warn him.

“So are we getting this teddy bear?” Hux held up the gorgeous bear.

She wanted it.

So badly.

“How did you know?” she whispered in a raw voice. Shoot. She hadn’t meant to show that much reaction.

“That you were a Little?”

She nodded. “I don’t ... I barely even acknowledge it to myself. I keep that side locked down. I never let her out. I’ve never even ... I haven’t had a Daddy Dom before. All I know about the lifestyle is from what I’ve read. So how did you know?”

“Well, I didn’t really. Not until I brought you here.”

Great. So she’d given her secret away.

“You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

He canted his head to one side, studying her. “I don’t keep secrets from my brothers.”

Shit.

“But it won’t go beyond the four of us. We know how to keep a secret. However, it’s not something to be ashamed of. And you’d be surprised by how many people around here are in that sort of relationship.”

“Really?”

“Yep. No one is going to judge you or insult you. And if they do, you tell me.”

Right. No one but Jonathan. That thought sobered her.

“There’s actually a large play area attached to this shop for big Little boys and girls.”

There was?

Were they truly that accepting of relationships like that here?

She brushed her hand over the teddy bear’s fur.

“Take me home, Chloe,” Hux said in a high-pitched voice. “I’ll be your good friend. I’ll listen to your secrets and give good cuddles.”

She eyed him. “That’s your teddy bear voice?”

“What are you talking about? That wasn’t me talking. It was Theo bear.”

She shook her head. “That was a terrible teddy bear voice. He’d sound more like this. Hello, I’m Tickles the bear. Will you take me home with you?”

“Tickles? His name isn’t Tickles. Although he probably gives good tickles.” He moved the bear toward her, running his furry arm over her face. “Tickle. Tickle. Tickle.” Tickles brushed his furry arm over her face.

Giggles flooded out of her, shocking her. When was the last time she’d laughed? She couldn’t remember.

“Stop! Mercy!”

Tickles the bear was pulled from her face and Hux gave her a satisfied smile. “Got you to laugh.”

She heaved out a breath with a smile. Until her phone started ringing, surprising her. She looked around for her handbag. She’d dropped it by the beanbag chair. Reaching over, she scrambled through it for her phone right as it stopped ringing.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Everything okay?” Hux asked.

“That was Jonathan’s ringtone.” She found her phone just as it started ringing again.

“H-hello?” Shoot. She needed to sound calmer than that.

“Are you all right, my dear? Did I interrupt something?” he asked smoothly.

She had to hide a wince at his tone. He sounded almost kind. Fatherly.

“Sorry. I was in the bathroom,” she lied. “Is everything okay?”

“Perfectly fine. We’re just wrapping up. I’ll meet you at the car in five minutes?”

Shoot. They’d have to hightail it back.

“Yes, of course.”

He ended the call abruptly.

Shit. He was annoyed with her. He hated when she didn’t answer his call straight away. She had to get back. Right now.

Grabbing her handbag, she started running toward the front door, ignoring the way her ankle protested.

“Whoa, little darlin’, where are you rushing off to?” Hux grabbed her around the waist just as she reached the door.

She let out a startled cry. Shoot. This guy was always touching her or grabbing hold of her.

And the thing was ... the more he did it the more she grew used to his touch.

“I have to go. Put me down, Hux.”

“Not until you tell me why you’ve gone pale and you’re trying to run off when I already told you that when I’m guarding you that you don’t go anywhere without me.”

“Hux, now isn’t the time. Jonathan needs me back there in five minutes.”

“And when Jonathan speaks, you listen, huh?”

“He’s my boss, Hux.”

“No, there’s more to this than that. He’s not just your employer, is he?”

Shit. He was way too observant. She could see how people were fooled by him. He made it seem like he wasn’t paying attention, when in fact, he saw far too much.

“I need to go, Hux.” She pulled herself together.

“All right. We’re going. But we aren’t running. Don’t think I haven’t forgotten about your sore ankle. I won’t risk you harming yourself any further.”

Shoot. Yep. There was that Daddy side.

They made their way back to the building. It took longer than five minutes. She sighed in relief as they headed to where the car was parked out front. Hopefully, he wouldn’t be upset at having to wait for her.

Suddenly, Hux stilled. What was wrong?

Then she saw a group of people rushing toward them. Their signs were waving in the air as they started yelling.

What was happening? Hux quickly picked her up and started racing toward the building entrance. But they weren’t going to make it. Had these people been hiding in wait? What the heck? And she thought that they were meant to be peaceful protestors.

All of the yelling was in Escanaian and she couldn’t understand it. But she got the general idea.

They didn’t want her here.

Maybe Hux too.

And they weren’t afraid to make their voices heard.

Hux placed her on her feet as they became cut off from the building, but he kept one arm around her as people pressed around them, reaching for them. It was terrifying being stuck in a crowd of people yelling at them, shoving them. Someone tried to grab her arm and she shook them off.

Another person scratched her chest.

The potential for violence was ripe in the air. She could almost taste it.

“Hold onto me, Chloe! We’re nearly there! Get out of the way!” Hux roared, pushing a man aside.

Someone slammed against them and she found herself torn from Hux. The crowd pushed at her, trying to separate them.

“Hux!” she screamed.

Panic engulfed her. Where was he? What was going on? Hands pulled at her. Old memories threatened to trap her.

Then he appeared, his face filled with fury. A shiver raced through her and she was damn glad that she wasn’t the reason he was so angry. He looked worse for wear, but to her shock people were actually backing away from him. She leaped toward him and he lifted her into his arms, holding her against him with one arm under her ass. She put her arms and legs around him, clinging like a monkey.

“Just hold on, darlin’. I have you.”

He started moving just as she heard sirens in the background. Around them there was panic. People started to run away. Were they going to trample them?

“Hux!” someone roared and then a large body was next to them. “Give her to me.”

Hux tried to pass her over to whoever was there, but she held on tighter. She couldn’t let him go. He was her safety net.

“It’s all right, little darlin’. It’s Judd. Go to him. He’ll keep you safe.”

But Hux was keeping her safe. However, she let herself be passed over. Judd ended up settling her against one hip as they made their way into the building.

She didn’t know how they managed to make it inside in one piece. But the silence as they entered the air-conditioned building was almost deafening.

She was aware that she was shaking uncontrollably. She couldn't stop. Her teeth were chattering, her heart racing so hard that she felt ill.

"Easy, girl," Judd said quietly. "You're all right. You're safe. Shh. It's okay. I have you."

He kept moving until it got even quieter.

"You're safe. You're safe. No one is going to hurt you."

His words finally started to filter into her mind. She forced herself to draw back, looking around. They appeared to be in some sort of meeting room. "Where's Hux? What happened to Hux? Did you leave him outside? Is he hurt?"

"Whoa. Calm down." Judd grasped hold of her chin, turning her to face him.

Suddenly, she became aware of her position. Judd was sitting on a chair and she was straddling him, her legs pushed wide over his thighs.

Holy heck.

This was an intimate position. But she didn't have it in her to get off him. She was pretty certain that if she tried to stand, she'd collapse.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"He's coming. I promise. He was just talking to the security guards and making a few calls. He'll be here."

She continued to tremble. It was hard to focus. Her eyes darted around, searching for danger.

"It's all right. You're safe." His voice was firm, but his touch was gentle as he cupped her face. Shoot. Seemed she was getting more used to being touched because she didn't even startle. Although, it could be because she was in shock. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

She wanted to believe him.

"That's it. Just look at me. Breathe in. Now out. That's a very good girl. You're doing so well. That's it. In. Out. Nice and slow."

The door slammed open, making her scream and bury her face into Judd's chest.

"Damn it, Hux. I just had her calming down."

"Fuck. Shit. Fuck. Sorry." There was a smacking sound. What was that? Was someone hitting Hux?

"Hux, stop!" Judd barked.

Shit. His change in tone had her freezing in shock.

Then she turned to find Hux leaning his hands against the wall, his head bent as he breathed deeply. She wasn't sure what that sound had been, but she knew defeat when she saw it.

It was something she felt most days, only hers was hidden deep where no one could access it. She started trembling again.

"Hux?"

When he didn't answer, she whimpered.

"It's all right," Judd told her. "He's a bit upset, but not at you."

She knew that. Why would he be upset at her? But she needed him. However, when she tried to climb off Judd's lap, he held her there.

"Hux!" she cried. "Let me go to him."

"No."

She shook her head. She needed Hux. "Let me go. Please." She knew that later she'd probably regret this huge display of emotion. But right now, she didn't care about what she looked like, what anyone else thought, she just needed to know that Hux was okay.

"He's not in a good way right now and I won't allow you to get hurt."

She gaped up at Judd. His jaw was firm. Stubborn.

What had Hux said, though? That he was a softie underneath? She took in a shuddering breath.

“He won’t hurt me. You know he won’t. Please, Judd.”

He moved his gaze to hers and she let her lip tremble. It wasn’t an act. She was upset. But normally she wouldn’t let it show.

Although, things were different around these men.

Judd’s face filled with worry, then he nodded and lifted her off his lap.

Wow, it worked.

She raced over to Hux, banging her hip into a table as she moved. She winced, but didn’t let it stop her.

“Be careful,” Judd barked.

But by that time she was standing by Hux. What did she do now? Clearly, she hadn’t thought this through. She was used to dealing with Jonathan’s displays of emotions. But that was completely different. Usually that involved making sure that he didn’t hurt himself or others, or it meant listening to him yelling and raging until he wore himself out.

She let out a deep breath and decided to just go for what felt right. Leaning forward, she pressed her front to Hux’s back and wrapped her arms around him.

A shudder ran through him.

“Hux,” Judd said quietly. “Come back to us, man. She needs some care right now.”

Hux spun so quickly that she nearly fell. Then she was in his arms. He lifted her, carrying her over to the chair and holding her in his lap. She attempted to curl up into him. Wanting to disappear in his embrace.

“It’s okay, little darlin’. I’m here. It’s okay now. They won’t hurt you anymore.”

Didn’t he understand that she wasn’t concerned about herself? She was nothing. But he’d been hurt. There were scratches on his arms and she thought she’d caught sight of a bruise on his cheek.

Unacceptable.

“Shh. Shh. I’m sorry if I upset you. Shh.”

She drew back to look up at him. He ran his finger under her eye. She knew he’d find it dry. She didn’t cry.

Ever.

She wasn’t sure she knew how anymore. A genuine smile was few and far between, but he’d gotten several out of her today. But tears ... they were a whole different ball game.

Because once she started, she wasn’t sure that she would stop.

“You didn’t upset me. I’m f-fine.” Jesus, even a toddler wouldn’t believe her.

Hux raised an eyebrow, but it was Judd that came over to call her out on her lies.

“No lying,” Judd warned, coming to sit next to them. “You’re clearly not fine. And you have every right not to be. What you don’t need to do is pretend to be okay when you’re not.” He shot her a firm look.

Her lips trembled. She didn’t like being told off.

“Hey, he’s not scolding you,” Hux told her.

“Yes, I am,” Judd replied.

“Judd. Jesus, man. She needs some care right now. Some tenderness.”

Judd glared down at them, but she got the feeling he wasn’t mad at her or Hux.

“That’s not my forte. But I’ll try.” He held out his hand and she slipped hers into it, staring at their difference in size in amazement. His hand was large and callused. But so warm. Why was their touch so comforting yet at the same so arousing? “You can tell us how you really feel. No one is going to get upset as long as you tell the truth. Okay, little one?”

Right.

That wasn’t her experience. But she believed him.

“I ... what h-happened? W-where’s Jonathan?” she asked.

“He was just leaving the office when I got the alert from security that there was a mob downstairs. I was going to stay up there with him, but he was worried you might be down here and in danger. I didn’t realize that he’d called you back.” Judd shot Hux a look.

“Uh, yeah, sorry,” Hux said. “I should have contacted you.”

“Yes, you should have.”

“It was my fault. I was in a rush to get back.” But it sounded like Jonathan hadn’t even finished his meeting. She guessed he’d had more things to talk about. Seemed like he had a lot to talk about with the CEO of this company.

“Anyway, he urged me to go check on you both and Adeel promised that they’d stay safe in the office. That he had a safe room they could go to if things got bad. So I rushed down to check and saw the two of you.” Judd shot his gaze to hers. He looked so concerned ... about her? But did he even like her? “Little one, can you tell me what hurts? Have you got any injuries?”

The caring in his voice floored her. It made her want to curl up in his arms and have him protect her. But she also wanted to stay with Hux.

And she knew that relying on either of them was foolish.

She shook her head.

“You can’t tell me? Or you’re not injured?” Judd asked.

It was silly, but she had the ridiculous urge to suck on her thumb for comfort. She used to do that as a child. She hadn’t had a lot of toys or friends. Sucking on her thumb had been her only comfort.

But she hadn’t done that in a long time. To stave off the urge, she wrapped her hand in Hux’s shirt. Clinging to him.

“Little darlin’, you need to answer Judd. He’s really big on verbal answers.”

Damn it.

Judd nearly winced at Hux's words as her eyes went wide. Was she scared of him? Did she think he was going to be upset with her? He was aware that he hadn't made the best first impression. He tended to speak first, then think later.

And he still wasn't sure about this girl. They didn't know her that well. She could betray them.

But there was only one way to know her better. And he had to admit to being attracted to her. Ester had been tall for a woman. Curvy. This girl ... she looked tiny even against Hux who was far smaller than him or Beck.

It was hard to believe that she was the same woman they'd first met. That woman had felt so far above him, that she was unreachable. She'd been perfect in every way. Her clothes without a wrinkle, not a hair out of place, her make-up flawless.

But here she was, her mascara smudged, her hair nearly completely loose from the bun and her clothes dirty. There was a rip in her shirt.

Fury filled him at the sight and he had to work hard to push it down. He hated the idea that those assholes had touched her. Hurt her.

Was this the real Chloe? Or that other woman? Maybe this was Chloe with her shields ripped down. It made him want to tear at those shields until they were completely down.

She'd buried her face back into Hux's chest and Judd reached out to lightly touch her back. She startled and he drew his hand away as though it had been burned.

She didn't want him touching her.

"It's not you, man," Hux said. "She's on edge right now and you probably startled her."

Judd stared at him in amazement. They'd only been gone an hour. How did he know her so well? Hux reached over and grabbed his hand, placing it on her back again.

This time she didn't flinch or pull away. Judd rubbed his hand up and down. Shit, he swore he could feel her ribs. He needed to make sure he was careful with her.

Hux leaned forward and kissed the top of her head. "Tell Judd how you're really feeling, little darlin'."

"I's okay."

He stared down at her in shock at the words. She sounded so ... young. Was she a Little? Then he realized that he'd been treating her like one without thinking.

"Little one, what did I just say, hmm? I think someone needs to learn that it's all right to say how she's really feeling."

And he was angry at whoever had taught her that it wasn't.

"Look at me, little—"

His phone buzzed, interrupting him. Shit. He pulled it out.

Fuck. He'd forgotten about His Lordship. He nearly scowled. There was no way he wanted to go deal with that pompous asshole when Chloe needed him.

She doesn't need you. She's not your sub. She's not even your charge at the moment, she's Hux's. His Lordship is who you're meant to be guarding.

But he wanted to tell that self-centered asshole where he could stick his demands. Although, he had surprised him by pushing him to go downstairs and make sure Chloe was all right. So perhaps he wasn't all bad.

Perhaps he did care about Chloe.

That was surprising.

Moving away, he answered the phone quickly, assuring His Lordship that he'd be up soon. When he turned back, Chloe was standing. She was looking around frantically.

"What is it?" he asked, worried by the manic look on her face. They needed to get her checked over by a doctor. Although he would rather wait until they were safely in the palace. As long as there was nothing majorly wrong, which there didn't seem to be. She was moving around without any sign of pain.

In fact, he wanted to get her back to the palace as soon as possible. It didn't feel safe out here anymore. Something he never thought he would think. Escana had always been such a safe place.

Something had to be done about the Purity Party. They were rising in numbers and they'd seemingly gone from being peaceful to acting like a mob overnight.

"Where's my handbag? I've lost it."

"You might have dropped it when we were surrounded," Hux said to her, watching her with concern. "I can go look and see if it's there."

"I need to go find it." She moved toward the door at a fast walk. "I need it."

"Whoa there, little girl. Nope. You're not going anywhere." Judd wrapped his hand around her waist, pulling her close to him.

"She's constantly trying to run off," Hux said, moving over to them. "It's a problem."

"Hmm, seems like someone might need a leash when she's out of the house," Judd said.

She gasped. "I'm not an animal."

"Leashes aren't just used for animals," he told her. "They can be used for naughty Little girls who keep trying to run

off.”

“I ... I’m not ... I’m not always doing that.”

“You sure are, little darlin’,” Hux said. “You tried to do it twice on me today. Three times now.”

Judd shook his head. “Three times, that is naughty. Maybe she needs some baby gates to keep her in.”

“I do not.” Temper filled her face.

Relief filled him. Anything was better than the blankness on her face before.

“We’ll see,” Hux said. “Now, Judd is going to go and get His Lordship and send one of the security guards to see if your handbag is out there. While we wait here.”

“I should go with Judd,” she said. “Jonathan will need me. He might have been calling me. I should go.”

“No.” Judd gave her a firm look to back up his order.

She stared up at him, looking dazed. “No?”

“Do you not hear that often, little one?” he asked. “No, you are not allowed to come with me. You are to stay here with Hux. Understand?”

“Yes. I understand.”

She probably wouldn’t have given in so easily if she wasn’t still in shock. He should have felt bad about using his Dom voice on her. She was shaken by what had happened and she hadn’t had time to regroup.

But if this kept her safe, then it was what he had to do.

He headed out quickly, talking to security before he raced upstairs. Technically, he shouldn’t have left His Lordship, and Judd was usually a by-the-book guy. Rules were what he lived by, they kept order in his life.

And he needed order and control.

However, there had been no way he’d been willing to stand by and let either of them get hurt.

He met Jonathan when the elevator opened.

“Ahh, there you are.” His Lordship looked positively cheerful. Weird reaction to have to his assistant nearly getting hurt.

But there was something off about this guy.

“Sorry I took so long,” Judd said.

“No, no, not at all,” he said. “You have Chloe somewhere safe, I believe?”

“Yes, she’s waiting with Hux. We have a car waiting at the back entrance. We’re going to collect them and head out now. We’ll keep you both safe.”

“I’m sure you will.”

As they reached the ground level, a security guard met them, holding Chloe’s bag.

“Thanks. She’ll be happy to see this.” They headed back to the meeting room where Hux and Chloe were.

When they walked in, Judd noticed that Chloe had pulled her blank mask back on. She’d tidied her hair and wiped off the mascara smudges. It didn’t hit him as healthy. He glanced over at Hux to see his thoughts, but the other man was staring at a wall.

Fuck.

He was more messed up by this than Judd had thought. But Hux had to pull himself together and help him. Judd checked his phone for a message from Beck.

BECK:

Back entrance. Clear.

“I’m so sorry, Jonathan,” Chloe started to say.

What the fuck?

Why was she apologizing? And why did she look so on edge again?

“No need to apologize, dear.”

“I tried to be here in five minutes, but we were too far away. And then I lost my handbag and didn’t have my phone. I’m sorry.”

“Chloe, dear. I’m not upset with you. This was out of your control.”

Yeah, he really didn’t like this guy. Did he ever consider asking her if she was all right?

“We need to go,” Judd barked. “They’re waiting with two cars outside for us. Your Lordship, you’ll go in car one, and we’ll get Chloe into car two.”

“Is it necessary to split us up? I’m sure Chloe would feel safer with me, wouldn’t you, dear?” His Lordship asked.

No. It wasn’t necessary, but he wanted to keep Chloe away from this asshole.

She nodded woodenly. “Yes, that would be best.”

“Do you have some time to clean up a bit?” Jonathan asked her.

“Oh, yes. Certainly.” She nodded almost woodenly.

“There’s no time to clean up, she’s fine the way she is,” Judd snapped.

His Lordship shot him a look.

Shit. He needed to pull back or the asshole would complain about him.

“And splitting you up is protocol.” Two cars meant they could split up if necessary.

BECK:

I can’t keep Owen here much longer. Hurry up.

JUDD:

What the fuck? You brought him?

BECK:

There was no leaving him behind.

“Let’s go.” He gave Hux a slap on the back, hoping it would jolt him out of his thoughts.

Judd led them out through the hallway. As they reached the back exit, Owen stormed through the door. The look on his face was pure rage.

“What is wrong with him?” Lord Jonathan asked.

“Nothing. He’s upset about what happened.” Judd had to hustle His Lordship out the door. He just hoped that Hux was with it enough to deal with Owen in this mood.



SHE FELT DAZED. Out of it.

Chloe wasn’t used to feeling like this. But she kept putting one foot in front of the other.

Keep it together.

It wasn’t easy though. She checked Jonathan’s hand.

Not twitching.

Okay, that was a good sign.

Suddenly, someone grabbed her, pulling her to a sudden stop. Fear flooded her. The mob was back. But then she saw Owen staring down at her.

He looked furious.

She was so shocked that she stood still he ran his hands over her.

“Are you all right? Are you hurt?” he demanded.

Amazed, she just gaped at him. “I ... what?”

“Are you hurt?” He turned to Hux. “Was she harmed?”

“Not badly. Just shaken, I think.”

Owen let out a low, disgruntled noise. “Come on. Let’s go.”

More shock filled her as he picked her up and cradled her against his chest with his arm under her butt.

“What ... what are you doing?”

“You shouldn’t be walking.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“Because I said so.”

Right. Because he said so. Sure, that made sense.

But she wasn’t willing to argue with him. She didn’t have the energy and she was pretty certain that he wasn’t going to listen anyway.

Then she remembered where she was. What was wrong with her? Why wasn’t her brain working?

“Jonathan? Where’s Jonathan?” she asked, stiffening as she looked around.

“Judd put him in a car with Beck,” Hux explained.

“He’s left?”

“Yes, baby girl,” Owen said. “And you’re coming with us.”

Owen was fighting his instincts hard.

What he wanted was to wrap this girl up in his protection. To take her far away from anything that would harm her.

Even if that meant locking her up in his room until they were old and gray.

Hmm. That was still an idea he was willing to entertain.

Another idea was just to kill every threat to her. But he'd have to know who each and every threat was. He could do it, but it would be time-consuming. And that would take away from being with her.

The third idea was probably the sanest one.

Keep her by his side always.

He could get her a special carrier. Like when adults carried toddlers while they were hiking and carry her on his back.

Yes, that thought was definitely the winner.

“Owen?” Hux queried.

“Let’s go. You stay by me at all times.” He didn’t care that the car was just on the other side of those doors.

He couldn’t believe she’d been attacked.

And that he wasn’t there to help her. Hux had been. Perhaps that should have been good enough.

But Hux didn't have his ruthlessness. He cared about others.

Owen didn't.

It made life easier. Simpler.

Setting her down, he wrapped one arm around her waist and they headed out the door. He kept his gaze moving and when she tripped, he simply picked her up, bridal style.

He ignored her gasp. Right now, his priority was to get her back to the palace safely. Judd was standing over by the driver's side, waiting.

"I'm driving," Judd barked.

Suited him.

Why the fuck would he want to drive when he could have her in his arms?

Hux opened the back door and he climbed in, settling her on his lap as the door closed behind him.

Hux jumped into the front seat. Judd drove the car away from the back of the building.

"That took you a while," Judd grumbled.

"Had to make sure she was unharmed first," he replied as he settled her comfortably on his lap.

"Is she?" Judd's gaze met his in the mirror before he turned to glance at Hux. "Are both of you all right? Beck said you were."

"Physically, they appear to be all right," Owen replied. She tried to sit up, to raise her head but he pressed her back against his chest.

"Uh, what are you doing?" Judd asked.

"I'm comforting her. What do you think I am doing?" He'd have thought it was obvious.

Hux turned to look at him. "Do you know how to do that?"

"Of course I do."

Well, he knew how to fake it. He'd done that before. But this time, it wasn't fake. Was he doing it wrong?

Shit. Fuck.

He didn't know.

"I think you might be smothering her," Hux said, looking amused.

Relief filled Owen. Hux had looked almost blank back there in the building.

Owen kept his hand on the side of Chloe's head, holding her to him as he patted her back. "There, there. Now, now. You're okay."

"There, there, now, now?" Hux asked.

"Yes. Those are comfort words. Maybe you need some lessons in how to comfort a woman."

"Uh-huh."

"She needs to be in a seatbelt," Judd barked. "It's not safe."

He scowled at Judd. "I'm not going to let anything happen to her."

Judd glanced back at him, his eyebrows raised. "I know you're not. But it's still safer for her to be in a seatbelt."

Hmm. It was a good point. And he wanted her to be safe.

He moved her into the middle seat. She stared at him in silence as he reached over her to do up her belt.

It was a good thing he was here. She was clearly incapable of taking care of herself right now. Actually, maybe at any time. Running until she exhausted herself. Hurting herself constantly. It was kind of cute that she was so clumsy, but he didn't like her being hurt.

"You need some bubble wrap," he muttered.

"For what?" She gave him a bewildered look.

"So you don't harm yourself anymore."

“I never harm myself.”

“You fell this morning. Did you hurt yourself?” He reached out to grab her hands, turning them over. He frowned at the raw scratches. They looked red.

“I thought you patched her up,” he said accusingly to Judd.

“I did. Why?”

“There are no bandages on her. They look like they’re getting infected.”

“They’re not getting infected,” she said, curling her fingers up.

“Don’t argue with me.” He pulled her fingers out.

“What?”

“Don’t argue with me.”

“What? Ever?” she asked.

“Yes. Ever.” He gave her a steady look. “Don’t ever argue with me.”

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

“Of course it is.”

“How?” she asked.

“By always agreeing with me.”

“Okay, I’ll do that.”

“Good.” There. That was easy. He knew she would see sense. And it didn’t make any sense to argue with him when he was always right.

“Uh, I was being sarcastic. I can’t agree with you all the time.”

“It’s easy. Say, yes, Owen. That’s all.”

“That’s all?” she asked in a strangled sounding voice. He hoped she wasn’t coming down with anything. He’d never taken care of someone when they were sick. Judd tended to do that. He could be a real mother hen sometimes.

“Do you have a sore throat?” he asked.

“What? No. Why?”

“You sound funny.”

“Probably because she was biting back the urge to tell you that you’re insane,” Hux provided.

“My baby girl wouldn’t tell me that, would you, baby?” Owen drawled.

“Who me? Nope. I don’t know what’s happening right now.” She ran her hand over her face and he noticed that it shook. He didn’t like that.

He patted the top of her head.

“Man, what has gotten into you?” Hux asked incredulously.

Owen ignored him. He didn’t give a shit what anyone else thought or said about him. As they parked by the palace, he decided that she was going to come back to their house with them. That was the only way to care for her properly.

That idea was thwarted as the backdoor opened and Caleb stood there. “Are you all right?”

Great. Now he had to act normal.

“I’m fine,” he replied. “Thanks for asking.”

Caleb shot him a strange look.

Right. He hadn’t been asking him.

“Hux?” Caleb asked. “You good?”

“Yeah, man. Chloe needs looking over by Obian, though.”

Caleb crouched down, looking past him to where Chloe had buried herself into Owen’s side. He had his arm wrapped around her. Caleb’s eyes narrowed as he took them in. He gave Owen a querying look, but Owen wasn’t giving him anything back.

“Hi, Ms. Reed. I’m Caleb Pierce. I’m the head of security here at the palace. I want to apologize personally for what happened.”

Chloe stirred. He wanted to warn Caleb off. To tell him to back away. Not to look at her or talk to her.

But that wasn't rational behavior.

His level of possessiveness surprised him. He certainly wasn't worried about one of his brothers being near her.

In fact, the idea made him hard. Watching them with her ... yeah, that would be hot.

But he felt murderous at the idea of anyone else touching her, coveting her.

Caleb has his own woman. Chill.

So he let her draw back. But he watched Caleb carefully.

Any threat to her ...

"It's not your fault," Chloe said. Owen turned to look down at her. She had a calm look on her face. Just a quick glance wouldn't reveal how traumatized she really was. But he could feel her trembling against him.

And he fucking hated it.

He was going to hunt down every one of those bastards and annihilate them.

None of them had any idea of who he was ... but he was coming for them.

"Owen?" Caleb queried.

Shit.

"Yeah?"

"Are you getting out so Ms. Reed can move? Are you hurt, Ms. Reed? I have the doctor waiting in your suite, but I can arrange for you to be transported through the palace if that's necessary."

Yeah. Owen thought not.

Caleb had his own girl. He didn't need to be touching theirs.

“What? No. No, I’m fine. I don’t even need to see a doctor.”

He tightened his hold around her. Yeah, that wasn’t happening. She was getting medical attention. Even if she hadn’t been hurt by that crowd, there were the scrapes on her hands and possibly a sore leg from what Hux had said.

He wasn’t happy with Judd for not insisting she get seen by Obian this morning.

“You need to see a doctor,” Judd barked from behind Caleb. Judd and Hux had already gotten out of the car. “That’s happening so don’t argue.”

“Judd!” Caleb snapped. Which was unlike him. He was actually a pretty decent guy. Which was high praise from Owen. But Judd did have the ability to get on people’s nerves.

Owen slid from the car ready to help Judd if things grew heated. Generally Caleb had a lot of patience. He needed it to put up with Wolfe.

That guy was nuts.

“Owen, are you going to move?” Chloe pushed at him lightly, trying to get past him.

He turned his head briefly to look down at her. “No.”

She let out a disgruntled noise. “Fine, I’ll go out the other side.”

“You’ll stay where you are until it’s safe.”

“It’s not safe? What’s going on?” she asked, sounding alarmed.

Well, it likely was. But he was feeling very protective right now. The fact that Judd and Caleb were glaring at each other was enough to have him on edge.

“You cannot talk to a guest like that.” Caleb shook his head. “You know, I put up with a lot and I don’t say anything because you’re good at your job. But if you’re rude to a guest, then we’re going to have a problem.”

Chloe gasped and he glanced down again to find her peering around him, looking up at Caleb in shock.

“I’m not being rude to her,” Judd snarled back. “Don’t insult me. I know how to treat a guest.”

“Do you? Because this isn’t how you do it. All of you step aside. I’ll escort Ms. Reed to her suite.”

“Yeah, that’s not happening,” Judd said.

Even Hux was scowling. Owen didn’t bother getting involved. His job was to protect their girl.

Who was sliding across the seat.

“Get back here, baby girl,” he commanded, turning to frown at her.

Damn. The brat was surprisingly fast considering what she’d been through. She was out the other door before he could grab her.

She walked around the back of the car and he moved to intercept her. “What are you doing?”

“Caleb!” she called out.

If she asked the other man to help her to her suite, then he wasn’t going to be able to hold the crazy back.

“Yes? Are you all right, Ms. Reed?” Caleb asked.

Chloe smiled at him. But it wasn’t her real smile. It was the one she gave everyone.

Except for him and his brothers.

They got her real smiles. That eased something inside him.

“Please, call me Chloe.” She gazed up at him.

Owen only had so much patience, though. She shouldn’t be looking at anyone else. Not even Caleb, who wasn’t really a threat since he was in love with Vivi.

Owen moved in front of her again. She gave him an exasperated look. “Move.”

He raised his eyebrows at her tone. Did she really think she got to boss him around?

“Owen, I’m trying to fix this.”

Fix what?

She gave him an exasperated look, then sidestepped him so she could see Caleb again. Owen leaned in toward her to whisper in her ear.

“Don’t look at him.”

He made sure to put plenty of Dom in his voice, certain she’d obey.

The brat rolled her eyes.

Oh. She needed a spanking. He’d never punished Ester. Hadn’t wanted to as she hadn’t really been his.

But this girl was going over his knee sometime soon.

“Caleb, I think there’s been a misunderstanding,” she said smoothly. “Judd and the others have been taking very good care of me and I’m appreciative. Hux and Judd saved me today.”

Owen frowned and half-turned so he could see Caleb..

“Yes, I know. And they did well to keep you safe,” Caleb allowed. “Have they been looking after you the rest of the time? You can be honest.”

“The honest truth is that I’ve never felt this well taken care of.”

“Hmm.” Caleb looked around at them all. “All right. I want you to know that if you need someone to talk to, I’m here. Ultimately, the safety of everyone at the palace rests with me.”

“That must be stressful.”

“Not usually. Escana has always been a really safe place. What happened today ... it shouldn’t have. And I’m sorry.” He shook his head, his jaw clenched. “The police are going to

want to talk to you both. But I'm holding them back until you've been checked over."

"Which she already should be," Judd said in his usual blunt way.

Caleb shot a look at him.

"I think I'll head to my suite now," Chloe said smoothly. "I'm sure you have more important things to do than escort me around, Caleb. But thank you for meeting us here."

"I ... well ..." He frowned. "I'll walk with you. And I'm afraid I'll need a recounting of what happened."

"Of course," she said. "Anything I can do to help. I'm at the palace's disposal."

"Right. His Lordship is waiting for you at the suite, I think," Caleb told her.

"Wonderful. Lead on."

She started to follow closely behind Caleb, but Owen grabbed the back of her clothing.

"I don't think so, brat," he said quietly so that Caleb didn't hear him.

Hux moved up with Caleb, probably to give his report, but Judd stayed back with them.

"What?" She gave him a confused look.

"Uh-uh, don't think you're getting away with it this time," Owen warned. "You disobeyed me back there. That deserves some punishment."

"Damn straight it does," Judd added. "You need to learn to listen."

"And you need to learn when to hush up," she countered.

Judd stared down at her in shock.

"Hush up?" Judd snapped.

Caleb looked back at them with a frown. Chloe smiled brightly at him until he turned back around. Only, Caleb was a smart man so Owen knew he was onto them.

They all walked through the palace to the suite she shared with Lord Fothersam.

Owen didn't like that either. She should be in their house. Preferably in his bed.

Yep. That's where she belonged. Maybe he'd handcuff her to it until she learned to obey him. That thought made him smile.

"Crap," Judd muttered.

He glanced over to see Judd was staring at him.

"That's a really scary smile," Chloe said.

"Yeah, I don't think we want to know what he's thinking," Judd said.

He wiped the smile off his face and glared down at them both.

"You didn't need to interfere back there. I had things handled," Judd said stiffly.

"Sure you did. You were about to get fired. You were being all Judd."

"All Judd?"

"Yes, all Judd. You don't know how to be diplomatic, do you?" she asked.

Judd snorted. "What's the point of that? It's all bullshit. No one says what they're really thinking. I speak my mind and if people can't handle it that's their problem."

"That must be a really refreshing way to live."

Judd shrugged. "It suits me."

She tried to walk ahead of them, but Owen pulled her back again.

"Will you stop doing that!" She scowled up at him.

He found himself wanting to smile. He liked when she got all riled up. Far better than the cold, collected Chloe that she gave everyone else.

This was real.

“Nope.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“Because you need to stay between us.”

“Why? We’re in the palace. It’s safe!”

“We’re your security detail,” Judd said. “We don’t need to give you a reason.”

“The two of you are pains in my ass.”

“Hmm. Not yet, but we will be,” Owen drawled.

She gave him an alarmed look. “What does that mean?”

“It means that you deserve a spanking.”

“I do not!”

“You do. I told you to stay in the car,” he said.

Hux was doing a good job of keeping Caleb occupied. Although he’d looked back a couple of times. Luckily, he hadn’t seen Chloe glaring at them.

“I was getting out to help Judd,” she explained.

“I didn’t need help.”

“Yeah, that’s not the way it looked to me. Besides, you guys don’t get to boss me around all the time.”

“Yes, we do,” they said together.

He looked at Judd over her head. It had been a while since they’d done that. When had they stopped being so close? Once, they’d been as close as actual brothers. But it seemed like they’d drifted apart over time.

Owen had grown more closed off. While Judd had become more volatile.

But now she was bringing them together.

Their girl.

Ours.

He'd thought that Judd was going to fight this harder after their conversation this morning. But something seemed to have shifted with him.

She tried to walk out ahead of them again.

Oh no. It was time she learned to be obedient.

"I'm going to look into getting a leash," Owen told her as he drew her back. "Keep you from running away. That's very naughty."

"Funny, that's what I said earlier," Judd drawled.

"A naughty Little pup," Owen added.

She gazed up at him with wide eyes. Something strange filled him.

Happiness.

No, it couldn't be. Owen couldn't remember a time when he was actually happy. He had thought it was a feeling that was for others and not him.

"You okay?" she whispered to him.

"I think I might be happy."

Judd shot him a sharp look. He got it. This was bizarre.

"Maybe it's just gas."

He stared down at her in shock. She hadn't just said that, had she?

"Did you just say ..." Judd's voice was strangled. "Miss Prim and Proper? I can't believe it."

Her cheeks were turning red. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said in a haughty voice that got his dick hard.

Shit.

This girl was turning everything on its head. He shouldn't want that. He should want to get rid of her. To remove any threat to the status quo.

But the status quo was shit.

She walked ahead again, but her ankle seemed to give way and she started to fall.

Why had she said that?
Idiot.

What if they told Jonathan? Not that she thought they would. And she could deny it.

But she had to be more careful. She couldn't let the real Chloe shine through. And yet, they seemed to be able to get through her walls. They were knocking them down one by one.

It was terrifying.

Space. She needed space.

She strode ahead again. If Owen grabbed her one more time ... then she was going to unleash hell on his ass.

She didn't know how exactly. Because she was pretty certain Owen could kill her and hide her body and no one would ever find her.

But for some idiotic reason that thought didn't even scare her.

Was it because she was ready to die? Heck, she thought she'd been ready for that for a long time.

Or was it because she didn't believe that he'd ever kill her? It was a mistake to be trusting. She knew that.

But her stupid heart wasn't listening.

She was tense, waiting for Owen to grab her again, and she wasn't paying attention to where she was stepping. A wave of light-headedness hit her and her sore ankle rolled slightly. She felt herself starting to fall. Someone grabbed her, lifting her into the air before she could hit the floor.

She was held cradled against a wide chest. She glanced up, fully expecting to see Owen's face.

Shock filled her as she stared up into Judd's firm jaw.

Why would he pick her up? Half the time she didn't think he liked her. Even if he'd helped her today. That was just because of his job. She wasn't even sure why she'd been attempting to smooth things over between him and Caleb earlier by the car. She should let him get pulled off her security detail or fired or whatever.

The guy was a jerk.

Yet, he held her gently in his arms and when he glanced down at her, she thought there was concern in his eyes before it was wiped away.

"Why are you carrying me?"

"I thought that would be obvious. Are you more hurt than you're letting on?"

"I'm fine."

Owen let out a low noise. "Stop lying, baby girl. I'm keeping track and there's going to be a reckoning."

No, there wouldn't be. Because she was leaving soon. In less than a week. And during the rest of her stay, she would have to do her best to stay away from them.

Screw Jonathan's request.

They reached her suite and she became aware of Caleb and Hux standing by the door, watching them.

"Chloe? Are you all right?" Hux walked up to them, looking concerned.

She wanted to reassure him. But this is where she started pulling back. "I'm fine."

“That’s five,” Owen warned quietly.

What? Five what? What the heck was he talking about?

“Please put me down,” she said to Judd.

“No.”

“Judd,” Caleb said warningly. “Ms. Reed wants you to put her down.”

“She nearly fell. I’ll put her down when she’s sitting or lying down on something,” Judd said.

Like on his lap?

Or in his bed?

Shit. She had to stop this.

“My ankle just turned. I’m fine.”

“Give her to me,” Hux insisted.

“No.” Judd just started walking toward the door. Hux leaped forward to open it. Behind her, she was certain she heard Caleb muttering about people losing their minds.

She winced. She needed to stop creating scenes.

This wasn’t how she was supposed to conduct herself.

“Chloe, my dear. What is going on? I thought you were all right?” Jonathan stepped up to where Judd still had her in his arms. If she let herself, she might melt into him. Bury her face in his chest. Breathe him in.

But she couldn’t do that. Because he wasn’t for her.

“I’m fine,” she told him. “Just a bit light-headed. Judd can let me down now.”

“Another five,” Owen said.

Caleb shot him a sharp look. Did he know what Owen was talking about?

“I’ll set you down in your bed,” Judd said. “Where’s Obian?”

“Here.” An older man stepped up to her. He gave her a warm smile before scowling at Judd. “And you need to let my patient go if that’s what she wants.”

“If I set her down on her foot, she’s going to collapse,” Judd said.

“I will not.”

Judd just grunted.

Urgh, he was so infuriating.

“What happened?” Beck asked.

Shit. She hadn’t even realized he was in here.

There were far too many people surrounding her. A tendril of panic started to unfurl. She turned her face toward Judd, taking a few deep breaths. Then a warm hand landed over hers.

“Chloe? Are you well?”

She stared up into Beck’s concerned gaze. It was too much. She was going to lose it. And she wanted to be alone.

“I just want to go lie down. Alone.”

“Judd, put her in her bed,” Beck said quietly. “Obian can check her over there.”

“I’m not leaving her alone,” Judd insisted.

“Ms. Reed? Would you like someone in the room with you?” the doctor asked kindly.

She turned back to look at him. “No. No, thank you.”

She was aware of hot gazes landing on her. But she didn’t look away from the doctor.

“Very well. Judd, please carry Ms. Reed into her bedroom and then leave.”

Whoa. There was some power to the doctor’s voice. Judd was stiff, but he carried her into the bedroom, setting her down. She tried to tell herself that she felt better. That she didn’t want him close, touching her.

But the truth was, she immediately felt at a loss.

“Right, you can leave now,” the doctor said. “Shut the door behind you.”

“We are her security. Someone should stay with her,” Judd said mulishly.

“Out.” Obian pointed at the door. “She’s my patient now. Out.”

“I didn’t think Judd listened to anyone,” she said once it was just the two of them.

“He’s stubborn, that one. But he has no right to bully you.” The doctor frowned. “Do you want him taken off your security? I can get someone else to watch you.”

“What? Why?”

“He’s not an easy man at the best of times. But you shouldn’t have to put up with his grumpy behavior.”

Grumpzilla.

This was her chance to push them all away. She knew all she’d have to do was say something to this doctor or to Caleb.

But the words wouldn’t come.

She shook her head. “I just need a bit of space for a while. I’m fine.”

“You tell me if that changes. Now, what hurts?”



JUDD WASN’T HAPPY.

Nope. He was fuming. He started pacing outside her door. How dare that old doctor kick him out? What if she needed him?

Why would she need you? You’ve been nothing but a prick to her.

Well, if not him, one of his brothers.

They should be the only ones taking care of her.

“Is she okay?” Hux asked. He didn’t look at Judd. His gaze was on the door that stood between them and Chloe.

This was ridiculous.

The last woman he’d been obsessed with had betrayed them. Chloe didn’t want a relationship with the four of them. She didn’t live here.

So why was he letting himself get all wound up about her?

Why had he teased her earlier with Hux?

Why had he gone tearing out of that building, terrified for her safety?

And why did being separated from her feel like a blow to the gut?

He simply grunted. He had no idea how she was, because Obian had made him leave.

He should have refused. Since when did he let other people tell him what to do? Turning, he reached for the door handle.

“No. Don’t even think about it.” Caleb reached him, grabbing his wrist.

Judd stepped back, glaring at the other man. No one touched him but his brothers.

No one.

Well, he wouldn’t be opposed to her touch. Running her hands over his body.

“We’re her security,” Judd spat.

“That doesn’t give you the right to invade her privacy.”

“Caleb is right,” Hux said.

Judd gave him a look of betrayal. But as his gaze hit Hux, he realized there was something off about his brother, so he bit his tongue. A glance at Owen showed that he was ignoring them all, his gaze on the door with a level of fixation that Judd hadn’t seen in a long time. If they didn’t distract Caleb, he was going to see how strangely Owen was behaving.

Although, much as he was loathe to admit it, Caleb was actually a smart guy. He probably had some inkling of what Owen was really like.

“We have to give her some privacy,” Hux said.

“I don’t know what is going on with you guys and that girl. But you need to take a step back and let her breathe. Hux and Judd, you need to interview with the police after they’re done with Lord Fothersam. Beck’s with him now.”

Wait. Fuck. He hadn’t even noticed that Beck and His Lordship had left.

“All of you are off duty for the next six hours,” Caleb said.

Like hell they were.

“Who is going to watch her?” Hux asked.

Caleb studied them all. “I will. Go home. Calm down. And really have a think about what you want.” He moved closer. “Because if you want that girl this isn’t the way to go about things. You’re going to scare her away. Chill out a bit and think about her.”

That hit Judd deep.

Want her? Yeah, he was starting to see that he did. He wanted her.

But was Caleb right? Would they frighten her?

“We’re going,” Hux said. He still looked strangely lost.

“She better be safe with you,” Owen told Caleb. “Not even a scratch.”

Fuck. Yep, Owen was close to losing it.

“I’m going to ignore the way you just spoke to me,” Caleb warned. “But that’s the only pass you get.”

Shit. Normally it was Judd pushing Caleb’s buttons, not Owen. Both he and Hux hustled Owen out.

“We shouldn’t be leaving her,” Owen said as they reached their house. He paced back and forth, giving the appearance of a caged animal.

Hux sat, staring into the distance.

“We needed some space from her,” Judd said.

“What? Why?” Owen snapped. “So you can try to convince us that we don’t really want her? That it’s something we’ll get over? I know you weren’t happy this morning after our talk.”

“No, not that. I’ve ... I’ve changed my mind. We need time to figure out how to win her over.”

Both of them stared at him.

“What?” Hux asked.

“I’m in. What I’m saying is that I’m in. That girl is meant to be ours. And now we need to figure out how to win her over.”

“Fuck yes, she is.” Owen slapped his hand against Judd’s back. Then he headed to the door. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Where are you going?” Judd asked.

“To get our girl, of course. Hux, start ordering some shit for her. We might need to convert one of our bedrooms into a playroom.”

“You can’t go and just grab her,” Hux said, standing. At least now the other man was paying more attention to what was going on.

“Why not?” Owen asked. “We’re all in agreement.”

“Beck isn’t here.”

Owen brushed his hand through the air. “Semantics. He agreed this morning. Kind of.”

Beck had agreed that they needed to try letting someone else in.

“You can’t kidnap her, Owen,” Judd said.

“Why not?”

Fuck.

“You know why not,” Hux said. “You know that’s not the way people do things. It’s illegal, for one.”

“Not if she’s our intended.”

Judd gaped at him. Was he for real right now?

“Not if who is our intended?” Beck walked into the house, staring at them all. “What is going on?”

“Judd’s fully in and I’m going to go get our girl,” Owen explained, moving toward the door.

Beck blocked him. “Whoa, what? Does someone want to catch me up here?”

“Owen’s losing it,” Hux said, sitting onto the sofa. “Judd has suddenly decided that Chloe should be ours and now Owen thinks we’re going to steal her. As our intended.”

“Whoa. Owen. We can’t do that!” Beck held up his hands.

“Why not?” Owen snapped.

“Because we still have to have her agreement. You know it’s not as cut and dried as that.”

“Caleb and the others took Vivi,” Owen pointed out.

“That’s true,” Judd said. He was starting to see how Owen’s view made sense.

“We can keep her here,” Owen said. “Convince her to be with us.”

Beck shook his head. “She’s a guest of the Princes. They’re not going to let us do that. She’s not Escanaian and neither are we. You can’t just do what you want. Not to mention, what if she doesn’t want us?”

That was Judd’s greatest worry. Not whether she wanted his brothers; he thought she did.

But he’d been nothing but a dick to her. There was no way she’d want to be with him.

“We can’t force her,” Beck said. “That’s not what I agreed to this morning.”

“I don’t see why not,” Owen muttered.

Beck sighed, rolling his eyes. The normally unflappable man was looking exasperated.

“Hux and Judd, the police want to talk to you both. They’re just speaking to Chloe right now.”

“What? She should have one of us with her,” Judd said.

“Caleb is there,” Beck soothed.

“But he won’t take care of her,” Owen said with a scowl. “Not like we can.”

“How? By kidnapping her?” Beck shot back.

Hux was surprisingly quiet.

“Look, I agreed this morning that maybe it’s time to let someone in again. To date. But I don’t know ... we’re kind of a mess right now. And why would she want us? We’re bossy and demanding and overprotective. And we don’t even know if she’ll fit with our lifestyle.”

“You mean because we’re Daddy Doms?” Hux asked.

“Well. Yeah.”

Out of all of them, Beck was the one who had embraced that part of himself the most. He needed someone to take care of, to coddle and discipline.

Judd missed that too.

“She’s a Little.”

They all turned to look at Hux.

“You know that for sure?” Judd asked, hope filling him.

“She told you that?” Beck added, looking skeptical.

Hux shrugged. “Yeah, sort of. But we talked about it today. I took her for ice cream and to the toy store.”

“Ice cream?” Beck gaped.

“Toys?” Judd asked.

“She wouldn’t let me buy her one. But I could tell she wanted to. She said that she’s never let her Little side out. That it’s too dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” Owen asked in a dark voice. “How is she in danger?”

Hux shook his head. “I don’t know exactly. Maybe she thinks Lord Fothersam wouldn’t approve and she’d lose her job? She seems overly concerned about his opinion of her.”

“I don’t like that bastard,” Owen said. “And she doesn’t need a job with us taking care of her.”

“Probably you shouldn’t lead with that,” Beck said dryly.

“Huh?” Owen asked.

“We need to get her to trust us, then we can figure out what’s going on,” Beck said.

“Or we can demand she answer us,” Judd said.

Beck shot him a look. “She’s not going to just answer our questions.”

“Well, she should,” Judd said. “How else do we get her to open up?”

Owen nodded in agreement, while Beck sighed.

“I need to go.” Hux stood up.

Judd frowned over at him. “Are you okay?”

“Yep, got to talk to the police,” Hux said.

“What’s up with him?” Beck asked.

Judd shook his head. He didn’t know. But they’d need to work that out soon.

Fuck. Everything felt very messy.

Maybe Owen was the one with the right idea.

And he couldn’t believe he’d just thought that.

Chloe stared blankly at the wall.
Was she in shock?

She'd heard Obian mention that to Caleb. Where were her guys? Why weren't they here? After Obian left, Caleb returned with some officers to question her.

The whole time, she'd expected someone to walk in the door and park themselves next to her.

But no one came.

Then the cops left, and Caleb told her to rest. And now she was on her own.

A knock on her door startled her. Was it one of them?

“Yes?”

She sat up straight as she saw who entered. She attempted to scramble off the bed. Why had no one warned her? Where was Jonathan?

“Stay where you are. Please. Don't get up,” Prince Kassim urged.

She stared up at him, aware she probably looked like a deer caught in headlights.

“Y-your Majesty. Can I help you?”

“Actually, I came to ask you that same thing. Would you mind if I sat?”

She gaped at him. Prince Kassim was asking her if he could sit. In his own palace.

“No. Of course. I, um, I’m sorry for the mess.”

He looked around as he sat and gave her a curious stare. “Mess?”

“Oh, uh, I meant me.” She hadn’t fixed her hair or make-up and she was still dressed in the clothes she’d been wearing earlier. Why hadn’t she gotten up to take a shower and fix herself up?

Jonathan was going to be so mad.

“I’m the one invading your space,” he said as he sat on a chair next to the bed. “Please don’t apologize for your appearance. You are fine.”

Right. She wasn’t, but okay.

“I wanted to come here to apologize,” he said.

“Apologize? For what?”

“For what you went through today. That should never have happened. And I am gravely sorry that it did. Escana is generally a very peaceful place. For this to happen ... I am sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize. It’s not your fault.”

“No?” he said cryptically.

She could see he was taking the blame on his shoulders anyway. She couldn’t imagine how stressful it was to be him. “No, really. And I’m fine. No harm.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure that’s true. Well, I just wanted to check on you myself. Jonathan has said that you’re taking a few days to rest. I’m glad. If you would like a different security team, I understand.”

“What? No! It wasn’t their fault.” Shoot. What was she doing? She should say yes.

Prince Kassim held up his hands. “I know. I am not blaming them. But if you’d feel safer with someone else, I can

make that happen.”

“I, uh, I really don’t think I need anyone guarding me.”

“I’m afraid that isn’t an option.”

“While I’m on palace grounds, I’m safe, right?” she asked.

“Our security has been increased so I would like to think so. But I’d be happier if at least one guard was with you at all times.”

“Then maybe someone new would be best,” she whispered. It felt like a betrayal. But it was also the right thing to do. Because she needed to put some distance between them.

“I shall speak with Caleb. Someone will be outside the suite tonight. Jonathan has a dinner in town, I believe.”

“All right.” Shoot why did she feel like she was about to cry?

He gave her a moment, obviously waiting for her to say something more. “I believe that Pippa met you today.”

“She mentioned me? By name?”

A genuine smile crossed his mouth. His whole body seemed to relax at the mention of his intended.

“She did. She was quite taken with you. And she said she invited you to our evening at the fair?”

“Yes, is that okay if I go?” She’d told Hux that she wasn’t going to go before ... but when would she ever get this chance again.

“Of course it is. Pippa would be disappointed if you didn’t.”

After he left, she lay back on the bed, feeling shocked.

Another knock had her sitting up again. A wave of dizziness hit her and she had to take a slow, deep breath.

It might help if she ate something. She hadn’t eaten since that ice cream and that hadn’t been much.

Jonathan stepped inside without waiting for her to call out. She guessed she should have expected that. He didn’t consider

her someone that he had to use his manners with.

“I just spoke to Prince Kassim on his way out,” he said.

“Yes. He was here to see how I was doing.”

“That was a terrible thing to happen to you.” He stared down at her strangely.

“I’m all right. Did you need me for something?” she asked.

Lord, she hoped not. She really wasn’t up to anything right now.

“No, dear. You’ve been ordered to rest so that’s what you should do. I just wanted to say that I will be away from the palace for a bit, I’m going to stay the night in town after my dinner. You rest.”

This was ... weird.

Once she had pneumonia and he’d insisted she keep working. She’d become so ill, she’d ended up in hospital for three days and all he’d cared about was the inconvenience.

He left and she breathed out a sigh of relief. She lay back down. She should sleep, she was exhausted. But it wasn’t her bedtime and her mind wouldn’t relax. She needed a shower, but she didn’t have the energy to get up. It’s like her limbs wouldn’t even move.

Every time she closed her eyes, the mob of people came back to her. Reaching for her. Their hands grabbing at her clothes.

Terrifying her.

Her breath came in faster pants as she reached for Amy Alpaca. She rubbed her under her nose.

Where were they?

Stop it, Chloe. You sent them away. They’re giving you what you wanted. You can’t get upset because they’re not here.

The more she lay here, the more stressed she grew.

I need to run.

If she didn't run, she was afraid of what she'd do. But her body was shaky and unresponsive.

She whimpered and pressed her fingernails into the palms of her hand. She bit down on her lip.

Call them.

They'd given her their numbers that first day. But what if she called them and they didn't come? What if they didn't care about her at all?

They could be angry with her.

She was alone. And it was better this way.

It was the way it had to be.

But if this was for the best then why did it feel like her soul was shattering into little pieces?



OWEN STRODE toward where his girl's suite.

He'd waited until Beck left with Lord Fothersam to go to her. Hux was still acting weird. And Judd had just been called into a meeting with Caleb.

Owen was glad he wasn't in charge. Not that anyone would be stupid enough to put him in charge. Bullshit meetings were not his thing.

And pretty much any sort of meeting was bullshit.

All that meant was that there was no one around to talk him into being reasonable. And sane.

He wanted their girl with them.

The way she should be.

As he approached her door, he saw Aleki standing outside it. The other man raised his eyebrows as he saw him approach.

"Owen."

"Aleki."

They stood there for a long moment, staring at each other.

Act normal.

“What are you doing here?” Owen asked.

“Guarding Chloe.”

“Guarding her?” he asked smoothly. “Isn’t that our job?”

Something filled Aleki’s face. Pity? Sympathy? What the fuck?

Then the other man’s gaze flickered to the side and he turned to see Judd storming toward them.

Fuck. What now?

Judd moved close to Aleki while Owen watched on curiously. Sure, he could intercept, stop Judd from losing it, but he wanted to find out what was going on first.

What had Aleki done? He was usually the most easy going of Alpha team. And he often had some great treats.

Owen was quite fond of the Tim-Tams and pineapple lumps. Not that Aleki shared.

Nope, he had to steal them.

“Caleb gave you the news, huh?” Aleki asked.

“It’s bullshit!” Judd had worked himself into a fury. His breathing was coming fast, his fists clenching and unclenching.

“Nice of him to leave me to cop the flack,” Aleki said dryly.

“We are her guards,” Judd spat. “Not you.”

“And you seem rather passionate about that.” Aleki eyed them both. “Something you have to say?”

“No,” Judd snapped. “We don’t have shit to say. Get out of the way.”

Whoa. Judd really was losing it.

Hmm, probably would have been better for Hux or Beck to be here to calm him down.

Because Owen wasn't going to do shit.

Aleki shot Owen a look and he shrugged. "I don't know what is going on."

"What's going on is that we've been pulled from guard duty for Chloe," Judd said.

He must have misheard. "We've been what? Why?" Because of what had happened today? But Hux and Judd had gotten her out of there. They'd kept her safe. There had been no inkling that was going to happen. Surely, Caleb couldn't blame them.

"It's what Ms. Reed requested," Aleki said gently. "She wants new bodyguards."

Owen's mind short-circuited. All he heard was a buzzing noise. The world around him went white.

She wanted them away from her.

She didn't want him.

But that didn't make sense. Because he'd seen the way she looked at them. At him. At his brothers.

She was starting to trust them.

So what was going on?

"Why the fuck does she get a say?" Judd snarled.

"Judd," Aleki warned. "She's a guest. Chill the fuck out. Owen, get him out of here."

"Why?"

"Because he's going to wake her up and upset her."

"I want to see her," Judd said stubbornly.

Aleki sighed. "Look, I don't exactly know what's going on. But when I saw her with Hux earlier ... well, I thought that something might be going on between them. And the two of you are acting as though she means something to you. But here's the thing. That girl in there has been through a lot today. She's sore, she's exhausted, and she needs a fucking break.

What she doesn't need is the two of you storming in there and demanding shit from her."

Fuck.

Aleki was smart. Owen wouldn't have thought about that. He saw Judd start to deflate.

Aleki sighed. "I shouldn't say this, but ... if you've developed feelings for this girl, then maybe you need to think less about bulldozing her and more about treating her like a fucking queen, yeah? Romance her."

Romance her?

"I'll stay here and guard her. I promise."

"There's a threat to her?" Owen asked. Was what happened this afternoon not a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time? Although ... he didn't usually believe in coincidence.

"What? No. There's no threat. This was just bad timing that she and Hux were there today. But His Lordship is out and Kassim didn't want her to feel scared."

Owen nodded, but he didn't like it. And he couldn't say how long he'd be able to stay away from her.

Judd glared at Aleki. Turning, he stormed back to the house.

Owen eyed Aleki. "I'll tell you what I said to Caleb. Not even a papercut. Got it?"

Aleki studied Owen. "Am I seeing the real Owen?"

He smiled. "Not even close."

He got back to the house just in time to watch Judd punch the living room wall. He leaned back against the wall by the door.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Hux asked, coming out from his bedroom.

Judd started pacing.

How long was it until it grew dark? Hmm, another hour. He wondered if she'd eaten yet. She seemed to be spectacularly bad at taking care of herself.

That needed to be addressed.

Of course, once she was under their roof they'd look after her. They'd baby her. Discipline her. Fuck her.

And fucking make sure that no one harmed her.

“Why the hell would she ask for us not to be her security?” Judd demanded.

Owen shrugged.

“What? Hux asked. “We're no longer security for Chloe?”

“No, and she requested it,” Judd spat out. “Why?”

“This is my fault,” Hux said, sitting.

Hmm. This was interesting. Why would he say that? Hux had his head resting on his hands.

“What? Why?” Judd asked.

“I didn't protect her.”

Judd frowned. “What the fuck are you talking about? Yes, you did. You got her out of there safe.”

“It was just like last time, with Vivi. I didn't protect her from her uncle.”

Vivi's asshole uncle had gotten onto palace grounds. He'd hit Hux on the head, knocking him out before trying to kill Vivi.

Owen hadn't realized that Hux still blamed himself for that.

“What happened with Vivi's uncle could have happened to any of us,” Judd said, pulling back his anger to be a good leader. “Right, Owen?”

Oh, he was expected to take part? Hmm, what to say?

“Course it could have. And you protected Chloe today.”

Hux shook his head. "I didn't. Judd had to help. I'm fucking useless."

Owen frowned. That was his bastard dad talking, not Hux. Throughout his childhood, his father used to berate him like that. Telling him how useless he was.

"That's not true," Judd insisted. "Don't let that bastard's words get hold of you. Hux, you're not useless. You took care of her."

"Then why doesn't she want us as security?" Hux asked.

"Maybe because she's starting to feel something," Owen said thoughtfully. "And it scares her."

Judd and Hux stared at him in amazement.

"What? You think I'm wrong?"

"No, I think you're right," Judd said. "I'm just shocked you'd think of that."

Owen shrugged. He couldn't explain it. But he had a weird instinct when it came to her.

"What are you going to do?" Hux asked.

Owen noticed he used the word you and not we. He didn't like that. They did things together.

"Aleki said we have to romance her," Judd explained.

"Do we know how to do that?" Owen asked. He'd never done anything like that with Ester. But the others should have.

"You were never that into Ester, were you?" Judd asked Owen.

"No.

"Why didn't you say anything?" he asked

"Why would I? You all wanted her. Were happy with her." He shrugged.

"Your happiness is important too," Hux told him.

It was?

Good to know.

“I didn’t know how to be happy,” he said. “I don’t think I’d ever felt it until ...”

Until her.

“You have to think about things she’d like to do,” Hux said. “Things she’d enjoy.”

Judd nodded. “Right. Take her on dates.”

Owen wasn’t sure what she’d like. “Like running?”

“I think you have to get her to run less,” Hux said. “I think she uses it as a way to escape her demons.”

“It’s not healthy,” Judd added. “She doesn’t take care of herself properly. She likes the beach.”

The beach?

It wouldn’t be his first choice for a date. Then again ... he’d never really been on a date before.

This would be ... interesting.

Hands reached for her.
Taunts filled the air.

Slut.

Whore.

Bitch.

Dirty. Dirty. Dirty.

“No, no, no!”

Dirty. Dirty. Dirty.

“Wake up, Chloe.”

Dirty. Dirty. Dirty.

“Wake up right now!”

She opened her eyes, staring up into someone hidden in the darkness. She took in a breath to scream, but a hand landed over her mouth.

She froze, terror making it hard for her to breathe.

“Shh, baby girl. You’re safe. I’m not going to hurt you.”

The words filtered through, easing the panic. She didn’t know why he was in her bedroom, in the dark, but she felt safe with him.

Probably foolish of her.

“That’s it. That’s my good girl. Now, I’m going to remove my hand and you’re not going to scream, understand me? Not unless you want a sharp smack on the bottom.”

Seriously?

He’d snuck into her room and instead of apologizing or acknowledging that he shouldn’t be here scaring her half to death, he was threatening to spank her if she made a noise?

The nerve of him.

As he moved his hand, she leaned forward and nipped the skin of his palm. Not hard, but enough to let him know that she wasn’t happy.

“Oh, feeling playful, are we, baby girl?” he murmured.

Oh shit.

No. Nope.

She shook her head. Then she groaned as the movement made it throb.

“What is it? What’s wrong? What hurts?”

That sounded like genuine panic in his voice. But could it really be?

Or was she just so desperate for someone to care about her that she was imagining it?

“Baby girl, you need to answer me,” he warned.

“I’m all good.”

“That’s another five. I think we’re up to twenty by now.”

“What?”

“Well, first there was you disobeying me in the car. Then you keep saying you’re okay when you’re clearly not. You’ve earned yourself five spanks for every transgression.”

What the hell?

No. Nope.

“You have no right to spank me.”

“Don’t I? I’m going to add another ten for you getting us taken off your security detail. That was very naughty of you, baby girl.”

Shame filled her. It wasn’t that she didn’t want them to be her security detail.

It was that she wanted them too much.

“It’s better this way, Owen.” She tried to make herself sound cold, aloof.

But she couldn’t manage it. There was a note of sadness in her voice that he’d easily be able to hear.

“Maybe,” he said.

She wasn’t prepared for that answer, and it sliced at her, cutting her open and making her bleed.

“Because this means we can spend time seducing you without worrying about Caleb getting upset that we’re not doing our job. Now, we have all the time in the world to romance you.”

Oh fuck.

Well, that backfired on her.

“Do you know how to?” she asked.

“Romance you?” he asked, sitting on the bed facing her.

She sat up. “Yeah.”

“I’ll figure it out. The others do. They’ll romance you and I’ll do what I do best.”

“What’s that?” She couldn’t believe they were having this conversation.

“Protect you. Dominate you. Spank your ass when you’re naughty. And, my little puppy, you’ve been so very naughty.”

Her breath hitched. But not in fear. Nope, that was all arousal.

“You need to leave. You shouldn’t be in here.”

“Course I should be. I’m protecting you.”

“Isn’t there someone watching the suite? How did you get past them to get inside?”

Owen brushed her hair back off her face. “No one keeps me out of where I want to be.”

Yikes.

She was in trouble here.

“This isn’t a good idea, Owen. I’m not free to pursue anything. So please, it would be better if you just left and stayed away from me. It will be easier on all of us.”

“No.”

No?

Was he for real right now?

“Owen.”

“No. I’m not staying away. You are mine and you’re not going anywhere.”

Oh dear Lord.

They’re just words.

He doesn’t mean them.

Yeah, she might try to tell herself that. But she also knew how intense Owen was. He wasn’t exactly the type of person to say something he didn’t mean.

She could be in real trouble here.

“I can’t be yours.”

“Well, I’ll share you with them. That’s what we always do. But make no mistake. You, Chloe Reed, are ours.”

“It isn’t possible for me to be with you guys. Besides, I don’t think Judd likes me. And Beck barely speaks to me.”

“Judd likes you. If he didn’t, he would only speak to you when absolutely necessary.”

“He’s constantly barking orders at me.”

“Yeah, because he cares. If he ignored your naughtiness, then you’d have to worry.”

“I am never naughty, Owen.”

“You are constantly naughty. But it’s okay. I like that you’ve got a naughty streak. Means I get to discipline you.”

Her mouth went dry as she got a sudden image of him disciplining her.

“And Beck just has a few issues, like we all do. He’ll get over them. But he already watches you like you’re the sun and he’s only ever known winter.”

Was he serious?

She swallowed heavily.

What would it be like to give herself to this man? To all of them? It had been so long since anyone had touched her who cared about her.

“I’m leaving soon.”

“Are you? We’ll see.”

“I can’t stay, Owen. Really.”

This wasn’t a game. It was her reality.

“Shh.” Leaning in, he kissed her slightly. “I’ll sort everything.”

He had no idea what he was talking about.

Yet at the same time ... she wanted to give in. To feel happiness even if only briefly.

“And if you tell me to leave ... to keep away ... I’ll tell you now that I won’t. I’ll just follow you in the shadows. You’ll know I’m there, even if no one else does. I’m good at hiding.”

She bet.

“Once you agree to be ours, I’m locking you in my room and not letting you out.”

“Why wait for my agreement. Why not just do it now?” she asked sarcastically.

“All right.” He stood and reached for her.

“No! Shit! That was sarcasm!”

“But you made sense. I should just bring you with me.”

“You’ll end up arrested on kidnapping charges.”

“Only if they catch me.”

“Owen. No.” She kept her voice firm. She didn’t think he would actually do it. But then again ... she wasn’t totally sure that he wouldn’t.

He was unpredictable enough that he just might do it.

But to her surprise, he eased back. “I’m staying.”

“All right,” she said tiredly. She really didn’t have the energy to fight him on this. Reaching up, she rubbed at her head.

He gently removed her hands and rubbed at her temples with his fingers. Whoa. They were skilled.

“Sit up,” he ordered.

“What?”

“Do as you were told, naughty puppy.”

She hesitated.

He cupped her face between his hands. “Do you think I will do anything to harm you?”

“No. But it will hurt when we say goodbye.”

“You won’t trust me when I say you won’t have to?”

“It’s not a matter of trust.”

“It is. Trust. Me.”

She let out a small whimper. She wanted this so badly, she could taste it.

“Say you’re mine,” he demanded.

“I’m not.”

“Say it,” he growled before he took her mouth with his. It was a kiss filled with dark possession. She felt completely owned by him.

And the thing is ... she liked it.

She craved it.

Being owned by this man would mean that she’d always be safe. Even if he was insane.

He drew back and nipped her bottom lip. “Say you’re mine, baby girl.”

“If I don’t?” she asked.

“Then I might have to punish you.”

“What? Why? How?”

“You forgot who and where. Perhaps I’ll tie you to the bed and then strip off every piece of clothing. Then I’ll lick my way down your body until I get to your pussy. I’ll eat you out for hours. Taking you to the edge, then pulling back before you go over. You’ll be writhing, begging me to let you come. But you won’t get to come until you admit you’re mine.”

Jesus. What a picture he painted. It couldn’t happen. There were guards on each of her doors. Something she thought was crazy, but Caleb had insisted. For tonight, at least.

Although she thought they might be terrible at their job considering Owen snuck past.

“What are you thinking?”

“That the guards on my door must be pretty shitty.”

He let out a low chuckle, surprising her. “Wasn’t expecting you to say that.”

“Umm. Didn’t really mean to say that out loud.”

“They’re actually not incompetent. I’m just that good,” he whispered. “And no one other than my brothers know just what I can do and the lengths I’m willing to go to in order to keep what’s mine.”

“I know about your crazy.”

“Yes, and now you know. And it makes you fucking hot.”

“How do you know?” she asked, her heart racing. He couldn’t know that, right?

There was no way.

“I can tell in the way your breath hitches. The little sighs you make. If I touched your pussy right now, would you be wet, baby girl?”

This was so dangerous.

Yet, she knew she couldn’t lie. She didn’t have it in her to pretend anymore. Not in front of him. In front of them.

She ran her hand over her face tiredly, wincing slightly as she scraped the cuts on her hand.

He ran his hand lightly over her body, resting it on her pussy. Just that slight touch through the bedding warmed her from the inside out.

“Well?”

“Yes,” she said. “I like your crazy. I like you. All of you.”

“Good girl. Good things happen to good girls. But you need to stop stressing and let me worry about everything.”

“Jonathan won’t like this.” Although he was the one pushing her at them, so maybe that wasn’t a worry.

Maybe the fact that he seemed okay with her being around them was the thing she should worry about.

“I don’t give a fuck what Jonathan cares about. And if he becomes a problem, I’ll take him out.”

She sucked in a breath. He wouldn’t, would he? With Owen it was hard to know.

Living in the moment wasn’t something she could ever remember doing.

But wasn’t she the one who earlier had been lying in bed, missing them, wishing they were with her?

“You’re worrying. I’m going to have to start distracting you.”

She gazed up at him. She’d thought she was exhausted before, but right now there was just nothing left in the tank.

“Let me in, baby girl. Let me help.”

“You’re a bulldozer.”

“Nah, that’s Judd. I’m the bogeyman in the shadows you never saw coming. I’m a monster in sheep’s clothing.”

Lord.

Well, at least he knew who he was, right? That meant he wasn’t too crazy. Or was she just telling herself that to make herself feel better?

“But I’m your monster. And I’ll take care of all your demons.”

She closed her eyes for a long moment. It was so easy to believe him. To be around him. She didn’t have to be constantly on guard. “I’m so tired, Owen.”

It was the most honest she’d been with anyone in years before she’d come here.

“It ... keeping everything locked down is so draining. I don’t know if I can do it anymore.”

“Then don’t.”

“Not that simple.” She felt so close to giving up. Even if she wasn’t quite sure what that meant.

“It can be. Stop putting up walls when you’re around us. Let us in. We won’t let you regret it.”

She was certain she would. But she just couldn’t do it any longer. This was something she wanted so badly that she was willing to risk it all just for a taste.

Seemed she liked living on the edge. Who knew?

“Sit up,” he ordered. “I don’t like to repeat myself.”

Lord. He was so arrogant. So used to getting his own way.

And for some reason, she thought that was hot as hell.

But she found herself sitting up. He moved in behind her on the bed and started massaging her head.

Oh. Now she was going to forgive him for every arrogant demand. Because this was bliss. She didn't know when her body had started trusting him. But she just seemed to know he wouldn't harm her.

She sighed.

“Better, baby girl?”

“Yes, thank you. So good.”

“You have a headache.”

“Yes.”

“Have you eaten dinner?” he asked.

“I'm not hungry.”

“Some bodyguards. They're not even making sure you're fed.”

“I don't think that's in their pay grade,” she said dryly. “Did you bring me that food the other night?”

“No. Someone brought you food?”

“Ahh, yeah, it was on the table in the other room. I didn't see it until the next morning.”

“Probably Judd.”

Really? Of all of them, she hadn't thought it would be Judd.

He moved his hands to her shoulders. Oh wow. Bliss. Her body started to grow more relaxed.

“You were having a nightmare when I snuck in,” he said quietly.

She tensed.

“Don't stiffen up. I understand nightmares.”

“You have nightmares?” she asked, surprised.

“Nope. I am the nightmare, baby.”

She giggled at his ridiculous words.

“And you shouldn’t have nightmares either. Because you should know you’re safe. I’m always going to watch over you, baby girl.”

But he wouldn’t always be there, would he?

“You’re tensing up again. I have an idea of what to do to help.”

“What?” she asked suspiciously. Knowing him it could range from sweet to insane.

Also ... she might want some of that insanity. Especially if he moved his hands lower and worked some magic down there.

Lord, when was the last time she’d had an orgasm?

“You need a bath.”

“Oh my God!” she wailed.

“What? What is it?” He stood up quickly, moving to the door to peer out. “What’s wrong? Did you hear something?”

“I stink!”

“You ... stink?”

She sniffed at herself. How had she not smelled herself before? She was still wearing her clothes from earlier. Of course she stank. Ew and her sheets were probably dirty.

It was a wonder he could bear to touch her.

Wait. What did she look like? She tried to smooth down her hair.

“I need a shower. Some fresh clothes. Do my hair. Make-up. This is terrible.”

“Stop.” He was back in front of her, his hands landing on her shoulders to prevent her from getting up.

“I need to go get cleaned up.”

“Baby girl, you do not stink. And you don’t need to do your hair or make-up. I don’t care about any of that shit.”

“But ... I must look a fright.”

He grasped hold of her chin. “You always look beautiful to me.”

Whoa. He was good at this.

She closed her eyes for a long moment. “I know I don’t, but thank you for saying so.”

“One thing you need to learn right now,” he growled.

“What?” she whispered.

“I never lie. And to suggest that I would is going to get you in hot water.”

“I’m already up to thirty.”

“I’m going to have to start adding different punishments or you’re not going to sit for a week by the time we get to your spanking.”

Yikes.

“So if I don’t smell then why did you say I need a bath?”

“To relax. I’ll run you one.”

“I don’t know if I have the energy for a bath. I’ll probably fall asleep.”

“I could get in with you. Or we could have a shower. I’ll wash you ... every single inch.”

“Really?” she asked breathlessly. She had to admit, she liked the idea of that.

“Yep, and if you’re a good girl, I might just finger you until you have that orgasm you’re practically begging me for.”

Chloe was staring at him in shock.
But she wasn't saying no.

Owen drew back the covers. She was still dressed in what she'd been wearing earlier. Why hadn't she gotten changed? Had she been too tired? Overwhelmed?

Fuck.

If playing by the rules meant that they couldn't take care of their girl properly, then he had no interest in following them.

Not that he ever had.

He picked her up, cradling her in his arms. Was she meant to be this light? He carried her into the bathroom and set her down on the counter. Reaching back, he turned on the light. At least they'd be less likely to be interrupted in here.

He turned the lock. She stiffened, staring at him.

"Scared, baby girl?"

"Of you?" She looked surprised. "No. I'm not. I like when you touch me. It makes me feel good."

Fuck. He liked hearing that.

He stepped between her legs, pushing them apart so her pussy was pressed to his stomach. He swore he could feel her heat.

Fuck.

He needed a taste. Just one.

But her care came first. At least, that's what Beck had always drummed into him.

Care first.

Kinky times second.

Then some care again after kinky times.

"So, are you saying that you trust me?" he asked.

"I wouldn't be here with you like this if I didn't."

"Say it," he demanded, pressing into her.

"I trust you."

"That's my good girl." He moved his hands along her thighs and up her stomach. She sucked in a breath. Cupping one breast, he wrapped his other hand lightly around the front of her throat before pulling her in for another kiss.

Part of his brain was screaming at him that she'd been traumatized today. That he needed to take more care.

But he wasn't the guy she should go to if she needed gentle. He should call Beck or Hux.

Yeah. Nope. Not happening.

She was his right now.

And he could be a selfish asshole when he wanted to be.

Pulling back to look into her eyes, he smiled. "You're such a well-behaved baby girl, aren't you? Trusting me."

She swallowed heavily and he stepped back, keeping his gaze on her. "Stay where you are."

He turned on the shower and let it run, spinning back to find her sitting exactly where she was.

"So obedient."

She narrowed her gaze at him. "Not always. Don't get any ideas."

"I don't mind if you're a bit naughty. Let's get you out of these clothes."

He undid the buttons of her shirt, which was looking worse for wear. He drew it off and she was left wearing just a small camisole. He frowned as he saw a long, angry-looking scratch over her shoulder.

“Did Obian treat this?” he asked, lightly tracing it.

“Treat what?” She glanced down. “Oh, I didn’t even see that.”

“You didn’t feel it?”

“No. I’ve been feeling kind of ... numb.”

There was a strange note in her voice that he didn’t like. He reached for the bottom of her camisole, pausing to give her a moment to protest. But when she didn’t say anything, he drew it up. She was wearing a lacy white bra underneath and he cupped her breast, running his thumb over her nipple.

“Oh. Ohhh.” She squirmed on the counter, her eyes closing as her head went back.

“Stay still,” he ordered.

Her eyes opened and she stared at him in shock. “How?”

“You’ll figure it out, baby girl. Be good for me.” It was a warning and an order all in one.

She licked those plump lips, and he leaned down to tug at her lower one, nipping it and then licking to soothe the sting. She instantly started to relax. Did she like a little pain with her pleasure?

He worried she used pain in other ways. To release tension. Is that why she pushed herself to the breaking point when she went running?

That part he didn’t like.

Reaching behind her, he undid her bra, pulling it slowly down her arms to reveal her gorgeous breasts. They were plump and tipped with pink nipples. He cupped a breast, then leaned in to lightly lick across her nipple.

She sucked in a breath but stayed still.

“Well done,” he told her before taking her nipple into his mouth as a reward.

“Owen.” Her fingers tangled in his short hair, holding his head.

He drew back and she made a small noise of protest.

“Shh.” He lifted her down, standing her on her feet before crouching so he could draw down her pants. “You’ll get more soon. If you do as I say.”

“I will. I will.”

He felt a surge of satisfaction at her submission. It fed his soul. It had been a long time since he’d played—not that she was up to much tonight.

She stepped out of her pants as he tapped each foot. He looked up at her, taking in her flushed cheeks and glazed eyes.

“Spread your legs. Reach behind you and grasp hold of the counter.” She reached back, her knuckles white as she held on.

Then he took in the state of her knees. He ran a finger over a nasty graze on one. There was a bruise forming under it.

“How did you get these?” he asked. “Did someone push you over? Hux never said that.”

Unfortunately, the cameras outside the building had been damaged the day before. It made him think that the purists had planned this. But why?

Didn’t make much sense.

And it was going to make it that much harder to find these assholes. The bastards that had dared to touch what belonged to him.

However, he wasn’t giving up. There had been other buildings close by and he’d requested their security footage.

“Oh no, this is from when I, uh, fell over,” she said in an embarrassed voice.

When she was running with Judd. Or away from him ...

“Did Obian look at these?”

“They’re just grazes. They’re fine.”

He growled and gave her a firm stare. “Not your call to make.”

Her eyes widened. “It’s my body.”

“Not anymore, baby girl.”

“That ... that’s crazy. Even if we were in a relationship, it would still be my body.”

“Nope. Mine.” He kissed along her stomach, just above the line of her panties. “All mine.”

“Owen,” she moaned.

“You said you were mine.”

“You’re insane.”

“Ah, but we already knew that. And you like it.”

“Because I’m obviously insane too.”

He moved his face down to her pussy, breathing in her scent.

“Are you wet, baby girl? Are your panties soaked for me?”

She moaned.

“And remember, I can tell if you’re lying.”

“Yes,” she replied.

“My beautiful girl.” He drew her panties down, staring at her.

Hell.

After she stepped out of her panties, he looked up at her. “Hold on tight.”

Then he lifted her leg onto his shoulder and licked his way along the seam of her lips before sucking on her clit.

“Oh. Ohhh, Owen.”

“Put your hand over your mouth. I don’t want anyone hearing you.” Then he lifted her onto the counter again. He

didn't want her slipping off. She stared at him with wide eyes as he kneeled back down.

He needed more of her taste.

He bent her legs, placing her feet on the edge of the counter, far apart so he could see her. "Lean back if you need to."

She sat back against the mirror and he parted her pussy lips, studying her.

So pretty.

He slid one long finger into her pussy, then another, pumping them in and out as he toyed with her clit, running his finger over it. Bending down, he replaced his finger with his tongue.

He moaned.

The taste of her was going to quickly become addictive.

He drew back to stare up at her. He kept his finger still and she whimpered, staring down at him.

But she still had her hand over her mouth.

"You're being such a good girl. And you taste so fucking delicious. I'm going to become addicted to that taste, little girl. Never been into drugs or alcohol, but you're the vice I can't live without. Are you going to let me taste you whenever I want?"

SHE GAPPED DOWN AT OWEN. Was he serious right now?

"Will you spread your legs whenever I say the word? Strip off those panties and let me taste you. Are you going to be my obedient little girl? You can move your hand and talk."

Wow. So generous of him to let her talk.

"We could get you some of those panties with a hole in the crotch. Or no panties at all. I vote for the latter."

She removed her hand, panting slightly. "So nice of you to give me a choice."

“Isn’t it? I can be reasonable.”

Right. Because it was so reasonable. “I can’t walk around not wearing panties.”

“Sure you can. That’s what you should do.”

“Owen, be serious.”

“What makes you think I’m not?”

As he stared up at her, she could see he really meant it.

She was totally out of her depth here.

He moved his fingers back to her passage, sliding them slowly in and out, making her moan.

“Here’s the thing. I’m a demanding guy. I like to be in charge. What I want, I take. But you have to give consent to let me have control.”

Really? Because he just seemed to take control naturally.

“Do you give your consent to me being your Dom?”

“Just during sex?” she asked.

“Oh, baby girl, no. I don’t know how to turn it off. But I can ... tone it down if that’s what you want.”

Did she?

She wasn’t sure.

“I’ve never done this. I’ve never had a relationship with a Dom ... well, with anyone.”

“Good,” he growled. “I don’t like the idea of you being with anyone else.”

“Even Judd, Hux, and Beck?” Because that idea made her sad. She knew it shouldn’t. She shouldn’t want them ... but then again, weren’t they a package deal? She was super confused.

“Oh no. With them it’s very different. I can’t wait to see you with each of them. To watch as you reach your pleasure while Hux feasts on your pussy, or Judd fucks your ass, or Beck has you on your knees feeding you his dick.”

Holy. Crap.

Why did she react so strongly to those images?

“Maybe all at once. Perhaps they’d take you together and I’d sit in the corner and direct. I wouldn’t let them get you off as they took their pleasure. And then when they were finished, you’d come sit on my lap and beg me to let you come.”

That ... that wasn’t what she wanted.

Nope. Sounded terrible.

Liar.

“You like that, my baby girl, don’t you? You like the idea of the four of us owning this body. Don’t worry, we’d take very good care of you. Better care than you do of yourself.”

Probably not hard.

She wasn’t exactly winning any prizes for self-care.

“Well?” he asked, moving his fingers again. He brushed them over her G-spot.

Holy. Shit.

She curled her toes as her head went back on a low cry.

“Uh-uh, quiet. Or I’ll need to find something for your mouth to do,” he warned.

Oh, she liked the idea of going down onto her knees so she could suck him into her mouth.

Yep, she liked that too much.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, you can have control over my body. When we’re like this. Together. Alone. But not ... not in front of others. I have ... I can’t do that.”

“I’ll accept that. For now.”

That wasn’t ominous sounding or anything.

“Safeword?” he asked.

“I need one?”

He shrugged. “You don’t need to. Beck will get upset if you don’t, though.”

And that’s the only reason he cared? Maybe it was ...

“I don’t know.” She was slightly concerned about why she might need to use one.

“We’ll use red.”

She nodded. “All right.”

“Good girl. You can call me Sir.” He paused for a moment. “Or Daddy Owen.”

“So, you are a Daddy Dom?” she asked. She hadn’t been sure and neither had Hux. Not completely, anyway.

He shrugged. “Yeah, although I’ve never been anyone’s Daddy before. But I like the idea of being your Daddy.”

Yeah. She liked it too.

He licked along her pussy.

“Hand over your mouth. You can come whenever you like. This is going to be hard and fast because you should already be in bed.”

Was he going to join her?

Yeah, she wasn’t brave enough to ask that.

He wasn’t wrong when he said it would be hard and fast. The man sure knew what he was doing as he thrust his fingers inside her, his tongue working her clit expertly.

Then he drew his fingers from her pussy, and she moaned in disappointment, trying to smother the sound. But he replaced them with the fingers of his other hand.

And he slid the fingers that had been deep in her pussy over the puckered entrance of her ass.

Holy. Shit.

Was he going to put them inside her? She didn’t know what he’d intended to do because the next moment, she was

coming. The orgasm rushed through her, stealing her breath. She pressed her hand against her mouth, the palm stinging at the pressure as she screamed.

As she came back down, Owen stood. She watched with wide eyes as he licked his lips. “Fucking delicious.”

Lord. Had there ever been anything so hot? She wasn’t sure if there had been.

Then he tugged her hand from her mouth and leaned in. He was going to kiss her. Then he paused, his gaze narrowing. “Why is there blood on your mouth?”

Owen took hold of the hand she'd been holding over her mouth, looking down at it with a frown.

Some of the scrapes had reopened. Shit. She must have placed too much pressure on them. Why weren't they bandaged? He'd have thought that Obian would have done that, at least.

"Owen, we're going to run out of hot water."

"Screw the hot water. Why didn't Obian bandage these if they were bleeding again?"

"They weren't bleeding before."

"I don't like that you didn't tell him about your other scrapes and bruises," he told her. "But what I really don't like is that you seem to think it's okay to be in pain. To be hurt. It's not. This is my body now. And you will tell me about every ache and pain, understand me?"

She sucked in a breath, staring at him. Then she nodded. "Yes, Sir."

His insides hummed. But it wasn't exactly what he wanted her to call him.

Leaning in, he lightly kissed the scratches on one palm, making her gasp. Then the other palm.

"What do you call me?"

"Daddy Owen."

“Good girl. Now, let’s get you in the shower.” Standing back, he started stripping.

He liked the way that she watched him, as though she wanted to devour him. He needed to get her cleaned up and into bed.

As he stripped off his boxers, she let out a small noise. He grabbed his firm dick, running his hand up and down the shaft. “Like what you see, baby girl?”

“Yes,” she breathed out. “Can I help with that?”

“My dick? What do you want to do? Jack me off? Suck on me until I come in your mouth, then swallow every drop? You’d swallow for me, wouldn’t you, my good girl?”

“Yes, Daddy Owen.”

“I knew you would. But not right now. We’ve got to get you cleaned up.”

“I’d rather give you a blow job.”

He grinned. “Good to know. But you’re gonna do as you’re told.”

She pouted as he lifted her down, then led her to the shower. He ran his hand underneath, testing the water temperature.

“Is it still hot?” she asked.

“Course it is.” He stepped in, then tugged her in with him. It was an enormous walk-in shower with double shower heads. But he still held her close to him.

After all, he didn’t want her to fall.

Plus, he wanted all of her wet, naked skin next to his.

Grabbing her shower gel, he squirted some onto his hand and then had her turn around away from him.

“Stay still. Tell me if you feel dizzy or get tired.”

He started on her shoulders and arms first, massaging her tight muscles until she moaned in pleasure.

Damn, that wasn’t helping his hard dick.

But he had to put her care before his own needs. It was surprisingly easy. He moved his hands down her back and over that plump ass. He moved one finger between her ass cheeks and slightly inside her puckered hole.

She stepped forward. "Owen!"

Smack!

He slapped his free hand down on her ass, making her cry out. Turning her head, she glared at him. "What was that for?"

He raised his eyebrow. "Watch that tone, little girl, or there will be more where that came from."

Her mouth opened in surprise and maybe some arousal.

"You moved when I said to stay still."

"You put your finger in my ass!" she exclaimed.

"Just cleaning all of you."

"Oh my God," she said.

"Do you not like being touched there? Is anal sex a hard limit?" he murmured as he parted her ass cheeks with one hand.

"Oh my God."

"Not God. Owen. Well?"

"It ... no, it's not a hard limit. I just ... haven't had any experience with that."

"All the more reason to start now. Put your hands back on the wall and keep still."

She was muttering something under her breath, and he decided to give her another smack on the ass.

"I think I might have to spank you every day, just to keep on top of your naughtiness. Hmm, it could be our nightly routine. You over my knee for five spanks before I fuck you into oblivion." He ran his finger down between her cheeks. Up and down, pressing slightly into her hole each time. He wanted her to get used to this touch there. To expect it.

Crave it.

Gradually, she relaxed, and he could press his finger further into her hole.

“That’s my good girl. You like that, don’t you?” he murmured.

She nodded. But they didn’t have time for more play. He was supposed to be helping her get clean.

Moving his finger away from her bottom, he turned to wash his hands in the water with more soap before he started cleaning her again.

Down her legs to her feet, which he raised one by one to wash. He frowned as he saw that one was slightly swollen. Hadn’t Hux said he thought she’d been limping slightly?

“Do you need to wash your hair, baby girl?”

“No,” she said. “Too tired.”

Yeah, he thought that might be the case. Standing, he ran his hands over her breasts. He lightly twisted her nipples, making her groan.

“Step under the spray, baby girl.” He held her steady as she rinsed off, then he switched off the water and reached out to grab a towel, wrapping it around her.

Five minutes later, he had them both dry and had pulled his boxers back on before he carried her through to the bedroom and sat her down on the bed.

“I’ll just get something to sleep in.” She tried to get up, but he put a hand on her shoulder.

“Stay there.”

Moving over to the set of drawers, he pulled them open. In one drawer was a babydoll nightgown. One that would sit tightly over her breasts, then flow out. It was black and lacy.

And he had to see her in it.

There were even matching panties.

Fuck. Yes.

He turned toward her with them in his hands. Part of him was wondering whether she'd brought these with her for a specific reason.

Had she been hoping to wear them for someone?

Or did she just like wearing this sort of thing to bed?

She blushed when she saw what he held and cleared her throat.

“These are sexy.”

“I, uh ...” She let out a deep breath and shrugged. “I just like the way they make me feel when I’m wearing them. Like I’m ... pretty.” She dropped her gaze to her lap.

No. Nope. He wasn’t having that.

He cupped her chin in his hand and tilted her face back. “You are fucking beautiful. Do you hear me?” His boxers did nothing to hide his thick erection. He squeezed the base. “Baby girl, I’m constantly thinking about you, wanting you, dreaming of ways to take you. Pretty? Nope. Fucking mesmerizing, gorgeous, incredible ... yes.”

She stared up at him with a hint of wonder. He had no idea how she didn’t know she was beautiful. But he would tell her as often as she needed. He might not be good at this romance stuff. However, he figured all he needed to do was tell her the truth.

He managed to get the nightie on her without exploding. It was close. He’d never felt this close to the edge of his control before.

“Lay back,” he said gruffly.

“I can put them on.” She tried to snatch the panties from his hand.

“No snatching. Naughty.” He rolled her onto her stomach and delivered several smacks to her bottom before rolling her back over. “You’re going to let Daddy dress you.”

“Yes, Daddy,” she whispered. She lay still and obedient as he drew the panties up her legs and settled them on her.

Fuck. Why was that so hot?

He had never put panties on a woman before ... taken them off, sure. But this felt good in a different way.

Standing, he moved into the bathroom to get the First-Aid kit out. When he returned, she had the blanket pulled up to her chin.

Now, that wouldn't do. She wasn't trying to hide from him, was she? Sitting, he picked up her right hand, examining it. Thankfully, it was no longer bleeding. But it still looked a bit red and sore to him.

"They're fine," she told him as he put some antiseptic on them.

"You must really like getting your bottom smacked," he commented.

"What? No, I don't!" She sent him a disgruntled look. "Fine. I get it."

Did she? He wasn't so sure. He put bandages on both palms and then kissed each lightly. "Those stay on there until I say otherwise, understand?"

"What if they fall off?"

Unlikely. But okay ... he'd go along with it. "Then you tell me. I'll put new ones on."

"And if you're not around?"

"One of the others will be." A relationship like this worked because they leaned on each other. Owen wasn't exactly emotionally available, but he knew one of the others would show him how or step up if he couldn't. Just like he'd do the same for them.

"Are you staying?" she whispered as he drew her blankets back to check on her knees. They didn't look as bad as her hands. But he cleaned them anyway.

"Do you want me to stay?"

She didn't answer as he applied Band-Aids to her scrapes.

“Yes. But I don’t know if it’s a good idea.”

“Not what I asked, baby girl. Do you want me to stay?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is. Yes or no. No worrying about anything else. Yes. Or no?”

“Yes.”

“Then I will. Because what my baby wants, my baby gets.” He finished with her knees and moved down to her feet. Carefully, he picked up her slightly swollen foot, prodding at it. “What did Obian say about your foot?”

She chewed at her lip.

He sighed, shaking his head. Oh, she was in trouble.

“You definitely need a Daddy. More than one.” That was obvious.

“It’s not that bad. See?” She wiggled it around. But he saw her wince slightly.

“Don’t try to fool me, girl.” He prodded at it. “Slight sprain. But no running on it for a few days.”

“What?”

“Once the swelling goes down, if the pain has gone, you can go for a light jog. But not until then.”

“I won’t last that long without running.”

“No? We’ll just have to find something else to occupy you. And you should have told someone. And iced it.” He looked in the First-Aid kit and found one of the dry ice packs. Cracking it to activate it, he set it on her ankle. Then he grabbed a cushion from the armchair in the room, he set it under her foot.

“That’s really not necessary,” she told him.

“I decide what’s necessary.” Standing, he walked in to the other room to get two bottles of water from the small fridge. Returning, he saw she had her eyes closed.

“Nearly time for sleep, baby.” He grabbed a bottle of painkillers from the First-Aid kit. “Here, sit up and take

these.”

It was a sign of how tired she was feeling that she didn't protest as he helped her swallow the pills and lie back down.

He turned off the lights and climbed in beside her. There was something in the bed. It looked like a toy llama. He set it over on the bedside table in case she needed it.

She rolled on her side, cuddling into him, her hand on his stomach. She rubbed her hand back and forth, sighing.

Shit. That wasn't doing his raging erection any favors.

Did she know what she was doing to him? He finally put his hand over hers.

“You're so sexy,” she murmured sleepily.

“Good to know.”

She snorted. “You already know you're hot. Sizzling.” She put a finger to his chest, made a sizzling noise, and he had to grin.

“Ouch. So hot.”

“Keep going, baby girl. My ego likes a good stroking.”

Just how sleepy was she? Would she remember this in the morning?

“I bet something else likes a good stroking too.” She moved her hand lower to run it along his dick.

Fuck. Shit.

“You're meant to be sleeping,” he told her, reaching down to stop her.

“Please, Daddy.”

“Please what?” he asked between gritted teeth as she tried to run her hand up and down his shaft.

There was only so much self-control he had.

“Please let me taste you.”

Shit. Was he really going to refuse her?

“Please. I really need to. It will help me sleep better.”

He made a scoffing noise. “First time I’ve heard that a blow job will help the giver get to sleep.”

“I want to have you in my mouth. Please.”

Yeah, there was no way he could tell her no.

“Fuck. Yes. Suck me off, baby girl. But if you start to feel sore or ill, you stop. Understand?”

“I won’t.” She drew back the covers and leaned up on one arm so she could take his nipple into her mouth. She sucked, then scraped her teeth over him, making him groan.

With her free hand, she jacked him under his boxers. Her hand was tiny and cool around his thick, hot dick. And fuck if he wasn’t so close to the edge.

“Do not tease me. Get your mouth on my cock.”

“So impatient, Daddy.”

“This night can still end with you over my lap.”

She kneeled, grinning down at him as she reached for his boxers. But as much as he might wish he could let her be in control, he couldn’t. He took the boxers off, then he sat up, leaning back against the headboard.

Then he spread his legs and pointed at the spot on the mattress between his thighs. “Kneel there. But do not touch

me until I tell you that you can.”

She moved into position, watching him with a hint of trepidation and heat.

“I like control, but I’m going to go as easy as I can on you.”

SHE LICKED HER LIPS.

I’m going to go as easy as I can on you.

What was wrong with her that she didn’t want that? That she didn’t want easy. That she wanted him to take complete command of her.

Was it a coping mechanism? Did she think it would make her forget everything for a while?

Or was it just who she was? Did she crave his control?

She didn’t know and she wasn’t in the mood to psychoanalyze herself.

“Please,” she whispered.

“Please what, baby girl?”

“I don’t need easy. I don’t need you to be anything but who you are. That’s what I want.”

He studied her for a long moment. She felt sure he’d tell her that she wasn’t strong enough or something like that. Instead, he just nodded.

Surprise filled her.

“I’m still taking it easy on you. But I will be in control.” He grasped hold of his dick, holding it around the base. She licked her lips. She could see a bead of pre-cum at the tip. She wanted to taste him.

“Get your mouth on me. Suck me, baby girl.”

She leaned down, placing her hands on the mattress on either side of him as she took his dick into her mouth.

She murmured in pleasure, taking as much into her mouth as she could. But when she went to slide up his cock, he placed his hand around the back of her head. “Don’t move. Not yet.”

She stayed still, just trying to breathe around him. Then he took over the rhythm, moving his hips up and down in short, sharp thrusts.

He pulled back and tilted her face so she was staring up at him.

“You good, baby girl? Need me to give you a break?”

Heck. No. Surprisingly, she liked this.

“No, Daddy.”

“Good girl. Lick your way down my dick. That’s it. Now, jack me off. Fuck, girl. That feels so fucking good.”

“Please, more,” she begged. She tried to lower her mouth to his cock once more.

“Uh-uh, naughty.”

He wrapped his hand around her hair, tugging at it. The slight sting of pain just seemed to add to her pleasure. That was something she hadn’t thought possible. Then again, she’d never have thought she’d let someone take control of her like this during sex.

“Be a good girl.”

“Sorry, Daddy. It’s just you feel so good in my mouth.”

“Fuck, and your mouth is delicious. All right, baby girl. Take me deep again. That’s it. Very good.”

This time, he kept his hand in her hair, but he didn’t try to control the pace. Every so often, he’d tug at her hair, making her scalp sting. But it would only add to the pleasure rushing through her.

“I’m going to come, baby girl. And you’re going to swallow me all down. Don’t miss a drop, understand me? Or there will be consequences.”

That warning, said in his deep, gravelly voice, sent a shiver of longing through her. Part of her wanted to see what those consequences would be.

But she wasn't certain that she was up to that yet.

“Good girl. Fuck. Yes. Swallow me down.”

He removed his hand from her hair, lightly holding her face as he came. She had a feeling that he was holding back. Maybe because of what she'd been through today, or perhaps he thought he couldn't let go.

But she wasn't going to bring it up yet.

Because as she drew off his cock, a wave of dizziness hit her. Whoops. She sort of collapsed forward onto his rock-hard abs. Damn.

“Chloe? Shit. Are you all right?”

“I'm fine. I'm better than fine. I'm buzzing.”

He ran his fingers through her hair. It probably looked messy as hell. She was in a state.

But for once ... she didn't much care.

She also didn't think she could move. “Just gonna sleep here.”

“I like the idea but it's not happening.”

“Can't move.”

“Come here.” He drew her up his body so she was lying on top of him. He wrapped his arms around her.

“What are you doing?”

“Holding you.” He patted her back. “There, there. Now. now.”

She rolled her eyes, grinning. Then he spun them over, putting her on her side. Reaching down under the covers, he grabbed the ice pack, putting it on her sore ankle. Then he curled around the back of her.

“You're going to date us, baby girl.”

She let out a deep breath. “I can’t promise a future, though, Owen. No matter that you say you’re going to sort things. It can’t be sorted. And it’s not fair of me to get involved with you all when there is no future.”

“Then don’t worry about the future. Live in the now. Stop worrying about tomorrow.”

Easier said than done.

“The others? Will they really want that?”

“They will.”

He was so confident.

“So you’ll date us,” he said firmly.

“I don’t have a lot of free time.”

“Stop making up excuses. Do you want to spend time with us?”

More than anything.

“Fine. Yes. I want to spend time with you all.”

“Tomorrow.”

“I guess. I do have tomorrow off.”

“Tomorrow it is.”

“Are you sure they really want me?” she asked quietly.

“Keep asking me that with that doubt in your voice and I’m going to forget you’re exhausted. Instead, I’m going to spank your ass until you promise that you will never think of yourself as anything less than a queen. Got me?”

“You have a way with words,” she said dryly.

“I get straight to the heart of things. It’s my superpower.”

She snorted. “Are you making a joke, Owen Kingston?”

“I don’t think so. Did I?”

“Um, you said it was your superpower. You don’t have any superpowers.”

“Don’t I?” he drawled. “Obviously if you think that, then I didn’t do a good enough job with my tongue. I’ll have to rectify that.”

Holy. Shit.

Was he for real right now?

Yep, he was heading down there again, pulling down her panties, then spreading her legs so he could lick along her slick lips. She hadn’t thought it was possible for her to come again. But the guy was definitely talented with that tongue.

Superpower, huh?

Yeah ... this could well be his. It wasn’t long until she was breathing heavily as he drove her higher and higher. Oh Lord, she was so close ...

The bastard drew back.

“What are you doing?” she asked, breathlessly. Why was he stopping? “I was there.”

“I know, baby girl.” He pushed the covers back so he could look up at her. Then he kneeled between her legs and grabbing her hips, he drew her ass up onto his lap. Her legs were spread, giving him a good look at her wet pussy.

Embarrassment stained her cheeks and she tried to wiggle away.

He held onto her, then slapped the side of her thigh. “Stay still.”

“Owen, what are you doing?”

“Looking at you. Playing with you.” He pressed two fingers deep inside her, then held them still.

“It feels like you’re punishing me.”

He got a wicked look on his face. Wait. He wasn’t ...

“Why?”

“You trust me, don’t you?” he asked.

“Y-yes.” Although, at the moment she wasn’t sure she liked him very much.

What a meanie.

Whoa. Nope. She pushed her Little side away. This was a weird time for her to pop up. Then again, her inhibitions were down.

“Good girl.” He used the fingers of his other hand to play with her clit. “Now, pay attention.”

Pay attention?

His finger moved over her clit, and she clenched down on his other fingers with a soft moan.

“This is torture.”

“But the fun kind, right?”

“Maybe for you.”

“Oh, definitely for me. We all want you. All you need to do is give us a chance to show you.”

When was she ever going to get another chance to be with men like this?

Never.

“All right.”

“Good girl. I’m hungry again.” He slid down so his face was at her pussy.

Lord. Who was she to deny him? He lapped at her clit, thrusting his fingers in and out until she came again.

She was definitely going to sleep well tonight.

Beck walked out into the living room, frowning down at the text on the group chat.

HUX:

I'll stay with His Lordliness today.

BECK:

Are you sure? I can take over.

HUX:

No point. He's not coming back to the palace.
Going straight to a few meetings. I'm fine.

BECK:

You shouldn't take Lord F. duty all the time.

HUX:

Neither should you.

FUCK. Had he been that obvious?

It wasn't that he didn't want to spend time with Chloe. He just felt awkward around her. Like he didn't know what to say or do.

She was beautiful, graceful, and sweet. He was a hulking behemoth who was scared to touch her for fear of breaking her.

Yet, he was drawn to her like a moth to a flame.

Fuck. It was confusing as hell.

He stilled as he saw Owen moving around ... packing up beach stuff? An umbrella, a blanket, towels, several buckets and spades and other toys. Where had those come from?

He'd never seen them before.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Judd came into the room, running a hand over his face. He looked tired.

He probably wasn't sleeping. That was only going to add to his grumpy mood. He was always grouchy, but he got worse when he was tired. Or hungry.

There was no one as grumpy as a hangry Judd.

“Can you make us some food for lunch?” Owen asked. “And some snacks. She probably won't eat breakfast, so she'll need some snacks. High in protein. You know, that healthy crap you're always spouting on about.”

Judd had a thing about food. Beck thought it had something to do with his childhood. Both Owen and Judd had grown up in poverty. Now, Judd couldn't relax unless there was plenty of food in the fridge, even though they could go over to the palace at any time and literally eat like kings.

It made Judd feel better to keep the pantry stocked and the fridge filled.

So that's what they did.

Just like Owen needed to keep his true self hidden from everyone but them. And Hux hid his vulnerability behind jokes and an easygoing persona.

And him? Well ... he was just as messed up as the rest of them.

He pushed his thoughts aside, watching Owen again.

“Why am I making food?” Judd asked as he walked over to pull out some whole wheat bread.

Beck was all for healthy eating. He was careful about everything he put into his body. He walked over to the kitchen to make a pre-workout smoothie.

“You’re going to have to skip the gym today,” Owen told him. “Although maybe you should make one of those for her. She might have that since she barely eats.”

“Who?” he asked. Was he talking about Chloe?

“Chloe. She barely eats.”

Worry churned inside him. She was tiny. Why wasn’t she eating? Was she ill? Did she have dietary needs they didn’t know about? Or was it something else ... an eating disorder?

Fuck. Now he knew he’d worry about her until he knew.

“Why isn’t she eating?” he asked.

Owen glanced over at him. “I don’t know ... I didn’t pick up on it until yesterday. But we can make sure she eats today when we have our picnic at the beach.”

“We’re going to the beach?” Judd asked. “With Chloe?”

“Yep.”

There was something weird about Owen this morning, but Beck couldn’t figure it out. At least not while he was scrambling to catch up.

“She wants to go on a date with us?” Judd asked. “All of us? I didn’t think she wanted to be around us when she got us taken off her security.”

“She was scared of her feelings for us. And she thinks there’s no future for us.”

Judd and Beck shot each other a look.

“So, we’re good enough to spend time with, but not to have a future with?” Judd asked.

“No.” Owen shook his head. “I think she’s scared, but she’ll soon learn that I’m not letting her go anywhere. I’m

going to sort everything.”

“You are?” Beck asked. “How?”

“By taking out every obstacle.” He eyed them. “I told her that you all wanted this. That you were fine with living in the moment.”

“What kind of bullshit is that?” Judd asked.

Owen shrugged. “It got her to agree to spend time with us. We’ll show her that she’s ours, then I’ll take out anyone who stops us from having her. Easy.”

Right. Easy.

“We’re going to end up in jail,” Beck said.

“That’ll only happen if I get caught,” Owen said. “And I never get caught.”

Judd sighed. “Fuck.”

“Just don’t scare her off,” Owen warned. “Both of you should get ready.”

Nerves filled him.

Chill, man.

It was just a trip to the beach. Nothing to get worked up about.

But it didn’t help that there was so much shit going on with them all.

Were they really what this girl needed?

Hux was avoiding them and Beck wasn’t sure what to do to get through to him. Judd was frowning, looking like he was going to his execution. While Owen ... was whistling?

What the fuck?

“Are you whistling?” Beck asked Owen.

“So, what if I am? You got a problem with that?” Owen asked.

Judd finished packing up some food and stared over at Owen with a frown. “Yeah, it’s fucking weird. You never

whistle.”

“You’re never happy enough to smile,” Beck added.

“It’s almost like you ...” Judd’s eyes widened. “You fucker. Did you sleep with her last night?”

Beck winced. He grabbed at the back of his neck. “Please tell me you didn’t sneak into her bedroom, Owen.”

“I didn’t sneak into her bedroom.”

“You’re lying, aren’t you?” Beck said. “You totally snuck into her bedroom last night. For fuck’s sake, Owen. What if she goes to the Princes? What if you fucking scared her?”

“She won’t and I didn’t.”

“You have to play by the fucking rules,” Judd snapped.

“Why?” Owen’s eyes blazed. “Last night, she was having a nightmare. I stayed with her to make her feel safe. Convinced her to give us a chance. And now, we’re all going on a date with her. End of story.”

“You didn’t fuck her?” Judd asked suspiciously.

“Nope.”

Beck let the tension leech from his shoulders.

“Got to taste her, though. Fucking delicious.”

“Owen!” Judd said.

“What? I took care of her. I didn’t force her. And you guys need to fucking step up and spend time with her.”

Judd sighed. “I don’t think she’ll want to know me. I’ve been a prick.”

“You’re always a prick,” Beck said. “It’s part of your personality.”

“Yeah, but I should have been nicer to her ... it’s just hard.”

“Because you’d need a personality transplant?” Owen asked with a serious face.

Beck nodded. “Good one.”

“Good what?” Owen asked.

“Oh. You were serious.” Shit. They needed Hux for the jokes at times like this. He’d never let any of them take things too seriously. The rest of them were serious bastards at the best of times.

Judd sighed. “No. Well, maybe. It’s just ... I feel this overwhelming need to protect her, and then I see something she does that puts her health and safety in jeopardy and well ... I might overreact.”

“Might, huh?” Beck slapped his back. “I think definitely. Don’t worry, Owen and I will try to keep you from going all OTT on her ass.”

Judd sighed and nodded. “Right, let’s go get her.”

They headed out the door with their stuff. “I suppose we have to put up with that dick, Ian,” Judd muttered. “Wait, what time is she expecting us?”

As they grew closer, Beck couldn’t see Ian anywhere. Worry filled him. Why wasn’t anyone guarding her? It was obvious she wasn’t doing well at taking care of herself and it stirred his Daddy instincts.

Just go slow.

Baby steps were better than flying leaps, as his Ma would say.

Sometimes Ma didn’t make much sense. Shit, he missed her though.

“Anytime,” Owen said.

“What?” Judd asked, stilling outside her door. “What do you mean, anytime? And where is Ian? Isn’t he meant to be guarding her? Or is she getting rid of him? We should be guarding her.”

Beck groaned.

“You didn’t ask her, did you?” he said to Owen.

“Oh, fuck,” Judd muttered. “I thought this was too fucking easy. She has no idea that we’re coming for her?”

“Of course she knows that we’re spending the day together. I just didn’t tell her what time or what we’re doing.”

“Fuck. You have no idea how to deal with women, do you?” Beck said. He should have known.

“What?” Owen asked, looking confused.

“She might want time to get ready,” Judd said.

“She’ll be fine.” Owen plastered a fake smile on his face as he knocked on the door.

Anger flooded Judd as that fucker, Ian, answered the door.

Chloe's door.

Was he trying to move in on her? Judd wouldn't put it past him. He didn't trust him.

He didn't like Ian or Jack. The truth was, he liked very few people. Ian might be okay at his job ... but that wasn't enough to have Judd feeling charitable about him.

But what was he doing in her suite?

"Hello. What's up?"

"What's up? Is that any way to answer Ms. Reed's door?" Judd said stiffly. "I thought you would have better training than that."

Ian just stared at him.

"Who's there?" Chloe asked.

"It's Owen, Beck, and Judd," Ian replied. "They look like they're going camping."

"Bastard," Judd muttered.

"We're going to the beach." Owen kept the smile on his face. "Chloe?"

She appeared behind Ian. Who didn't move.

Oh, he was pushing it.

“Um, Ian?” she said quietly. “Can you please move?”

“Of course. Anything for you.”

Fucker. The asshole barely said a word the rest of the time. And now he was all chatty with their girl.

Judd was about to lose his mind.

Beck put a hand on his shoulder. “Easy, brother.”

Owen stepped forward, completely confident that she would let them in. And she did step to one side. As Judd watched, her cheeks grew red. Was she remembering what they’d done last night? He wouldn’t have minded watching Owen go down on her, lick her pussy, bring her to orgasm.

Normally, Owen was the voyeur. It wasn’t really Judd’s thing. But he could get behind watching them together.

Fuck.

Okay, he needed to think about something else before he got too excited. Last thing this situation needed was for him to have a freaking boner.

Beck shot him a sharp glance.

Asshole was too observant.

“Um, hi,” she said quietly. She reached up to run her hand over her hair. Was she nervous too?

It wasn’t just him?

“Are you all going somewhere?” she asked.

“To the beach,” Owen said, rocking on his heels. It was a calculated move. Owen never fidgeted. It was likely because of Ian’s presence.

“Oh. The beach?” Her eyes lit up.

“Yep. You’re coming with us,” Judd told her.

Ian’s eyes narrowed and Beck stepped forward. “What Owen means is that we’d love to have you join us.”

“The three of you?” she asked.

“That a problem?” he asked before he could think. Shit. That sounded far more accusatory than he’d meant it to sound.

Beck cleared his throat, drawing her attention away from Judd. Thank God. They hadn’t even left her suite and he was already fucking this up. He could feel himself sweating, but he wasn’t going to show how uncomfortable he was in front of Ian.

Fuck.

Maybe that was his problem. He always cared what other people thought.

“Would you like to come with us?” Beck asked. “Hux couldn’t come because he’s with Lord Fothersam, but he wanted to be here too. Or would you rather just go with one of us? That is if you’d like to go to the beach at all? I’ve just realized that we didn’t actually ask if you wanted to come.”

“Smooth,” Ian muttered.

“Oh. Well. I ... I ...” Her gaze moved to Owen and whatever she saw there had her taking a deep breath. “That would be nice. Oh, but, um, Ian ...” She turned to the blond-haired guard. “What about you?”

“He can stay here,” Judd barked.

“Actually, Jack and I are now assigned as Chloe’s personal guards. So where she goes, so does one of us.”

Judd crossed his arms over his chest. “She doesn’t need you. We’ll be with her.”

“It’s my job. I’m not staying behind unless Caleb tells me to.”

“Are you saying we can’t protect her?” If there was one thing Judd couldn’t stand, it was someone implying he couldn’t do his job.

“I’m sure that’s not what Ian is saying.” Chloe moved up to place her hand on Judd’s arm. He opened his mouth to argue, but there was a glimpse of anxiousness on her face.

He didn’t want her stressed.

“Chloe, what do you want to do?” Beck asked. “If you feel more comfortable with Ian along, then he’s welcome to come. Or we can talk to Caleb and have you under our care for the day. Or longer.”

She nibbled at her lip.

Fuck. Those lips. Judd had to tear his eyes away.

“I think I’d feel terrible taking up your day for no reason, Ian.”

“I’ll call Caleb,” Judd said.

“I ... I feel like I’m messing everyone around, though. I don’t mean to. Caleb rearranged everything for me, and now I’m changing it all up again.”

“Hey,” Beck said soothingly, stepping forward and slowly reaching out to free her lip.

Judd had noticed how she could be a bit jumpy when they touched her suddenly.

“Stop stressing,” Beck ordered. “No one is going to get upset at you. Caleb won’t be angry. You’re allowed to change your mind.”

“We’ll blame me,” Judd said as he used his phone to send Caleb a message. “I have big shoulders.”

“Oh, no,” she protested. “I don’t want to get you into trouble.”

“Don’t worry. Judd is used to Caleb being annoyed at him,” Owen said.

Judd just grunted.

“You trust us to take care of you?” Beck asked.

Fuck. Since she got them removed from her guard duty, did she truly have doubts about their ability to look after her? Owen said it wasn’t that ... that she was scared of what she felt for them.

But she barely knew Judd. How could she trust him?

Especially when you keep being a dick.

Yeah, he had to figure out a way to stop being an asshole ... without resorting to a personality transplant as Owen had helpfully suggested.

Fucker.

“Of course I do,” Chloe said.

Owen gestured to her and she moved over to him.

To Judd’s shock, he reached out and drew her close to his side, placing a kiss on the top of her head.

Okay, he’d never seen Owen touch anyone like that. Not in front of other people. And he did it so effortlessly. As though it felt as normal as breathing.

And she sunk into him. So trusting. Fuck, didn’t she know that he was the deadliest fucker in the room?

This girl definitely needed a keeper. She had no self-preservation instincts.

Not that Owen was going to harm her.

Nope, he was definitely in protective mode when it came to this girl.

He got a text back. “Caleb is okay with Ian being reassigned. But he’s going to call you. Bastard obviously doesn’t believe me.”

“He’s just doing his job, Judd,” Beck told him.

“Why don’t we get you ready, baby girl,” Owen told her. “We’ll meet you all outside in ten minutes.”

CHLOE FELT DAZED as Owen led her into her bedroom. At least Jonathan wasn’t there. She was still shocked that he’d given her today off.

That was so unlike him.

When she’d woken up and Owen hadn’t been there ... well, she’d started to have doubts. She’d wondered if he’d meant any of the things he’d said.

But now, they were all here ... asking her to go to the beach with them.

Something she'd been longing to do since she got here. That likely wasn't a coincidence.

Caleb called her phone and she spoke quickly to him, reassuring him that she was fine with the guys going back on her security detail.

Lord, she hated being a hassle.

“What’s wrong?” Owen asked, cupping her face between his hands.

“What? Nothing. Why?” She tried to give him a fake smile. But his frown told her that she wasn't fooling him.

“What’s your safeword?”

“Red. Why? What are you doing?” she asked as he took hold of her hands and led her to the bed.

“Bend over and put your hands on the mattress.”

“Uhh, what?”

“You keep lying to me. Not telling the truth about how you are feeling. And no matter how many times I tell you not to, you keep doing it. Which makes me think you're not going to stop until you experience some consequences. You're getting a spanking. So turn around, pull your pants and panties down, and spread your legs.”

“They'll hear, though.”

Whoa. Was that the only thing she objected to? The fact that the others might hear her being spanked?

Shouldn't she be objecting to the spanking itself?

He frowned. “You need to have a consequence for being naughty.”

“You really want to know what I'm thinking, don't you?” She was so used to pushing her own thoughts and needs to the side. To doing what Jonathan wanted. To thinking how he told her to think.

When did she become just an extension of him?

She leaned her forehead against Owen's chest. "I'm so lost, Owen. I don't know who I am anymore."

He wrapped his arms around her. "This is because of Jonathan, isn't it?"

"I don't want to talk about him." She took a deep breath and looked up at him. "I'm sorry. Really. I will try not to do that anymore. I'm not used to people wanting to hear the truth from me."

He frowned. "All right. This is the last time you get a pass, though. Next time, it's ten and I won't be going easy on you."

"Yes, Daddy," she whispered.

He turned her toward the wardrobe. "Find something suitable for the beach."

To her shock, two heavy smacks landed on her ass. She had to hold back a squeal as she turned to glare at him.

His eyes were dark. But there was a hint of heat in their stormy gray depths. "That will show you I mean business."

Ouch. She rubbed her bottom.

"No rubbing either. That's part of the punishment."

Damn it.

"What a meanie," she muttered as she entered the closet.

"What was that?" he asked.

"Nothing, dear."

He snorted as he followed her into the closet. "That's what I thought. Because I know you wouldn't be sassing me right now since I would have no problem spanking you. All sounds would be mostly muffled. Unless you scream really loudly."

"No. Nope. I'm good. I'm not sassing you at all. Not me. Nuh-uh." She searched through her clothes. What on earth could she wear to the beach? Oh wait. She did have a sundress.

It was long, but it would keep her cool. And it was the most relaxed thing she had brought with her.

She turned to look at Owen, who was watching her with interest.

“Um, can you give me a minute to get ready?”

“Why would I do that when I could stay here and watch you get naked?”

“I’m not getting naked. And I need some room.”

He didn’t look happy about it, but he stepped out to wait in the bedroom. She wondered what the others thought about him being in here. Did they know he’d spent last night with her?

Actually, who cared?

She was so used to worrying all the time about what Jonathan was thinking, but she was tired of it. Exhausted.

It didn’t matter what anyone else thought.

What mattered was that this was the first day she’d had off in years. And she wanted to spend it at the beach with a man who made her feel safe. And two other men that she felt drawn to.

She was just sad that Hux couldn’t join them.

Walking out, she glanced over at Owen, who was leaning against the wall, watching her with hungry eyes.

“Baby girl, you look ... delicious.”

She blushed with pleasure. “I do?”

“Yes. Come on. Let’s go show the others.” He held out his hand. She couldn’t remember anyone ever looking at her like Owen did.

Hands reaching for her.

Leering faces.

Dirty. Slut.

Whore.

She shook those words off. But nerves jumped in her stomach. She stepped out, and Judd and Beck turned to look at her.

Her breath caught in her throat.

“Fuck,” Judd muttered.

She moved her hand up to touch her hair. Did she look all right? Was there any hair out of place? Should she put on more make-up? Was the dress okay?

Beck stepped forward between her and Judd, who was frowning. Was there something wrong?

“What he means to say is that you look gorgeous, sweetheart.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. The hunger and admiration in his gaze filled her with more confidence.

Judd stepped to the side to nod at her. “Yes. That is what I meant to say. You look ... beautiful.”

“Thank you.” She was starting to understand Judd. She thought, anyway. He seemed to be a bit awkward. He took things personally and often spoke without thinking. But Owen had assured her that he had a soft heart.

“But also, have you got sunscreen? A hat?” Judd asked.

“I packed sunscreen,” Owen told them.

“You did? You know what to pack to go to the beach?” Judd asked.

Why wouldn't he?

“I looked it up online. They have lists for everything. How to pack for the beach, what to say on a first date, how to make a girl scream your name...” Owen winked at her.

She went bright red.

“And that's my cue to leave,” Ian said.

“Thanks, Ian.” Oops, she hadn't noticed he was still here.

Once he'd left, she turned to Owen. “I can't believe you did that!”

Owen raised his eyebrows. “What? It’s just the truth. Plus, it was time he left.”

He was terrible.

“I’ll get my hat. Do I need to bring anything else?”

“Just yourself,” Beck told her.

She gathered up her hat and sunglasses, checking her reflection once more.

You have this.

It’s just a trip to the beach ... and also a date.

With three hot guys.

Nothing strange about that at all.

When they left the suite, Chloe saw that two ATVs were already packed up with stuff. Owen held out his hand and helped her into one ATV, then got into the driver's seat. Judd and Beck climbed in the other one.

They headed out the way she usually went for a run. She'd nearly gone running this morning, until she'd remembered Owen's warning.

She bit her lip. Had he really been going to spank her just before?

Yikes.

He'd checked her hands this morning and declared she could take off the bandages. So that was something, at least.

They veered off rather than heading toward the cliffs.

"There's an easier way to get down to the beach from here," Owen told her as he slowed and parked the ATV.

She nodded and undid the belt he'd buckled up for her. Before he could get around to help her out, Beck was there. He held out a hand to her. She slid hers in. His hand was warm and rough and it engulfed her much smaller hand. As she stood next to him, she felt tiny. But safe.

"Thank you."

He was staring down at her intently. "You're welcome."

They stared at each other some more before she started smiling.

“What? What is it? Oh shoot. Do I have something on my face?” He patted his face with his hand.

“No, no.” She shook her head. “It’s just that I think you’re as nervous as I am.”

He heaved out a breath. “That obvious, is it?”

“Just a teeny bit.” She held her finger and thumb apart.

“I know why I’m nervous, but why are you?”

“Are you kidding? I’m going on a date with three gorgeous men. It’s kind of intimidating.”

“A date, huh?” He smiled at her.

Mortification filled her as she stared at him. Oh, Lord. Had she just made a fool of herself? Is that not what this was? Had they asked her as friends?

Of course they asked you to be friendly.

Well, maybe not Owen. Perhaps he’d said he was going, and then they decided to come ... and oh, God. It didn’t matter.

She’d just said it was a date when it wasn’t.

“I’m so sorry. That’s so embarrassing. I can’t believe I thought ... excuse me.” She kept her gaze down, not looking at him. Now, she just wanted to go back to her room ... and never come out again.

“Whoa, where are you going?” Beck reached out to touch her arm, and she was so on edge that she shied away. He immediately snatched it back. “I apologize. I didn’t mean to ... upset you.”

She glanced up to see him staring out at the ocean ahead of them. It was pristine and beautiful. It should have calmed her.

“Why are you apologizing?” she asked. “I’m the idiot who thought this was a date and made everything awkward. I’m so sorry.” She walked away toward where Owen and Judd stood, watching them.

Stupid. Dirty.

Deep breaths, Chloe.

“Whoa. Nope. Okay, we need to talk for a moment.” Beck moved in front of her, placing his hands on her shoulders.

He frowned. “I know I’m a big guy, but I won’t harm you.” There was a strange look in his eyes. One she couldn’t understand.

Her eyes widened. “I know that. I’m not scared of you. I just ... sometimes if I’m on edge I get easily startled.” It wasn’t a lie.

“Are you starting to trust us?”

“Yes, I think so.”

He gave her a beautiful smile. Lord, he was handsome. “Good. Because we would never harm you. And if anyone ever tries to hurt you, then you’re to tell us.”

There was that Daddy voice. Delicious.

“Judd and I will head down,” Owen said, gesturing toward a path that seemed to lead down to the ocean. “Beck, can you bring baby girl? It might be better if you carry her so she doesn’t twist her sore ankle.”

“Sore ankle?” Judd turned to her. “From yesterday morning?”

“Um, yes.”

“You should have told me about that when it happened. Don’t keep things like that from me again.”

She stared at Judd in shock.

“Make sure you carry her,” he ordered Beck.

“I don’t need anyone to carry me,” she said. How mortifying.

“Beck will carry you,” Judd ordered. “No arguments.”

“Let’s go,” Owen said.

They both disappeared down the path.

“You really don’t have to carry me,” she told Beck.

“You don’t want me touching you?” There was a note in his voice. Oh no ... she hadn’t hurt him, had she? “I’ll call Owen back.”

“No, it’s not that,” she said hastily. “I do want you to touch me. I just ... Lord, this is hard to say. I’m not used to being touched all the time.”

He froze. “What do you mean?”

She blew out a breath. She couldn’t look at him, so she stared out at the ocean. “It’s been a long time since anyone touched me with care or thought.” Rather than indifference or to make her feel smaller than them. “I don’t remember the last time I was hugged before I came here. Probably my ex-boyfriend in high school, but he was a jerk so he doesn’t count.”

Beck made a strange noise. Almost as though he was in pain. She glanced up to find him staring down at her with ... with anguish in his face.

It took her by surprise and she just gaped at him. She wasn’t expecting that reaction.

“It’s okay,” she whispered, reaching forward to touch his arm. “I’m all right.”

Beck shook his head. “It’s not okay. You’re not all right. And you shouldn’t have to pretend that you are. How often do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Put other people’s emotions and feelings before your own. Freckles, I’m so sorry. No one should go without some sort of caring touch.”

“Yeah, it starts to mess with your head after a while.”

“So, you haven’t dated anyone in a long time?”

“Not since that secret boyfriend in high school. The jerk whose touches don’t count.”

“Secret boyfriend?” he asked.

“Ah, yeah. Secret in that he didn’t want anyone to find out that he was fucking me. The social pariah of our school. I thought he wanted to keep us a secret because he wanted me to himself. That’s what he told me. But no ... I caught him kissing one of the cheerleaders one day. I confronted him ... right there in front of half the team and the cheer squad. He laughed in my face. Told me there was no way he’d ever touch an STD-ridden little whore like me.”

“That motherfucker.”

“The ironic thing is that the only STD I’ve ever had in my life, I got from that asshole.”

“I’m going to want a name.”

“What?” She stared at him in shock.

“His name. What is it?”

“I ... why?”

“So I can make that bastard suffer.”

“That ... no, it was a long time ago. It’s not necessary.”

“Oh, Freckles, I promise you. It’s more than necessary. And you’re going to want to give me that name because I’ll allow him to keep breathing. If you leave this to Owen ... the fucker will never be found because they won’t be able to put the pieces of him back together.”

She swallowed heavily. “I thought you were the sanest one.”

He grinned. Then, reaching up slowly, he cupped the side of her face and ran his thumb over her lower lip. “That’s the thing. I am. Any of the others will happily send that guy to hell. Where he belongs.”

“Hux?”

“Uh-huh. Hux hates bullies. With a vengeance. He’d bury that bastard alive.”

She sucked in a breath. She’d never had anyone defend her before. She wanted these men for her own. What would it be

like to always be able to rely on them? To have them always there to defend her?

Easy, Chloe.

“I hope you realize now that I know I’m not going to be able to keep from touching you. I’m going to make it my aim to ensure that you never go without again.”

“You are?”

“I am.” He put both hands on either side of her face. “And just so you know ... this is most definitely a date.”

“It ... it is?”

She chewed her lip and he reached down to free it, running his thumb across her lower lip again. Damn. Why was that so sexy?

“Oh yes. I’m sorry if it sounded like I was questioning you before. All I meant was ... well, I was glad you thought it was a date as well. Sometimes Owen misreads things. He decides what he wants and doesn’t pay attention to anything else. And he wants you with us. So I was worried that perhaps you only wanted him and that he was pushing you toward us. Or something like that.”

“Oh. Well, he can be pushy when he wants something.”

He tensed.

“But in this case ... he was right. I do ... I like all of you.”

“Even Judd?”

“Hmm. I have to think about that one a bit. He is a Grumpzilla.”

Beck’s lips twitched. “Does he know about that nickname?”

Her eyes widened. “No. And you will not tell him.”

“I don’t know ... I feel like it might slip out.”

“You’re as bad as Hux.”

“Hux knows about this nickname?” he asked.

“Yes. And he said that unless I ate some ice cream, he would tell him. So mean.”

“He ... he bribed you into eating ice cream?” Beck asked.

“More like threatened ... but yeah, that’s the general gist.”

“I want to say I’m surprised ... but I don’t think I am. What sort of ice cream?”

“Well, I just wanted a small scoop of coffee and candy, but he ended up getting a sundae bigger than my face.”

Beck shook his head. “He’s got a real sweet tooth.” He stared down at her hungrily. “Hmm ... so what do I get if I don’t tell Judd about his nickname?”

Oh. Crap.

She was in trouble here. She didn’t know what to say. Nerves fluttered in her stomach. Could she say what she was thinking?

Was it what he wanted?

She raised her hand to smooth down her hair. He watched her intently.

“Um, I don’t know.” She licked her lips.

He moved his thumb back to her lower lip. He seemed to like doing that.

“Open,” he whispered.

She parted her lips and he placed his thumb in her mouth.

Dear. Lord.

Why was this hot?

“Suck.”

She sucked on his thumb and hunger filled his face. “Sweet baby, do you know what you’re doing to me?”

She shook her head without letting go.

“I’d show you, but I don’t want to be crude.”

Warmth filled her cheeks and she drew her head back. “Show me. Please.”

He raised one eyebrow. “You sure?”

“I ... yes ... I need to know.”

He took hold of her hand and ran it down his chest. Leaning in, he pressed his lips to hers. “Open for me, baby. This is my price. I won’t tell Judd what you call him, but you’re going to kiss me as payment.”

He didn’t have to bribe her to get her to kiss him.

She parted her lips, and he took her mouth. Hard. Fiery.

So hot.

She whimpered as he led her hand further down to where his hard cock was pressing against his shorts.

Oh. Lord.

Drawing back, he stared down at her. Both of them were breathing heavily and she felt slightly light-headed. “See what you do to me, Freckles?”

“Yes,” she said in a husky voice.

“This is most definitely a date. And Owen isn’t the only one who wants you. Hey, don’t stress.”

He freed her lip from her teeth.

“I’ve never been in a proper relationship. Again, I don’t count that jerk in high school. I’m so out of my depth ...”

“Hey, it’s okay to be nervous. Even a little scared. As long as you want this.”

“I do, but ...”

“But what?”

“I don’t see how it will ever work. I tried to tell Owen this. I’m leaving in six days. Maybe we’d be better off not doing this.”

“Maybe,” he agreed. “But sometimes living with regrets is worse than living with heartbreak.”

She frowned at him. "I've never heard that before."

"Likely not. My Ma is filled with all sorts of interesting sayings."

"You're close?"

"Very."

She wished she had that. Wished she was free to have the four of them. But she didn't see how that would work.

"Owen says that he's not letting me go. But I don't see how this can work and I don't want to hurt anyone. Or make you think I can promise something I can't."

Beck hated the stress in her face.

He never wanted her to worry about anything. There was so much more going on with this girl than they knew about. They needed to get her to confide in them.

“You can talk to me about anything. We need to build your trust in us and to do that, we all need to spend time together. And that might mean that our feelings will deepen, which will make it harder if something goes wrong. But I will say this ... if Owen says he’s going to sort something out, he will. There’s very little he wants in life ... but when he does want something, he moves the world to get it.”

“He might just have to.”

Slowly, he drew her close. “I hate that you’re worrying so much, Freckles. A problem shared is a problem halved.”

“Your Ma again?”

“Yeah. Sometimes she comes out with some that everyone knows. Other times, she just makes shit up.”

She let out a small giggle, and it was like the sun coming out from behind the clouds. His soul felt lighter.

“Come on, Freckles. I heard that you’ve been wanting to go to the beach. Put your worries aside. At least for today and let’s have some fun.”

She nodded but didn’t say anything.

This girl ... she took everything on her shoulders. And he wanted to ease that. Even if he had to get a bit Daddy on her ass.

“Right, listen to me.” He drew back, placing his hands on her shoulders and giving her a stern look. “You’re going to make yourself sick if you keep worrying all the time. You’ve got to let people in, let them share the load.”

“I don’t know.”

He cupped her chin. “I do know. Let us take some of that burden and you’ll be able to breathe easier.”

He could feel how tense she was. It wasn’t healthy. There was so much bottled inside.

“One day of not worrying,” she whispered.

“Yep. One day. Can you do that?”

“I think so.”

“Good girl. I’m proud of you. I know this isn’t easy.”

Her shoulders went back.

There was a shout from below. Their names were being called.

“Come on, they’re starting the fun without us.”

“We can’t have that.” She gave him a smile.

“Piggyback ride or would you rather I carried you?”

Her eyes wide. “Neither.”

“Sorry, Freckles, that’s not happening. The path isn’t completely stable, and you could stumble and hurt your ankle further.” He gazed down at her feet. He couldn’t see that one looked swollen or bruised, but Owen wouldn’t have mentioned it if he wasn’t sure.

“It’s really not that bad. And what if you slip? You shouldn’t be carrying me.”

“When I’m carrying you, I won’t ever fall. Promise.” He grimaced as he took in what he’d just said. “That probably sounded really cheesy.”

“No, actually, I thought it was sweet.”

“Good.” Turning, he crouched down. While he’d like to carry her cradled in his arms, he thought she might feel more confident in his ability to get her down to the beach without falling if he could see where he was stepping. “Just think of me as your sweet donkey. That sounded better in my head.”

She chuckled. If him acting like an idiot made her laugh like that ... then he’d gladly do it.

She moved in behind him and he got his hands around the backs of her thighs, lifting her up.

“Ohh!”

“You okay, Freckles?” he asked as he stood.

“Yes ... just, you’re strong. And tall.”

“You aren’t scared of heights, are you?” he teased as he started walking down the path.

“Just a bit. This is a much better way to ride than the way Hux carried me,” she told him.

“Hux carried you?”

“He threw me over his shoulder. I nearly threw up.”

“Hux can be ... impulsive.”

“Is he okay? I haven’t really spoken to him since yesterday afternoon.”

“He’s ... working through some stuff.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Nothing that you said or did. Just something from his past. I can’t say more.”

“It’s all right. I get it.”

At the bottom of the slope, he let her slide back down. When he turned, she wobbled slightly.

“Whoa. Are you all right? What is it? Your ankle?”

“Hmm. Oh no, my ankle is fine. Owen is just being overprotective.”

“Owen can do that.” With people he really cared about—like the three of them.

And her.

He got the feeling it wouldn't be hard to fall in love with Chloe. She was equal parts strength and vulnerability. Someone with a lot going on, but who did her best to look after everyone else.

Even if no one was taking care of her.

That was going to change.

Beck took in her pale skin. “Are you feeling light-headed? Did you eat breakfast?” He remembered what Owen had said about her eating.

“Um, well ...”

“Not sure that Owen has had a chance to talk to you about this, but there can't be any lies between us.”

“Uh, yeah. No, I haven't had any breakfast.”

“What about dinner last night?” he asked suspiciously.

“No. I wasn't hungry.”

“When was the last time you ate?”

“Umm.” She rubbed at her temple. “I'm not sure.”

“Right. If you can't remember, then it was too long ago. That's not good, Freckles.”

“Why Freckles?”

“I'm not letting you distract me. But it's because of these.” He ran his finger over the top of her nose.

Then she slammed her hand over her nose. “You can see them?”

“Uh, yes?” Why was she so upset?

“Shit. I didn't put on enough make-up this morning.”

He didn't like any of that statement. “You don't have to cover them up. Why would you? They're cute.”

She dropped her hand. “You really think they’re cute?”

“Course I do. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Jonathan thinks they’re a flaw.”

“Jonathan’s a giant dick. Excuse my language,” he said hastily.

She grinned. “Jonathan is a giant dick. And you can swear around me.”

“My Ma would tan my hide if she heard me swearing in front of a lady.”

“Your Ma sounds like an amazing person.”

“She is. Raised me on my own after my dad died when I was six. There’s no one like my Ma.” Ester hadn’t gotten on with her, though. That should have been a red flag. Anyone who didn’t love his Ma as much as he did wasn’t for him.

He could see her talking to Chloe, though. The two of them sitting down at the big, worn table that she’d served thousands of meals on.

Damn.

He was getting ahead of himself.

“And I expect that when you’re in Little space, you won’t swear either.”

Her eyes widened.

Shit. Definitely getting ahead of himself.

“Who told you that I was a Little?” She looked so uncertain.

Shit. Had he messed up? Hux was going to kill him.

Why did he have to go saying that?

“Hux did. We don’t keep anything from each other. I hope you don’t feel he betrayed your confidence.”

“No. I don’t mind. I never said he had to keep it to himself. Is that the reason you decided you wanted to date me?”

Oh, fuck.

He cupped her face between his hands, wanting her full attention. "I wanted you from the moment I first saw you."

"W-what?"

"When you walked into that room with Hux and Lord Fothersam, I took one look at you and I was blown away."

"Really?" she whispered.

Did she not know how utterly beautiful she was? Seemed like she didn't.

"You barely looked at me. I didn't think you even liked me. You kept calling me, ma'am."

He smiled. "You looked so beautiful that I thought you were completely untouchable. That there was no way someone like you would look twice at me."

"Are you ... crazy? Do you not have a mirror? Beck, you are ... you're one of the sexiest men I've ever seen in my life. I look at you ... and I want to climb you like King Kong and claim you as my Big Ben ... hmm, I think I'm mixing things up there."

He had to grin. "I think I get the idea." Although if anyone was King Kong it was him. He felt huge in comparison with her delicacy. He would have to make sure he was always careful with her.

"You guys coming or what?" Judd yelled.

"Grumpzilla is getting impatient," he murmured.

She smiled. "Is he ever patient?"

"Hmm. Not that I've seen. Let's go join them. I'll get you something to eat. And you will eat it. Or I'll tell Judd that you've been skipping meals. He'll make it his life's mission to make you eat. And if you think he's stubborn and bossy now ... just wait."

"Jeez, you play dirty."

"I do when it's something important."

Her eyes lit up at his words.

“But I do want to make something clear. I do not want you skipping any more meals, understand? It’s a risk to your health. And if we ... well, I’m going to assume you know that I’m a Dom.”

“Yeah, uh, Hux told me. He said you’re a Daddy Dom. The McDaddy.”

“McDaddy?” Because of his size?

“Like the Daddiest of them all. Or something like that.” She gave him a nervous look. “You didn’t want me to know?”

“No. It’s not that.” He sent her a small smile. “Health and safety are very important to us McDaddies. And you’re risking your health by skipping meals.”

“I’m not a big eater.”

“It’s all right if you only eat a little bit. But you have to eat. And you might need some vitamins or shakes. I’ll do some research.”

“I’m really fine.”

“But we want you better than fine, Freckles. We want you to thrive.”

W *e want you to thrive.*

These guys were crazy.

She couldn't believe that Beck had piggybacked her. She'd barely been able to get her legs around him, he was so wide. But rather than his strength scaring her, she liked it.

She liked how secure he made her feel. As though he'd always listen to her. Always care what she had to say.

He took her hand in his, leading her toward the others. He walked slowly and every so often, he'd glance down at her feet.

"My ankle is fine. It was just a little swollen."

"A little swollen isn't fine, Freckles," he replied. "I don't want you doing anything strenuous for a while."

She wondered what he considered strenuous. Would riding that firm cock of his while he lay on his back be strenuous? She wouldn't have to put any pressure on her ankle.

Shoot.

Stop it.

What was wrong with her? This wasn't like her. Hussy.

Whore.

She wasn't, though. She knew she wasn't.

"Understand?" he said. "No running or walking too far. What did Obian say about your ankle?"

“Um, I didn’t tell him.”

“We need to work on your communication, Freckles. You need to start telling people how you feel. Especially when you’re in pain. And if you can’t do that ... then one of us will have to step in and do it for you.”

She didn’t know what to say to that. So she just nodded.

Then she took in the others. They’d set up a space several hundred feet down the beach. She wasn’t sure why they’d gone so far, but that didn’t matter. A blanket was laid out on the sand and a couple of chairs were set up. There was also an umbrella for shade. And buckets, spades, flippers, snorkels, towels, along with a giant blow-up ball. And was that a volleyball set?

But even stranger than the sheer amount of stuff was the fact that Judd and Owen were staring down at everything as though they had no idea what to do with it.

“Um, are they okay?” she asked.

“Hmm, that’s debatable.” He sent her a wink. “But if you mean right in this moment ... I think they’re confused.”

“By beach stuff?” That sounded weird.

Beck eyed them as they drew close. “You two okay?”

“Ah, yep.” Judd rubbed his forehead. “Just not sure what to do now.”

“Well, you can sit if you want.” She kneeled on the blanket. She glanced at the bucket and spade. Would anyone think her weird for wanting to build a sandcastle?

Beck sat on the edge of the blanket while Owen and Judd sat in the chairs.

“These things are more comfortable than they look,” Owen said.

“Have the two of you never had a picnic on the beach?” she asked. That’s what they were acting like ... but that couldn’t be the case.

Right?

But as their silence grew, she stared over at them. She shared a look with Beck, who didn't seem that surprised.

She hadn't had a great childhood ... but even her mom had taken her to the beach a few times.

"Where did you grow up?" she asked.

"Harlem," Judd said.

Owen nodded. "Same."

She hadn't been to New York, so she wasn't sure if there were beaches nearby.

"Oh, did you know each other growing up?" she asked as Beck searched through some bags.

"Yeah," Owen said. "We lived in the same neighborhood. Kind of."

Kind of?

"When I lived with a foster family for a while, we went on the train to Long Island once," Judd said. "I didn't really join in, though. I was ... angry at the world, I guess. Just sat there, sulking. I was sixteen. I've always regretted that."

Wow. She hadn't expected him to be that open with her.

"Never went to the beach until I could drive," Owen said. "And then it was because we were searching for a place to bury ..." he trailed off, looking around at them all. "Never mind."

She gaped at him. Had he been about to say that they were looking for a spot to bury a body?

Surely not.

She had an overactive imagination.

"Here, let me put some sunscreen on you." Beck sat behind her and squirted some into his hands before running it over her exposed shoulders and arms. She shivered and he removed his hands. "Okay?"

"It's cold," she explained.

"Ahh, sorry, Freckles. I should have warmed it up first."

Jeez, who were these guys? And how could she keep them?

She was all too aware of Judd and Owen watching Beck.

“I’m starting to see the appeal of the beach,” Owen said strangely.

What did that mean?

Judd grunted in reply.

Beck moved around to her front. “Feet.

“I can do my feet.”

“Feet,” he repeated.

She kicked off her sandals and he took one foot in his lap and slathered it in sunscreen up to her knees. Even though they were covered.

Then he did the same to the other one.

Dear Lord.

Who’d have thought that having sunscreen put on could be such a sexy experience?

Then he moved on to her hands and forearms. She swore he was taking his time.

Not that she was complaining.

“Face,” he said after he finished her arms. He tilted her face back and dabbed the sunscreen on before rubbing it in. Then he kissed the tip of her nose. “Good girl.”

She smiled.

“We need to buy a vat of sunscreen,” Owen said.

“Uh-huh,” Judd agreed.

They were being so weird.

“I’m hot.” Owen suddenly stood and stripped off his T-shirt. “I need more sunscreen on, though.”

“Subtle,” Beck said dryly.

“Baby girl?” He sat in front of her, presenting his back.

Whoa.

All that gorgeous, tanned skin in front of her made her mouth go dry. She studied the tattoo winding around his side. She'd seen it last night but hadn't taken the time to study it.

It was filled with swirls and flames. Kind of abstract. She longed to run her fingers over it.

"Baby girl?"

"Oh, sorry. Of course." She put some sunscreen on her hand and started running it over his warm, smooth skin.

Damn. She clenched her thighs together.

"That feels so good," he groaned.

"I'm hot too." Judd suddenly sat next to him, his shirt gone.

Her mouth dropped open. He was wider than Owen. Slightly more muscular.

Dear Lord.

She moved so she could put some sunscreen on Judd's back too. Her mouth went dry.

"You're an asshole," Owen told Judd.

"Right back at ya."

She ignored them and concentrated on getting every inch of skin she could reach. Wouldn't want to miss any.

"There," she said huskily. "All done."

"Sure?" Judd asked.

"Uh-huh." She had to stop herself from offering to do their chests.

"Beck?" she asked. "What about you?"

"I'm good," he said hastily from where he sat on the blanket. He still had his T-shirt on. Might be just as well, otherwise she might self-combust.

"What do we do now?" Owen asked.

“I have an idea,” Beck said. He was searching around in a cooler bag.

“What are you doing?” Judd came over and brushed his hands away. “I have everything arranged in there. What are you looking for? A shake? A bar?”

“Freckles? What do you feel like? A protein bar? A piece of fruit?”

Judd turned so quickly that she felt sure he was going to give himself whiplash. “You’re hungry?”

“Um, not really.”

His eyes narrowed. “Are you lying to me?”

“No.” She wasn’t. She didn’t feel that hungry.

“She hasn’t eaten breakfast,” Beck said. “Or dinner last night.”

“What?” Judd snarled. He practically pushed Beck out of the way. He looked almost ... feral.

She gave him a shocked look before turning to glare at Beck. What had he just done?

Judd muttered to himself as he set out a veritable feast of food. Her eyes widened as she looked over everything. There was cut-up fruit. Huge sandwiches wrapped in Saran wrap. And then he drew out some other sandwiches with the crusts cut off. These were cut into shapes. There were hearts, triangles, circles, and something that looked a bit odd. What was it?

She moved closer, knowing he’d made these sandwiches for her. Which was adorable. But what was that shape?

Judd was busy glaring at Beck. “Why didn’t you tell me she hadn’t eaten breakfast straight away?”

“I told you almost as soon as we got here,” Beck said calmly. “I only just found out myself.”

Judd turned that glare on her and she froze. “And you.”

“Me?” she squeaked.

He pointed a finger at her. “Not eating is unacceptable. You’ll be eating right now. Butt down, mouth open, get ready to swallow.”

Beck groaned. “Judd.”

“What?” she asked.

“I’m disturbed by my reaction to that,” Owen said, shifting around in his chair.

She went bright red. Poor Judd still didn’t seem to realize quite how he’d worded that.

Judd unwrapped a sandwich, then paused. “Any allergies?”

“Um, no.”

“Anything you really hate?”

“Not really. I’m not fussy.”

“Good.” He held a sandwich up and she took it from him, studying the shape. “What is it meant to be?”

“Ah. Oh,” Judd said.

Were his cheeks red?

“Ah, well ... hmm. It’s meant to be a llama.”

“Oh, that’s cute.”

Judd eyed her strangely, then he glanced over at Owen. “Do you like llamas?”

“Of course. Who wouldn’t?” She kind of saw that it might be a llama. Maybe.

“I think he was trying to make it look like the llama that you sleep with,” Owen said casually.

She gasped in horror.

“Oh shit,” Beck said. “Owen, that might have been something that she wanted to keep private.”

“Amy is not a llama,” she said, ignoring Beck.

“What?” Owen asked. “What the heck is it then? Strange looking horse.”

“She’s not a horse. She’s an alpaca.”

“Isn’t that the same thing as a llama?” Owen scratched at his chin.

“It certainly is not. Amy Alpaca is insulted. She will expect an apology. She likes roses.”

Owen gaped at her.

Yep, she was acting crazy. But seriously ... what an insult to an alpaca. She knew they were always getting mixed up with llamas, but that didn’t mean they liked it.

“It’s like calling a camel a horse,” she muttered.

“Um, sorry?” Owen said.

“Like I said ... apologize to Amy. With roses. Preferably white. Although she isn’t fussy.”

She turned back to Judd. “I can understand why you struggled since you didn’t have accurate information.”

“Ahh, thank you.”

“Have I really got to buy roses for an alpaca?” Owen was asking Beck.

“I think so, man. The alpaca sounds pretty upset.”

Oh Lord.

They thought she was nuts. She thought she was nuts.

But when she risked a look at Beck, he just winked at her. Owen was nodding thoughtfully. He brought out his phone. She reached over to grab for it.

He gave her a shocked look.

“You don’t really have to buy her roses. I’m acting like a crazy person. Sorry.”

She was so embarrassed.

Owen scowled. “What did I tell you about saying bad things about yourself?”

Uh-oh.

There was no way he would spank her here, right?

“You can’t spank me!” She looked around. There was no one here. But still, he wouldn’t spank her here, would he?

Hmm. She wasn’t so sure about that.

“Spank her?” Beck asked.

Oh crap.

Owen raised his eyebrows as he stared down at her from his chair. “Don’t think I won’t do it just because we’re outside, baby girl. I gave you a reprieve earlier, but that was your last one.”

“You still spanked me!”

“Two pops on your butt aren’t a spanking.”

“It is in my books!” she cried. “And you’re not spanking me here!”

“That’s a shame,” Judd muttered.

She shot him a look. He wasn’t helping.

“And I didn’t say anything bad about myself.”

“I heard you call yourself crazy,” Owen said.

Nuh-uh. He had it all wrong. That wasn’t what she’d said at all.

“Owen,” Beck said again. “We’ve had a conversation about consent.”

“I know. Consent is sexy. Always get consent. Have a safeword. I remember it all. I have an excellent memory.”

“So you’ve had that conversation with Chloe?” Beck asked, sounding far too interested.

Great. Were they all going to want to wallop on her ass? She clenched her butt cheeks just thinking about it.

“Yep. Her safeword is red. She’s never been in a relationship with a Dom or a Daddy. She’s nervous about being spanked, but not opposed to it.” He frowned, thinking.

“Limits. We didn’t really talk about limits except that anal isn’t one of them.” He looked at her expectantly.

She groaned, going bright red.

“That’s good you spoke to her about all of that. But how about we try not to overwhelm her so much she starts to hyperventilate,” Beck said calmly.

“Got to know her limits so I don’t cross them. How do you feel about bondage?”

She stared at Owen. Was he having her on? He wanted to know that right now?

“Eat.”

She turned to Judd who was staring intently at her sandwich.

“Um. I ... I don’t think I can.”

Judd grunted.

“Okay, everyone, just take a deep breath. You’re overwhelming her,” Beck said.

“She needs to eat,” Judd said. “She’s pale.”

“Come here, Freckles.” Beck reached slowly to grab hold of her. She tightened up. He drew her onto his lap, settling her so she faced him. He placed one hand around the back of her head and drew her in, snuggling her into his chest. His touch was firm but didn’t hurt her. And she got the feeling if she tried to move, he’d let her go immediately.

But she kind of liked his firm grip. It was helping to keep her grounded. His other arm was wrapped around her lower back. She was pressed fully up against him.

And her body really liked that.

Shit. Now was not the time to get turned on. But she couldn’t help it.

“Feeling better?” Beck asked.

“Yeah. I’m so sorry. I just ... I felt a bit ...”

“Overwhelmed? It’s all right. I get it. We can be a lot. Judd has a thing about making sure we’re eating properly and looking after ourselves. When one of us is sick, he goes all mother hen on our asses.”

“He sure does. Last time I got a sniffle, he tried to stick a rod up my ass. Why he thought that would make me feel better, I have no idea,” Owen complained. “Maybe he thought it would scare the germs out of me.”

“It was a thermometer, you ungrateful asshole. You think I wanted to stick anything up your hairy ass? I didn’t. But I thought the oral one wasn’t getting a proper reading. And you didn’t have a sniffle. You had pneumonia. I was the one who got your ass to the hospital. You should have thanked me.”

“You knocked me out and stuck me in the back of your truck.”

“Because you were trying to leave.”

“Never did pay you back for that.”

To her shock, she started giggling.

Beck shook his head. “They’ve known each other so long that sometimes they sound like a married couple.”

“Hey!” Judd protested. “I could do way better than him!”

“No, you couldn’t,” Owen said smoothly.

She turned her face to look at him, surprised to find him staring at her intently. “You okay, baby girl?”

“Yeah.”

“You lying to me?” Owen asked.

“No.”

He nodded. “Not going to apologize for threatening to spank you.”

Beck groaned.

“I didn’t expect you to.”

“Good. Because you deserve it.”

“I do not. I didn’t call myself crazy. I said I was acting crazy.”

“Hmm.” He frowned. “I don’t know ... could be the same thing.”

“It’s not. It’s really not.”

“How about we let that go and let Chloe eat some food since it’s been a while since she last ate,” Beck suggested.

Why wasn't she eating? Was she ill?
Worry filled Judd.

Perhaps they needed to take her back.

Beck turned her around on his lap so she was facing Judd. She didn't look ill. Well, she was pale. But other than that, she seemed fine. Just a bit ... embarrassed.

Judd clawed back the need to order her to eat. Instead, he reached out slowly to clasp her chin. He studied her face. "Is there a reason you're not eating?"

"I ..." She licked her lips. "I want to say no. But I ... I don't know. I never seem to be that hungry and sometimes I forget."

She didn't seem that certain of her answers. Worry filled him. But he knew that he might be acting irrationally. Having grown up with never enough food in the cupboards, he now had a few issues around food.

And yeah ... he had turned that into a bit of an obsession with making sure that his brothers were always well-fed and healthy. But if he didn't fill the fridge with good food and cook it, then Hux would just eat crap. And Beck would live on protein bars and drinks. And Owen, well, who knew whether he even needed to eat.

So really ... they should thank him.

They'd probably be happy if he turned most of that attention on Chloe. Although she might not feel the same way.

But from now on, he was determined to ensure that she ate. However, being all bossy and intense probably wasn't the way to get her to eat. He needed to help her relax.

They needed Hux here. He always knew how to lighten the mood.

"How about a game?" he asked.

"A game?" She was still sitting on Beck's lap. He was surrounding her, his big body dwarfing hers. But despite their size difference, they looked right together.

He hoped to make her feel so relaxed around him that she would sit on his lap as easily.

Then stop being such a bossy, grouchy bastard.

It wasn't that simple ... since that was kind of his personality.

But he'd try.

He brought out the three plastic cups he'd brought with him, then grabbed a grape. Hmm. He needed a flat surface. Using the lid of the cooler, he placed the three cups upside down.

"Right, see this grape?" He held it up.

She nodded.

"I'm going to put the grape under one cup. You guess which cup has the grape and I take a bite of a sandwich. You guess wrong and you take a bite."

She grinned at him. He was taken aback by how young she looked.

Carefree.

How much stress was she carrying on those slim shoulders? It made him want to do whatever it took to always have her looking that way.

"Ready?"

“Ready.” She leaned forward, watching intently as he put the grape under the middle cup. Then he started moving the cups around.

She had her tongue poking slightly out. It was adorable. Endearing.

And it made her seem more real. When he’d first met her, she’d seemed like an angel. Beautiful and untouchable.

Cold and removed.

But right now, with her tongue poking out, her face flushed pink with enjoyment, eyes sparkling as she sat on Beck ... yeah, he could see how mistaken he’d been.

“Right. Which one is it under?” he asked.

“That one.” She pointed confidently to the cup on the right. “It’s that one. I knows it.”

He blinked and shared a look with Beck. She was starting to go into Little headspace. It filled him with hope that she really did trust them. Even if just a tiny bit.

He lifted the cup.

No grape.

“Oh no! That can’t be right! I was sure it was there.” Her lower lip dropped in the sweetest pout.

Fuck.

He was entranced. He had to shake himself to remember what his aim was here.

“Nope. Afraid not.” He lifted another cup to show her the grape.

She sighed. “Drat. Again! Again!”

“Uh-uh,” Beck said. “Not until you eat a bite of your sandwich.”

“Can’t I do that after?” she wheedled.

“Nope,” Judd said firmly. “Rules are rules. Would you like ham and cheese, cream cheese and olive, or peanut butter and jam?”

“Um, cream cheese and olive.”

He unwrapped the heart-shaped sandwich and held it toward her. She reached out a hand for it, but he drew it back.

“Nope. Let me feed you.”

She sucked in a breath. “R-really?”

“Yes.”

WAS SHE REALLY DOING THIS?

Sitting on the lap of one man while another fed her and the third watched on with hunger in his eyes that had nothing to do with food?

“Eat your sandwich like a good girl,” Owen urged.

“Take a bite,” Judd said. There was a note of sternness in his voice that told her he wouldn’t bend.

Leaning forward slightly, she took a delicate bite.

“Hmm, I don’t know. Are we going to accept that as a proper bite, Judd?” Beck asked.

“I don’t think we will.”

“But I just have a small stomach,” she protested.

“Take a proper bite, Freckles,” Beck warned.

Fine. She took a bigger bite.

“That’s a good girl. You did so well. Didn’t she, Judd?” Beck asked.

“She certainly did.” Judd gave her an approving look that had happiness filling her.

Did she like making them happy?

It seemed so.

Her Little side was rising fast to the surface. And for once, she didn’t try to push her back, to hide her.

Owen tickled her under the chin.

She started giggling, turning her head away. “Daddy Owen! That tickles!”

Beck tensed underneath her while Judd stared at her intently.

Whoops.

She turned to Owen, feeling stricken. “I’m sorry.”

“Why would you be sorry?”

“Was I ... was I not supposed to call you that in front of other people?”

“Course you can,” Owen said. “Call me that all the time. I don’t give a fuck. New rule. Only call me that.”

“What?” she squeaked. He was insane.

“Whoa. Not a rule,” Beck said, holding his hands up.

“Why not? She’s my Little. I can make rules as her Daddy.”

“You never had a Dom/sub relationship with Ester,” Judd said.

“I was never anything with Ester. I didn’t like her. I only tolerated her.”

Ester? That must have been their ex.

“I’ve never felt anything for any woman. Just you, my baby girl.”

Her breath caught in her throat. Was he for real right now? What happened when she had to leave? Why had she agreed to this?

Because you’re weak.

“Okay, let’s rewind a bit,” Beck said. He turned her so he could place his finger under her chin, tilting her face back.

Carefully, he extracted her lip from her teeth. “Stop worrying. This is meant to be fun. It’s not meant to stress you out. And if you want to call Owen Daddy, then there is nothing wrong with that. Obviously, he prefers it. However, it isn’t going to be a rule that you have to call him that all the time.”

Owen huffed. “Don’t see why not.”

Judd was staring at her strangely. “When I first met you, I didn’t even see a glimpse of you being a Little. You hid it well.”

She thought there was a question in there, but it wasn’t one she was going to answer. Not now.

Maybe not ever.

“It’s a privilege to meet your Little,” Judd said gruffly. “That you feel safe enough with us to let us see her ... that’s something we shouldn’t take lightly.”

That wasn’t something she’d expected Judd to say, and she couldn’t help but blush. “Thank you.”

“No, little one. Thank you. Right, now where is the grape this time?”

After playing the game ten times, she’d only managed to guess where the grape was once, and she was well and truly full.

“No more,” she complained, patting her tummy. “I’ll get a sore tummy if I have to eat any more.”

“It wasn’t very much,” Judd said with a frown.

“She can eat some more later,” Beck said.

She wiggled in his lap, and he grunted. She froze. “I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?”

“In the best way possible, I’m guessing,” Judd muttered as he packed up the food and put it away. “Lucky bastard.”

Was he saying what she thought he was? She could feel herself growing red.

“I am feeling very lucky,” Beck murmured in her ear.

She shivered.

Holy. Heck.

She climbed off his lap, hoping that she didn’t insult him. But when she glanced back, he was just staring at her in hunger.

“Come on, let’s go wash our hands.” Beck stood and brushed off his shorts, then he held his hand out to her.

“Uh, okay.” She gave him a shy look, but let him pull her up. He tugged a bit too hard, and she fell into him.

“Sorry,” she said.

“I’m not,” he told her, helping to right her. He kept hold of her hand as he led her slowly down to the water.

She paused at the edge as the water lapped at her feet.

“Come on, Freckles.”

“Oh. Okay.” She took a few steps in before pausing again. “I’ll just wash them here.”

He eyed her. “Not fond of the water?”

“I love the beach. I love looking at the water. It makes it seem like all your problems are so small, you know? But no, I’m not a great swimmer. I can doggy paddle, but that’s about it.”

“You weren’t taught to swim as a child?” Beck asked. “Didn’t you grow up in Florida? Surrounded by water?”

“Ah, yeah, I did.” Had she told one of them that?

“We run background checks on everyone who visits the palace,” he explained.

“Oh, right.” She wondered what else was on there.

“Hey, there wasn’t much on yours. You okay?” He eyed her strangely.

He was probably wondering why she was freaking out. But of course all the bad bits weren’t on there. Because there had never been any authorities involved.

“Um, there wasn’t any money to spare for swimming lessons and while we did some swimming at school, it didn’t teach much more than how to float or doggy paddle.”

“Here, let me help you wash your hands.” He bent down and splashed a bit of water up onto her hands. When he stood, he used his shirt to dry them.

“Thank you.” She stared up at him in amazement. No one had ever taken care of her like this.

“So what do we do now?” Owen asked when they returned to where he and Judd were sitting. “We’ve eaten. And now ... we sit?”

“What would you like to do, Freckles?” Beck asked.

“Oh. Well. Umm.”

Beck drew her hand away from her hair. Drat. She hadn’t realized she was doing that.

“Tell us what you want to do,” he told her.

“Do you think it’s silly if we build a sandcastle?” she whispered. She tensed up, waiting for them to laugh at her.

“Yes!” Beck clapped his hands together.

She jolted, staring at him in surprise. That was unexpected.

“I am the champion of sandcastle builders,” he said.

“You are?”

“Yep. Mine will be the best one.”

“I doubt that,” Judd huffed.

“Really? How good are your skills?” Beck asked.

“I’m sure it can’t be that hard if you’re good at it,” Judd replied.

She waited for Beck to fire back at that insult. But he just shrugged those massive shoulders. “We’ll see.”

“Doesn’t matter how good the two of you are. Mine will beat them all,” Owen said.

Beck winked at her.

She sighed, shaking her head. “I don’t know.”

“What?” Judd asked, looking concerned. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to say it and hurt your big boy feelings.”

“My ... big boy feelings?” He gaped at her.

“Uh-huh. See ... I’m a bit worried ...”

“About what?” Judd demanded.

“That you might cry when my sandcastle whips your sandcastle’s butt.”

Judd gaped at her. “You think I’ll cry?”

“Yep. Like a baby. Big tears ... snot ... all of it.”

Judd’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, I don’t think so. I never back down from a challenge.”

She grinned. “Neither do I.”

“Let’s do this! You want to pair up for this since we don’t have enough buckets and shovels?” Beck asked.

“We don’t need buckets and shovels,” Owen said. “But fine. Judd and I against the two of you.”

“It’s on,” she said. “The two of you are going down.”

“**W**hat the hell is wrong with this sand?” Owen complained.

Beck grinned as he glanced over at Owen. Dude didn’t have a clue what he was doing.

“Do you think we should help them?” Chloe asked. “I feel a little bad.”

“Oh no. They were the ones who laid down the challenge. They think they’re going to do so much better than us. And don’t feel bad for them. They’re using all the dirty tricks they have.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I mean the fact that they’re both trying to distract you.”

Both of them had been strutting around half-naked. Beck had felt a stab of envy.

But it didn’t matter if she found Judd attractive.

It doesn’t lessen her feelings for you.

Owen had even poured water all over his head and chest.

Asshole.

“Hmm. I think we can play that game too.” She strode over to the cooler and bent over, wriggling her butt back and forth.

He watched as both Judd and Owen stopped to stare. Then she pulled out a bottle of water and tilted it back as she drank it down.

Oh yep ... those boys were goners.

But then, so was he.

She walked back over with a sassy grin.

“You’re naughty,” he told her.

She laughed.

He looked over at Judd, shaking his head. “Do you think Judd will ever work out how to get water to stay in his moat?”

“Nope.”

She giggled as Judd poured out more water into his moat, swearing as it all disappeared.

“I’m going to go find shells to decorate our castle,” she said. “It’s looking super good.”

“Isn’t it?” He checked his phone. “Time’s almost up.”

Judd groaned. “This is impossible!”

“Why won’t this sand stay still?” Owen grumbled.

Beck just shook his head. If they hadn’t insisted they would be great at this, he would have given them some pointers.

Although ... that wouldn’t have been as funny, and he loved listening to their girl giggle at their complaints.

Their girl.

Damn. He hoped that they could figure out a way to make this work that didn’t involve them moving to London to be with her.

Although ... was it fair to expect her to uproot her life for them if they weren’t willing to do the same?

They finished putting some of the shells on their castle. It had a large main body with four turrets and a functioning moat.

He held up his hand to Chloe. She slapped her hand against it. Bits of hair had fallen out of her ponytail. She had sand on her face, her chest, her hands ... and probably other

places. A lot of her make-up looked like it had been wiped away and her face was flushed.

She looked stunning.

“What is it? Oh no. I’m probably a mess.” She tried to tidy up her hair and he moved over to her, grabbing her hands in his. She tried to tug her hands free, but he held them firm.

“Hey, no. You don’t look like a mess. You look perfect.”

She nibbled on her lip. “That can’t be true.”

“It is, though. You look beautiful, no matter what. But right now, you are stunning.” Leaning in, he kissed her forehead.

“Oh.” She stared up at him with a small smile.

“That was sweet,” Owen said.

She jumped, and they both turned to find Owen staring at them hungrily. Judd was, too, although Beck thought he saw a hint of jealousy.

He got it. He’d felt far behind Owen and Hux in his relationship with Chloe. But it didn’t matter if they moved at a different pace. The end goal was all the same.

Claiming Chloe.

Christ. In some ways, it felt like they’d known each other forever. He had to remind himself it had been less than a week since she’d arrived.

And that they shouldn’t move too fast. Despite the fact that Owen seemed to have the opposite view. Owen had always done things at his own pace.

“You okay, Freckles?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Are you?”

He gave her a surprised look, then he nodded. “Yeah, I’m more than good. Sooo, who is going to win this competition? The immaculate, impressive Château Chloe or the unimpressive, falling down Shack a la Judd.”

“Hey!” Judd protested. “It’s not that bad ...”

They all stared as half of Judd and Owen's sandcastle fell away.

"It's shit," Owen said.

Chloe started giggling. "It really is."

Judd was still frowning, his arms crossed over his chest. He stared over at them, narrow-eyed.

He leaned down to grab some of the wet sand from his failed moat. He picked it up in his hand and turned to Chloe. "What did you just say?"

Her eyes widened and she stumbled back. "Nothing. I didn't say anything! It was Owen." She ducked behind Owen, who dodged away as Judd ran toward Chloe.

She started running away before stumbling.

"Shit!" Owen said.

"Her ankle, Judd!" Beck called out.

Instead of getting her with the wet sand ball, Judd dropped it and picked her up with one arm around her waist. "I've got myself a mermaid!"

She started giggling again, wriggling around in his hold.

Owen stepped up beside him. "Judd's smiling."

Beck glanced over at him with a nod. "Yeah. I wasn't sure he'd ever smile again after Ester."

Neither had Beck.

"Chloe, since these two lost the sandcastle competition they should have to do something we want, right?" Beck called out.

"You're right! We were the winners, and it's only fair." She nodded seriously. "It's a sandcastle competition rule."

"Something you want?" Owen asked. "What would that be?"

CHLOE HAD to hide her grin. Oh, he was in for a surprise. It was obvious what Owen thought she was going to ask for.

“Lie down. Both of you. Side by side.”

Beck just watched her with a look of indulgence. She could get used to this. Having all of their attention. Having them play with her. Her Little side was practically dancing in happiness.

“All right, we’re lying down,” Judd grumbled. “In the sand. Now what?”

“Now, you’re going to get buried.” She kneeled between them and used her bucket to pour sand over their legs.

“What?” Judd sat up.

“Nope. You’ve got to lie down. You lost.”

“Who says we lost?” Judd complained. But he laid back down.

“Your castle is a ruin,” Beck said, helping her by filling up buckets of sand. She patted it down around their legs. Owen was surprisingly quiet, just lying there. It took her a while to bury their legs properly. Then she moved onto their bodies.

Okay, this was a bit more of a problem.

It was a smorgasbord of abs. Seriously. How could they be this ripped? And tanned? Did they walk around all the time with their shirts off?

Judd was wider than Owen and had notches in his hips that made her mouth water. While Owen had the most perfect forearms and hands she’d ever seen on a man. She’d never understood how forearms could be sexy.

Until now.

But like the trooper she was, she soldiered on. It sure was a hardship to touch all of that smooth, hard skin.

Yep. Definitely a hardship.

She got to work, and by the time she was finished, both men were covered in sand except for their necks and faces.

“All right, now that we’ve got sand in every crevice, can we move?” Judd asked, frowning.

Such a Grumpzilla

“Move?” she asked. “No, you can’t move yet. I haven’t decorated you.”

“Decorated us?” he asked, giving her a suspicious look.

With a giggle she ran off to grab some shells from her sandcastle.

“No running,” Beck ordered, reaching out to lightly grasp hold of her hand. “Only walking. Or tell me what you want and I’ll bring it to you.”

“I need lots of shells. Little and big.”

Beck brought her as many shells as he could get his hands on. And twenty minutes later, she thought her masterpiece was finished.

She glanced up at Beck. “What do you think?”

His lips were twitching. “I think it’s perfect. Just let me get something.”

She watched curiously as he moved over to their stuff.

“What have you done to us?” Judd asked. “Christ. I think there’s sand in my butt crack. There should never be sand in butt cracks.”

Owen grunted in agreement.

She giggled. Then she turned to see Beck returning with his phone. He snapped a few photos before the other two realized what he was doing.

“There,” he said. “That’s perfect. And sent.”

“What the hell?” Judd asked, sitting up and brushing the sand from his skin. “Who did you send that to?”

“Oh, you know, just a myriad of acquaintances and friends,” Beck replied with a grin.

“Show me.” Owen stood and held out his hand.

Beck turned his phone around, wisely keeping hold of it as he showed the image of Owen wearing a shell loin cloth and Judd in a shell bikini. She'd also used sand and shells to make it look like they were holding hands.

“Well, at least I’m the boy,” Owen said as Judd started swearing. “Why’re you so upset? You look good with boobs.”

She couldn’t help it, she burst into laughter. When she finally managed to stop, she realized all of the men were staring at her in awe and happiness.

Owen drew her close, kissing her.

“Worth it?” Beck said.

“Worth it,” Judd replied.

Huh. She wondered what they were talking about.

Chloe didn't want to go back.

She knew she had to. Even now, Jonathan could be back at the suite waiting for her. She winced at the thought. Shoot. She should have checked her phone.

"What's the matter?" Beck asked as she searched around.

"I can't find my phone." Surely, she wouldn't have lost it. She was always so careful to keep her phone on and charged in case she needed it.

"Here it is." Judd handed it to her. They were packing everything up to take back.

She looked at it, sighing with relief at the lack of notifications. She sent Jonathan a quick message.

CHLOE:

Just checking in. Do you need anything from me?

THERE WAS NO IMMEDIATE REPLY. Hopefully that was a good sign.

"What is it? Is it His Lordship?"

She glanced up at Owen and shook her head. "Ah, no. Just checking that he didn't need me."

He frowned. "It's your day off. He shouldn't need you."

"Yeah, well ... my job is kind of a twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week deal."

"That better be an exaggeration," Judd said sharply. "Because not only is that illegal, but it's not good for your health."

"Sorry. Yes, an exaggeration. Of course it is."

Owen stared down at her. Then he patted her butt. Heavily. She gaped up at him.

"Just a warning that you better not be lying, baby girl. Or your ass is toast. What are we up to? Like five hundred and forty-five spanks?"

"What? No! We're not!"

"Hmm, I think we are."

"It's not. It's only like thirty."

"Thirty, huh?" Owen said. "Seemed much more than that."

"Thirty?" Beck whistled as he shook out the blanket. "Someone isn't going to sit comfortably once she gets that punishment."

Shoot.

Owen could never find out that she was lying about not being on call all the time for Jonathan.

"I just heard from Hux," Judd said. "They're still about three hours away from returning back to the palace."

She breathed out a sigh of relief. Okay, she had some more free time. She missed him. The day had been so much fun, but it had always felt like something was missing.

Hux.

She yawned as they headed toward the pathway.

"Someone's tired," Beck commented.

"Oh. I'm so sorry." She gave him a guilty look. "It's not the company. I promise."

“She hasn’t been sleeping well,” Owen said. “She has nightmares.”

“Owen!”

“What?” He turned to look at her.

“That might have been private.”

“But I know.”

“Because you snuck into my room while I was having a nightmare!” She gave him a look.

He smiled smugly. “I sure did.”

Lord. He was crazy.

“What were you having a nightmare about?” Judd demanded.

“That’s something I’m not willing to share just yet.” Or ever.

“Why not?” Owen asked.

She stilled, putting her hands on her hips. If she gave these two an inch, then they’d take a mile. “Have you told me about all the skeletons in your closets?”

“What skeletons do you have?” Judd asked.

“Literal skeletons?” Owen frowned. “I’ll need a list. I need to make sure they’re buried properly and can’t come back to haunt you.”

Her mouth dropped open and she turned to look up at Beck who seemed to be the only sane one. She really, really needed Hux here to help balance all this crazy out.

“I don’t think she means literal skeletons, Owen,” Beck told him. “And Judd, ease up, man.”

Neither man looked happy, but they stopped firing off demands at her.

“You guys carry that stuff up. I’ll take Chloe,” Beck ordered.

“I really can walk.”

Beck gave her a firm look. “That wasn’t a request.”

Okay, then.

He crouched in front of her. “On you get.”

Beck was still wearing his T-shirt. Which was a damn shame. She wouldn’t mind seeing all that muscle on display. But unlike the other two, he didn’t seem comfortable with taking it off.

He heaved her up onto his back.

“Are you sure you’re okay to carry me?” she asked. It was going to be harder going up, surely?

“Freckles, you don’t weigh anything. I could carry you with one arm and not break a sweat.”

“That’s nice,” she said without thinking as she placed her face against his back. He was so warm. And she was kind of tired.

He let out a low chuckle. “Yeah, it is nice.”

As he carried her up the pathway, the rocking movement nearly lulled her to sleep. She let out a murmur of protest as she was lifted off him and placed on the seat of the ATV.

“Don’t wanna get up. Wanna sleep.”

“You can sleep soon, Freckles. Let’s just get you home first.”

She stirred, becoming more aware of their surroundings as they drove past the palace. And then past her room.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“I thought we’d take you to our place,” Beck said, looking over at her. He’d slowed right down. She could see the other two ahead of them in their ATV.

“Your place?”

“Yeah. I’m not ready for the day to end, and I’d like to take care of you. Maybe give you a bath, and get you settled in for a nap before dinner.”

A nap actually sounded amazing. When had she last taken a nap?

“But Jonathan,” she whispered.

Beck frowned. “I don’t like the hold he seems to have on you. Are you sure there’s nothing you want to tell us?”

Tell him that her boss was basically her jailer? That he owned her?

“No.” She knew that they wouldn’t be happy, and what would happen if they confronted Jonathan?

Even though she knew that legally he couldn’t hold her against her will ... there was still a part of her that saw him as her savior. The man who had taken her from hell. Kept her safe.

So she couldn’t say anything.

But she could grasp a few moments of happiness.

“I’d like to go home with you, though.”

Beck sent her a smile. “Good, Freckles.”

Chloe let him undo her seatbelt and help her down. She leaned on him as they walked into a nice-looking house that had a balcony along the front of it. It was set away from the palace, surrounded by trees to give it privacy.

“You all live here?” she asked.

“Yep. Thankfully, it’s big enough we’re not in each other’s space all the time. Or Judd probably would have been smothered in his sleep a long time ago.”

She laughed. However, she felt a bit sad as well. What would it be like to have other people to rely on?

Was that why she’d jumped on this opportunity, even knowing it had no future?

“Hey, what’s got that sad look on your face?” Beck asked.

“Nothing.” She smiled up at him.

He studied her intently. “One day, I hope you’ll trust us enough to be truthful with us.”

She dropped her eyes, feeling guilty.

“But until that happens if you can’t or don’t want to tell us something, I would prefer you say that instead of pretending everything is all right. Understand me?”

“Yes, Sir. I mean, uh ...”

Beck ran his thumb over her lower lip. “Sir is fine. Daddy is better. But we’ll get there. I hope.”

Her heart raced.

“Now, would you like a shower? Or a bath?”

She was suddenly aware of how gritty she felt from all the sand. And her hair was probably a mess. She glanced down at herself. All of her was a mess.

“Hey, none of us care what you look like. Understand me? I was only concerned about your comfort. That’s all.”

They weren’t Jonathan.

They weren’t the kids growing up at school or ... nope. She wasn’t going to think about what came after that.

“Right. Sorry.”

“No need to say sorry. What would you like? A shower or bath?”

“A bath would be amazing.”

“With bubbles?” he asked, a teasing glint in his eyes.

“Is there any other way to have a bath?”

Beck laughed. “Come on, you can have a cold drink while I run you a bath.” He led her into the open-concept living, kitchen, and dining area. Judd was rustling around in the fridge, laying things out.

“Oh, I’m fine. I don’t need a drink.”

“You barely drank anything while we were at the beach,” Judd replied as he shut the fridge door with one hip.

She raised her eyebrows, surprised he’d noticed.

“Sit.” He pointed at a stool at the island. “I’m making you a snack.”

“A snack? I just ate lunch.”

Judd didn’t look up as he cut some cheese into pieces. “That was hours ago. And you barely ate.” He sliced an orange into pieces and put the cut side down on two plates. What was he doing?

“I really don’t think I can fit anything more in.”

Judd grunted. “You can.”

Jesus. It truly was a miracle that no one had smothered this man.

“Sit here. I’ll be back. Judd will look after you.” Beck lifted her onto a stool.

Wait. He was leaving her with Grumpzilla?

She shook her head at Beck when Judd turned away. But Beck just grinned and spun around, whistling.

Traitor.

“Here you are,” Judd said.

She looked at the plate in front of her. “Is that ... a hedgehog?”

“Yep.” He wiped his hands on a cloth. The orange was the body of the hedgehog and cut pieces of olive had been used for the eyes. The spikes were toothpicks pushed into the orange skin. On each toothpick was a piece of cheese, a grape, and a piece of pineapple.

It was so sweet.

She gaped at Judd, shocked that he’d done this for her.

“What is it? Is there something you don’t like on there? The pineapple? Should have asked,” he muttered to himself. “Not everyone likes pineapple.”

He reached for the plate, but she grabbed it, hugging it against her. “Mine.”

His eyebrows rose. “What?”

“I mean ... uh ... I like pineapple.” She put the plate down, feeling foolish. But Judd just smirked, leaning a hip against the counter.

“You like cute food. Noted.”

What did that mean? Why would he take note? She didn't understand why he was being so nice. This was so sweet. Maybe this was the real Judd and the rest was an act.

“You going to eat it or just look at it?” he asked as he moved to the fridge.

And there he was ... she shook her head. Perhaps he really was a mix of grumpy and sweet.

She reached for a toothpick, pulling it out and taking off an olive.

Yum.

Okay, maybe she was slightly hungry.

He placed a glass of water in front of her. “Do you have any coffee?” she asked.

“Nope. Water.” He tapped the glass. “Drink.”

“You do realize I'm not a dog, right?” she asked in exasperation.

“Yes, you are,” Owen said from behind her. She jumped in surprise. How had she not heard him? The damn man moved like a ghost. “You're a naughty little puppy.”

He reached over her to grab one of the toothpicks. Judd smacked his hand. “No. Not yours.”

“What? I can't have one?” Owen asked, slipping onto the stool beside her.

“No, they're for Chloe.”

She stared at Judd in shock. He was looking at her intently, almost willing her to eat.

“I can share.”

“Can you?” Owen asked. “Are you a good sharer, baby girl?”

Okay. Whoa. They seemed to be talking about two different things. She turned to look up at Owen. His gaze was intense. Hot. His hair was wet as though he'd just been in the shower.

Damn. She wouldn't have minded joining him.

She licked her lips and glanced back up at Judd. He hadn't moved any closer, keeping several feet between them. For some reason, she wished he was closer.

What would it feel like to be pressed between them? Shoot. Was she really thinking about the two of them sharing her?

Yes. Yes, she was.

"I think I could be," she whispered, surprised at her daring.

She licked her lips. Judd stepped forward and drew another toothpick free of the hedgehog. He held it out to her, and she used her teeth to draw off a piece of pineapple.

As she chewed, satisfaction filled his face. Because she was eating? It seemed to be the way Judd took care of those around him.

Although he slapped Owen's hand away again as he tried to grab another toothpick.

"Hey! I'm hungry!" Owen said.

"You know where the food is. Get it yourself."

"No cute animal food for me?" Owen asked.

"No. That's all for Chloe."

Wow. Her head was spinning. She felt special. When she really wasn't anything of the sort.

"I don't get this beach thing," Owen said. "Found sand in places no sand should ever be."

She couldn't help but giggle. Although, she got it. She loved the beach, but sand got everywhere.

"Eat a bit more, Blue," Judd coaxed.

Blue? That was a new one.

“I really won’t eat all of this. Owen can have some.”

“Don’t go sharing your food with these beasts,” Judd told her. “They’re garbage disposals. Owen can get his own food. Or he can wait until you’re finished. You eat first.”

Shit.

These guys kept surprising her in the best possible way.

Judd picked up the water, holding it out to her across the island bench. She wrinkled her nose, water wasn’t her favorite. But she reached for the glass.

“No, let me hold the glass. You drink.”

She dropped her hand and took a few sips, tapping his hand when she was finished. As she drew away some water spilled on the counter.

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s just water,” Judd told her. “And you didn’t drink enough.”

“I don’t like water that much. Are you sure there’s no coffee?”

“There’s some here,” Owen said, turning with the coffee pot in his hand.

“No coffee unless she drinks more water,” Judd dictated.

“What?” She gaped at him.

“Shit. Seems harsh,” Owen said. “But fair.”

“How is that fair?”

“You’re getting dehydrated,” Judd said. “You run until you’re near collapse and you don’t drink enough water.”

“You can’t know that,” she huffed. It was true. But still ... he couldn’t know for sure.

Right?

“Give me your hand,” Judd demanded.

“What?” she asked.

“Hand.”

She reached out with her hand to him and he turned it over, examining her fingers. “Prune fingers.”

Owen leaned over the back of him, a cup of fresh coffee in hand. “You’re right. Didn’t notice her prune fingers before.”

“It’s a sign of mild dehydration,” Judd offered. She tried to tug her hand away, but he had a firm hold on her.

“That’s not good,” Owen said. He pointed at her with his free hand. “You need to drink more water.”

She gaped at him. “I do not!”

“Yes, you do,” Judd said firmly.

“It’s a rule,” Owen said. “More water. Less coffee.”

Oh, she’d like to see him enforce that one. “I’ll drink as much coffee as I like.”

Judd whistled. “Someone’s asking for a spanking.”

“**W**hat’s going on?” Beck asked as he entered the room.

“These two have gone insane!” she said.

“So what’s new?” Beck reached out for a toothpick, only to have Judd slap his hand. “Ow! What was that for?”

“Those are for Chloe. She hasn’t finished yet.”

“I have,” she said.

“No. Eat more,” Judd demanded.

She heaved out a sigh but took the piece of cheese he offered. She had to admit that she kind of liked being fed by him.

“What’s going on?”

“She’s not drinking enough water,” Judd said. “And she’s being rather stubborn about it.”

“Me?” She gaped at him. “I’m stubborn? Me?”

“Yes. You.”

“You’re right, Judd.” Owen shook his head. “So stubborn.”

Beck let out a small huff of laughter.

Bastard.

She turned to glare at him. “I’m not dehydrated.”

“Pruney fingers don’t lie,” Judd said.

“And I don’t have pruney fingers!” She curled her fingers into her palms. Shit. Or did she? Did they look awful?

“Not sure she should drink any more coffee,” Judd said.

Oh hell no.

“Do not even think about touching my coffee.” She glared at him, watching as his eyes widened. “I will take your balls and shove them down your throat.”

“Hardcore,” Owen said. “Gotta admire that.”

Judd didn’t seem that impressed, though. He narrowed his gaze. “Your health is our responsibility. If you’re dehydrated, you could get dizzy, fall over, hit your head, and give yourself permanent brain damage.”

As he spoke, Owen grew tense. Crap. Great. Owen was going to take Judd’s words seriously.

“You’re exaggerating,” she said hastily.

“I don’t want you getting hurt,” Owen said.

“I’m not going to get hurt.”

“How about a compromise?” Beck suggested.

“What sort of compromise?” Judd asked suspiciously.

“You don’t touch my coffee, and I won’t rearrange your balls,” she growled.

“So vicious.” Owen’s gaze darkened with heat. “That’s sexy. I knew you were the one for us.”

He was nuts. But also ... she seemed to kind of like that.

“Or,” Beck said, “you could drink more water and still have your coffee.”

“I suppose that would work,” Judd said. “But I want to see those fingers get less wrinkly.”

Jeez. Would he stop going on about her wrinkly fingers!

“Fine,” she gritted out.

“Just so you know that we’re not complete assholes, good girls get rewarded,” Beck said.

“Rewarded?”

“Uh-huh.” He nodded.

“With what?” she asked.

“Well, you’ll just have to wait to find out.” Beck lifted her off the stool and took her hand.

Don’t ask.

Do. Not. Ask.

“Do I want to know what naughty girls get?”

Crap. Seems she was a glutton for punishment.

He sent her a wicked look that she’d expect to see on Owen’s face. “Oh, Freckles, I think you know. But if you need a demonstration ... I’ll be happy to show you.”

Holy. Heck.

Yep, that was not something she thought would come from Beck’s mouth.

“I’ll pass.”

He chuckled and led her into the bathroom. A deep tub was already filled with bubbles.

She clapped her hands before she could stop herself. “Goody!”

Whoa. It seemed that the more time she spent with these guys, the more her inhibitions disappeared. But the satisfied look on Beck’s face told her that he didn’t care.

That he liked her Little side.

She gave him a shy look, then glanced away not knowing what to say.

“Hey.” He turned her face back. “Look at me. That’s a good girl. Let me see those pretty baby blue eyes. God, you’re gorgeous.”

She wasn’t.

Especially right now. Her hair was probably a rat’s nest, and no doubt all of her make-up was smudged or had washed

off. But the admiration in his eyes was real.

“Do you know that I feel privileged every time you show me a glimpse of your Little?”

“I ... what? Really?” Why would he feel that way?

“Really. I know it’s because you trust me ... at least a small bit. And that’s something I never want to betray. I just wanted you to know that. I’ll never laugh at you or make fun of you ... I want to know your Little. So anytime you feel like slipping into Little headspace, I’m here.”

She leaned her forehead against his chest. “I worry a lot about how people see me.”

It was as much as she could admit.

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her against him. “Well, you never have to worry about that with me. Because all I want is for you to be happy. I don’t care about what your hair looks like or your clothes. I do care about whether you’re happy, or sassy or in need of a butt warming.”

“I’m never going to be in need of a butt warming.”

He patted her bottom lightly. “We’ll see. I can definitely see some spankings in your future. And Owen said you’re already owed thirty.”

“Daddy Owen is a meanie-pants.”

He snorted. “I’d like to see you tell him that. I like that you call him Daddy Owen.”

“You do?” She leaned back to look up at him.

“Yeah. He needs someone like you. Someone who sees him. Ester, our ex, never did. He stuck to the outside of our relationship. I didn’t see it back then, but I do now. And I’m ashamed I didn’t realize how much he wasn’t included. By any of us.”

She chewed at her lip, her heart aching for Owen.

Beck freed her lip. “I bet that when you’re in Little headspace you won’t worry so much. At least, not about your

Big problems. You will have to worry about obeying your Daddies. Pleasing us.”

“Yes, I’m sure I’ll spend all my time worrying about obeying and pleasing you,” she said dryly. He could be just as arrogant as the rest of them.

“That’s what I thought.” He winked at her. “But you won’t have to worry about anything else. Because that’s our job.”

Lord. That sounded like heaven.

“Would you like a taste of that right now?”

“I don’t know if I know how to slip into Little headspace.”

“Owen said you don’t have much experience.”

“Ahh yeah, I don’t.” She dropped her gaze, feeling embarrassed by her lack of experience.

He tilted her face back. He was very big on making her look at him. “Good.”

“Good?”

“Yes. That means that my brothers and I can introduce you to a whole lot of firsts. I like that. I might be the sane one here ... because the rest of them are nuts. But that doesn’t mean I’m not as possessive or jealous. I am. I like that we’ll show you how we like things. That so many of your firsts will belong to us. You want to be brave, Freckles?”

She knew what she should say ... but her good sense had gone out the window a long time ago.

“Yes.”

“That’s my good girl.”

SATISFACTION FLOODED BECK.

Fuck. This girl.

So damn perfect. She was meant for them. He could feel it. Today was the first time that the three of them had taken time off just to have fun in forever.

The only thing that could have made it better was Hux being with them.

That guy needed to pull his head out of his ass.

But Beck had a feeling that Hux wouldn't be able to resist this girl for long.

"Owen said your safeword is red."

She nodded.

"Words, Freckles. If you don't want to talk while in Little headspace, that's fine. But during negotiation, I need words."

"Yes, Sir. It's red."

"That's my good girl. And your boundaries? Is there anything you don't want me to do? Are you all right with me stripping you naked to bathe you? Are you okay with bondage? Being blindfolded? Being punished?"

"You're going to blindfold and bind me while I'm in the bath?"

"What? No!" He shook his head. "Those were examples. I'd never do that while you were in the bath."

"Oh. Right. I'm okay with those things. I think."

"You think?"

"I've never done any of that, so how will I know?"

Shit. She had a good point.

"All right, so if there's something you don't want to do or are unsure of, say red. We'll stop, talk about it, and decide if you want to keep going. Okay?"

"Yes. All right."

"Good girl, you're being so brave. Are you going to let Daddy Beck take care of you?"

She nodded.

"Words, Freckles," he demanded. "So I'm certain this is what you want."

"It ... it is."

“Sure?”

“Just nervous,” she admitted.

“Nerves are fine, Freckles. Being scared isn’t. Okay?”

“Okay, Daddy Beck.”

SATISFACTION FILLED HIS FACE, making her feel less nervous. This is really what he wanted.

Her.

He wanted to spend time with her Little. To take care of her. She just hoped that she could relax enough to enter Little headspace. She was so used to suppressing that side of herself.

“You’re doing so well. You had a big day at the beach, didn’t you? I bet you’re a bit tired now.”

She nodded, feeling exhausted.

“It’s okay, Freckles. I’ll take care of you. Let’s get your clothes off you.” His voice was so soothing. She found herself swaying where she stood, wanting to get closer to him. To lean on him.

“Whoa. Come here.” He put the seat on the toilet down and sat, drawing her between his legs. Then he settled her on one thigh so he could undo the back of her dress. He drew the straps down over her arms so it pooled around her waist.

“That’s it. Good girl,” he told her, reaching for the fastening of her bra.

She tensed.

“Hey, if you don’t want me to do something, then all you need to do is say red, understand?”

“Yes, Daddy Beck.”

“Love hearing you call me that.” He kissed her cheek. “But I don’t want to scare you. If you want, I’ll turn away while you strip and get in.”

“No,” she whispered. “I want this.”

He tilted her face back, his lips hovering over hers. “I want to kiss you.”

“I want you to kiss me,” she said boldly.

He moved his mouth over hers, taking her carefully, slowly. It was such a sweet kiss that she was nearly moved to tears.

Nearly. Because she didn't let herself cry.

Not anymore.

Tears never helped.

“You taste delicious. Open your mouth for me, Freckles. Let me taste you.”

Lord. Yes. She opened her mouth and his tongue slipped inside. It melted her from the inside out. She squirmed on his lap, and could feel him hardening

More. She needed more.

“That's my girl. Your mouth tastes delicious. I know the rest of you will too. And one day soon ... I'm going to taste all of you.”

Oh Lord.

“But that's not what I'm doing right now. Right now, I'm taking care of my Little girl.”

Another shiver. For a completely different reason.

“I'm going to strip you off for your bath now.” He paused for a moment. She guessed he was waiting to see if she objected.

He kissed the top of her head lightly.

“My precious girl.” He slowly undid her bra and slid it off her arms as well.

She tried to cover up her breasts. She'd always felt they were too small. But he drew her hands away from her mounds.

“Little girls don't need to worry about being naked or what they look like. It's up to Daddy to take care of them.”

He lifted her to stand between his legs. Her dress fell to the floor, leaving her in just a pair of cotton panties.

His eyes widened as he stared at her panties. Oh no, what was wrong with them? She glanced down.

Oh shoot.

She'd forgotten she was wearing these ones. They weren't exactly sexy. They had an image of an alpaca on the front sunbathing on the beach.

Slightly odd. But she'd thought they were cute.

But what did Beck think?

"A sunbathing llama. Not what I expected." He ran his finger over her mound. But that wasn't enough to distract her from frowning down at him.

"Not a llama, Daddy. An alpaca." She huffed out a breath, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I do apologize. Didn't mean to insult your alpaca panties." His eyes were dancing with laughter. Was he teasing her?

"Good. Because Amy Alpaca doesn't appreciate being called a llama. Owen already owes her roses."

"I can't wait to meet the special alpaca in your life."

"She's the only alpaca in my life. Sometimes I think she's a bit lonely. Alpacas aren't solitary animals, and I can't always give her the attention she needs."

"I'm sure she's very happy, but we can see about getting her a playmate."

"I don't know. Hux and I found Tickle, but ..."

"Tickle?" he asked as he drew her panties down.

She lifted one foot.

"Hold on to my shoulders as you lift your feet. I don't want you falling over."

"I never fall over. I have excellent balance."

“Your ankle is still tender from the last time you fell over,” he pointed out.

Drat. She couldn't argue that. She placed her hands on his wide shoulders. She wondered if she could get him to strip off his T-shirt now.

Was he going to join her in the bath? Would they both fit?

He was a big guy. But if she sat on his lap ...

“Freckles, what were you thinking about just then?” He raised his eyebrows at her. “Tell me.”

“Are you getting into the bath with me?”

A strange look came over her face. “No.”

“Oh.” She wrapped her arms around herself.

“But I am going to make sure you're taken care of. Don't worry.” He stood and lifted her up against him.

She hadn't been worried about that. She'd never felt as cared for as when she was with these men.

It was amazing.

And terrifying.

Because she felt like they were stealing pieces of her, bit by bit. She was showing them all of her.

Once this was over ... then she worried she might not be able to find those pieces to put herself back together.

Beck lowered her into the water.

Wow. That felt so nice. It warmed her aching muscles. She hadn't realized how tense she'd been. She guessed part of it was her fall yesterday.

The other part was all due to Jonathan.

So she likely had years' worth of stress to get rid of.

"Do you want some toys to play with, Freckles? I think we have some things in here." Beck turned to search through the cupboards.

How many Littles had he bathed in here?

Beck turned back, holding some plastic cups and a plastic duck and whale. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just ... whose toys are those?"

Understanding filled his face. "Yours."

"What?"

"We've never had another Little in this house. We've never even had a woman here unless she was someone who worked here delivering groceries when we couldn't manage it."

"Oh." Now she felt silly. But why did they have the toys?

He put the things in the bath. "I don't know why I bought these things when there was no one to play with them. I just ... like to be prepared. It's why I set up a playroom in the spare

bedroom and have it filled with all sorts of things that a Little girl might like.”

“I ... a playroom?”

“Yes. I was thinking you might like to take a nap in it after your bath?”

“I ... I’m not sure.”

“You’ll want to see it first. I’ll show you after your bath.”

She nodded. What happened if she saw the playroom and never wanted to leave?

“Here you go. Look at Mr. Whale. I think he sucks in water.” He pushed the whale under the water. Then pulling him out, Beck squeezed. Water shot out of his blowhole and she giggled in delight, taking hold of him.

She sunk him deep under the bubbles and then drew him out, making him shoot water up high.

Beck grabbed a washcloth and some gel that smelled like strawberries. He soaped the cloth up and started washing down her back.

She had the duck and whale racing through the water.

“Go, Mrs. Duckie! Go Mr. Whale!” she cried out.

“Who is going to win?” Beck asked.

“Hmm, well, I don’t know, Daddy Beck. Who do you think? If Mrs. Duckie decided to fly, then she might kick Mr. Whale’s ass.”

“Don’t say ass,” he scolded.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Because Little girls shouldn’t swear.”

“Saying ass isn’t swearing, Daddy Beck.”

“Little girls should say bottom.”

“Okay, Daddy Beck. I won’t say ass.” She gave him a sly look over her shoulder.

“Brat. You’re coming close to feeling my hand on your *bottom.*”

Oops. He seemed serious. She turned around to play with her toys as he continued to wash her. He’d moved to her shoulders and arms.

“Lie back, Freckles, and I’ll do your legs.” He washed her toes and feet. Then he moved up her legs, washing them with long strokes.

Ooh. That felt nice.

Hmm. She had an idea of how she might get him to take his T-shirt off. She looked at Mr. Whale. She swore he was giving her a disapproving look.

Don’t do it, Chloe.

But Mr. Whale, it will be fun.

You’re going to get in trouble.

She glanced over at Mrs. Duckie.

Do it. Do it. Do it.

I want to see those abs.

Yeah, she’d bet they were to die for. He was now washing her tummy and breasts.

Shoot. Her nipples had grown hard. She squeezed her legs together, somewhat distracted by her feelings.

Do it. Do it.

She pushed Mr. Whale down, filling him up. Beck turned away for a moment and as soon as he turned back, she struck, squirting the water right up into his chest and face.

He gaped down at her, his face dripping, with water on his chest.

She started giggling. She laughed so hard that she actually slipped under the water.

Oh shoot!

Strong arms reached down to grasp her under her arms, pulling her up before she could sit.

She gasped for breath. The water had gone into her ears and up her nose and in her mouth. “Yucky!”

“Freckles! Are you all right?” Beck ran a towel over her face and hair.

“I ... I ... yucky!”

“I know. I bet that didn’t taste very nice.” He gave her a stern look. “But neither was getting Daddy wet with that water. Was it?”

Uh-oh.

Was he really upset?

And why wasn’t he taking off his top? Shoot. This wasn’t going the way she wanted. So far, the only one wet and naked was her.

“Well, that didn’t go to plan,” she muttered.

“I bet. Naughty Mr. Whale,” he scolded.

She sighed. “It wasn’t Mr. Whale, Daddy.” She couldn’t let the whale take the fall for her. As much as she might want to. “He actually advised against it. It was Mrs. Duckie who egged me on. She’s naughty.”

“Hmm. I know someone else who is naughty.”

“Am I in trouble, Daddy?” She worried at her lip and he freed it gently, rubbing his thumb over it.

“Not serious trouble. But no more splashing. Or you’ll be getting five spanks as well as some corner time.”

He grabbed another towel and wiped off his face as a knock came at the door. She dove further under the bubbles.

Beck rubbed her shoulder soothingly. “They won’t come in without permission.”

Right. Okay.

He went to the door and there was a short conversation that she couldn’t make out. Then he returned with a sippy cup

filled with water and cut-up pieces of strawberry.

Beck crouched down, holding the sippy cup. “Judd wanted you to drink more water, and he thought the sippy cup would be easier to drink from in the bath. I think he also really wanted to see if you would use this cup. It’s brand new.”

The cup had a picture of a panda on the front. It was cute. And she did like strawberries.

“Judd is a caregiver.”

“And a Grumpzilla.”

Beck grinned. “That too. But he’s also extremely loyal to the people he cares about. And a bit of a jerk too. It’s all part of his charm.”

“Are you trying to sell him to me?”

“Hey. No. Judd can make his own holes and then crawl his way back out of them. I just ... our ex, Ester, left us for another man. And I think that was hardest on him. All Judd wants is a family. And this is him trying to show he cares because he’s not necessarily good at verbalizing it.”

“He talks plenty,” she said.

“Yeah, and most of what he says is the wrong thing.”

She couldn’t argue that. She thought she understood what he was saying. Reaching out, she took the sippy cup, and Beck gave her a relieved look that changed to happiness.

“I was hoping you’d like the sippy cup too. Is there anything else your Little needs that we can provide? You can tell us.”

She took a few sips of the water. Much better with the strawberry in it. Judd was smarter than he looked.

“Chloe? You can tell me.” He moved the cloth lower toward her pussy. He watched her carefully as though waiting for her to react. She had to work hard not to close her legs.

He ran the cloth up the lips of her pussy, making her gasp slightly.

“Aren’t you a good girl, letting Daddy take care of you,” he murmured in a husky voice. “Tell Daddy what else you need.”

Like an orgasm? The cloth moved even lower, toward her bottom. She clenched down. She wasn’t sure if she was ready for him to touch her there.

“Have you had someone play with your bottom hole before? Have you had them finger you? Fuck you?”

“N-no. Well, just Owen last night. He touched me there.”

Pleasure filled his face. “Good. Are you going to let me touch you there, Freckles?”

“I ... I ...”

“Too soon? Daddy will just clean you.” Instead of the cloth, she could feel his finger moving lower. “Raise your hips.”

Before she could even think about it, she’d pushed her hips up and he was sliding his hand under her ass, running his finger between her cheeks and over her hole. She clenched tighter and he kissed her lightly.

“Good girl. There you are. Just relax. That’s it.” It was hard to relax with where his finger was. And this position didn’t exactly help.

“Good girl. Daddy is all done.”

Another knock came on the door and she stiffened again.

“That’s just Judd with something for you to get into for your nap.” He got up, washed his hands and then opened the door. Judd must have just dropped something off because there was no conversation at the door this time. When she saw what he held up, her heart raced.

“Judd likes pandas.” He held up a white onesie with images of pandas on it. It even had built-in socks and mittens and when he turned it around she saw there was a drop seat.

It was utterly adorable.

And she wanted it on now.

But what if someone saw her?

Shut it, Chloe. It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks.

“Hey,” Beck said quietly. “If you don’t want to wear this, or don’t like it, then you don’t have to.”

“It’s not that,” she whispered. “I love it. I just ... maybe I love it too much. I might not want to take it off.” It was only half the problem and the way he was looking at her showed her that he knew he wasn’t getting the full story.

“Will anyone else see me?” she asked.

“Other than us? No, Freckles. No one ever wants to do anything to embarrass you.”

“I just ... I hate the idea that people are talking about me, making fun of me. I know I should be tougher, that I shouldn’t care ... but I can’t help it.”

“No one is going to make fun of you, Freckles. Hell, if they do, I’ll take care of them. I promise you that.”

What was wrong with her that she liked that? The idea of him sticking up for her ... being on her side?

She’d never had anyone on her side before.

“If they do it in front of Owen, no one will ever find the bodies.”

Well. That was probably true. If a little terrifying.

“And no one else will ever see you in this or anything else unless it’s what you want. But you should know no one here would even blink an eye. Out there, in the rest of the world, our sort of relationship might be seen as weird or wrong.”

As he spoke, he lifted her from the bath and grabbed a towel to dry her. She stood there, letting him dry her off. Not even trying to hide herself.

“But here ... we can be free to be what we want. Who we are. And a lot of people here are in different sorts of relationships. I think Hux took you to the toy store for big Little girls and boys, right?”

“Yeah. He did. Jonathan doesn’t like me to make a spectacle of myself.”

Beck stared at her hotly, the anger in his face taking her by surprise.

“Jonathan isn’t here and if he was, I’d tell him to go fuck himself.”

She sucked in a breath. “Daddy Beck, that’s a naughty word.”

“So it is. Sorry, Freckles.” He kissed the top of her head. “Now, will you let Daddy get you dressed? I promise no one will see you but the four of us.”

She nodded.

“Good girl. Sit on the toilet so I can get this on you. Do you need to go potty?”

She could feel her cheeks growing hot. “No.”

Had he seriously just asked her that?

“And I have a shy bladder.”

He grinned at her. “You don’t have to be shy in front of Daddy.”

She chewed at her lip. Maybe after she’d been with him for ten years, she’d be happy going potty.

What was she talking about? There wasn’t going to be ten years for her to get comfortable with him or the others.

She let out a sad sigh as he helped her stand so he could pull the onesie over her bottom.

“You okay, Freckles?”

“Yes, Daddy Beck.”

“Hmm. Tired?” He took hold of one hand, staring down at her scrapes. They were a lot better today.

“How are your hands feeling?”

“A lot better. Then don’t hurt.”

He grunted, but slid her hands through the arms and settled them in the mittens. Thankfully, the air conditioning kept the house cool, or she'd be roasting hot.

“Yes.” She was exhausted.

“It was a big day for a Little girl. There you are. All snug as a bug in a rug.”

She had to smile at him. “You’re silly sometimes, Daddy.”

“Am I?” He stood and took hold of her hand and the sippy cup. He also grabbed a pink brush out of a basket in the cupboard. Was that where all the Little girl stuff was kept?

Had they really bought stuff in the hopes they'd one day meet a Little?

“Come on, let’s go into the living room and I’ll brush out your hair. Then I can show you the playroom and you can see if you’d like to take a nap there.”

She stilled at the door, hesitating. This just felt like a next step. And it was scarier than letting Owen in her bed. Or giving Judd a chance. Or getting ice cream and going toy shopping with Hux.

“Be brave, Freckles. Trust me. You don’t have to worry about what you look like with us. We think you are perfect just the way you are.”

She let out a deep sigh. “Okay, Daddy Beck.”

Beck was surprised that his chest wasn't puffed out to twice its size.

His girl believed that he'd keep her safe.

He led her out into the living room where Judd was vacuuming.

Judd was clearly nervous.

"Judd, man. You want to turn that off now?" he said loudly.

Judd glanced over at them, nodding. He turned it off and Chloe let out an audible sigh of relief.

Beck led her to the sofa and pulled off a cushion, putting it on the floor. Judd scowled and Beck shot him a look. When Judd was stressed, he cleaned and he tidied. Everything had to be in its place.

But he better calm down, or he was going to stress Chloe. And Beck wasn't going to allow that.

"Sit there, Freckles. Shoot. I should have dried your hair first." He sat behind her, taking out her hair tie.

She winced as he accidentally tugged on her hair. "Shoot, sorry, Freckles."

"Let me." Judd appeared beside him, holding out his hand in clear demand.

"You want to do her hair?" Beck asked.

“You know I’m better at it than you.”

That was actually true. Surprisingly, despite his lack of patience in so many areas, Judd could be very patient when it came to taking care of a Little.

“Is that all right with you, Freckles?” Beck asked.

She gave him a worried look over her shoulder.

“He really is a lot better than me.”

“I won’t tug on your scalp until it burns, anyway,” Judd said dryly.

“I don’t do it on purpose,” Beck grumbled. He moved aside when Chloe didn’t object. Picking up the remote, he turned the TV on.

Judd sat behind Chloe, his legs on either side of her. “How’d her hair get so wet in a bath?”

“She slipped under after Mr. Whale squirted me in the face.”

“Did he? I always thought he was a naughty whale,” Judd said.

She glanced back at Judd in surprise, and he winked at her. Beck started to relax. Maybe Judd could show her his more playful side. That he wasn’t just a perpetual grump with a need to constantly prove himself.

“Can you get me a towel?” Judd asked. “She can’t sleep with hair this wet.”

“Sure.” Beck grabbed him a towel from the bathroom, then handed it over to him. Chloe was watching a cartoon playing on the television. Beck moved over to Owen.

“What are you doing?” he asked as he saw he was looking at CTV footage. “Is that ... is that our girl and Hux? Fuck, you managed to find camera feeds that showed that mob that surrounded them?”

“Yep.”

“Owen, don’t do anything stupid.”

“Never do.”

Christ. He had a fair idea what the other man was doing ... he was going to track down everyone who had been in that mob. More specifically, anyone who had touched their girl.

And then he'd make them pay.

This wasn't going to end well.

Suddenly, the door opened with a slam. Chloe let out a small scream and he turned to go to her, to reassure her, only to find she'd crawled up into Judd's lap and wrapped herself around him.

Holy. Heck.

Judd had his arms out as though he didn't know what to do with the trembling bundle in his arms. Beck mimicked hugging her just as Hux stormed into the house. He came to a sudden stop, looking around at them all.

“Uh, didn't realize you were all home.”

“No. I can tell since you just slammed your way into the house,” Judd barked, wrapping his arms gently around Chloe. He ran his hand up and down her back.

Fuck. Beck didn't like the way she shook. He moved to them, sitting next to her. He cupped the back of her neck, leaning in.

“Easy, Freckles, it's just Hux.”

A shudder ran through her. “Hux?”

“Yep. No one else. Just Hux. You're safe.”

Judd shot him a look, but he didn't move his gaze from her. She turned to look at him, then she seemed to realize that she was wrapped around Judd like a baby monkey.

“Oh. I'm so sorry.” She tried to move off his lap, but Judd held her hips.

“I'm not,” he said gruffly. “You can jump onto my lap anytime you like.”

“Any of our laps,” Beck added.

Owen glanced over at them, giving her a heated look, which made her squirm.

Damn. Beck wouldn't mind knowing what she was thinking.

"Why don't you sit down, and Judd can finish doing your hair," he suggested.

"And Hux can explain why he's throwing a temper tantrum," Judd added.

Hux glared over at them. But his face softened as he took in Chloe. "Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay ... it's your house. You probably didn't think I'd be here."

Beck willed him to reassure her that it was great that she was here.

Hux opened his mouth, then frowned and glanced away.

When Beck saw her shoulders slump, he could have murdered Hux. Didn't that asshole realize how fragile she was? How one cross word ... one disapproving look could break her?

That fucker needed to know.

"Wait. If you're here, does that mean Jonathan is back?" she asked. "Oh no, I have to go." She jumped to her feet and started moving toward the door.

"Stop," Judd ordered. "Freeze."

She was at the door when she froze. Then she turned to him, her eyes wide.

Beck got to his feet to go to her, but Owen reached her first. To his shock, the other man drew her against him, holding her gently.

Had he ever seen Owen treat someone with such care? He held her to his chest, rocking slowly back and forth.

"His Lordship is with Prince Aric," Hux said. "Caleb sent Ian to relieve me. Not that I needed it. I was fine."

He didn't look fine. He had big dark marks under his eyes. He appeared to be on edge.

Fuck. Beck hated this. That his brother was hurting, and he didn't know how to fix it.

"He doesn't need you," Hux told her. "They were going off to do a tour around the cultural center that Aric is sponsoring and for dinner. They'll be back late."

"Oh," she said, pulling back from Owen's hold. She looked embarrassed and worried. "I should ... I should text him just in case."

"Are you scared of him?" Judd asked in his blunt way.

"Scared?"

"You seemed scared just now," Beck said gently. "If he's hurting you, then you need to tell us. We can help you get away from him."

"By breaking every bone in his body, cutting him into pieces, and feeding him to the pigs," Owen said darkly.

"Whoa, dude. You've thought about this." Hux gave Owen a shocked look.

"You can't ... you can't touch him, Owen," she said.

"I will if he's hurt you."

"I told you. He hasn't touched me."

"I've seen the way you watch him," Beck told her. "You watch him like someone who is waiting for him to strike."

"I'm fine," she said firmly. "He's not hurting me. He's my employer. I'm here to work for him. Not have fun. Maybe I should head back anyway for when he gets back." She tugged at her hair, finding knots that Judd hadn't managed to untangle yet.

"I can get Ian to text when they're headed back," Beck told her. "Stay, please."

"She's staying." Judd pointed down at the cushion by his feet. "Sit."

Heat entered her face. The fiery kind. “Woof. Woof.”

Owen patted her bottom. “There’s my little puppy. Trying to run off again. Tut-tut.”

She shot him a look over her shoulder as she made her way back to Judd.

“I’m not a puppy.”

“Sure you’re not. Now ... I need to look into leashes and collars.”

“Owen! Don’t you dare.”

Owen shot her a wicked look.

“I’m going to my bedroom,” Hux said abruptly, interrupting them. “Bye.”

He stormed off and Chloe’s face dropped.

Fuck. They needed to sort Hux out. And quickly.

Owen sat on the sofa by Judd and held out his arms. “Come here, little pup.”

She practically dove into his arms. He held her on his lap, whispering to her quietly. Every so often, she’d nod.

Beck wished he’d thought to be the one to comfort her. But for this to truly work, they all had to have time with her. On their own and together.

They couldn’t make the same mistakes they’d made with Ester.

He glanced at Judd, who was staring at Chloe and Owen with a mix of surprise and hunger. A hint of jealousy too.

“That’s my good little pup,” Owen said in a louder voice. He wrapped his hand up in her hair. “You’re going to be a good girl now and sit so Judd can do your hair, then let Beck fuss over you, aren’t you?”

He didn’t fuss.

Maybe a little.

“You’re going to be Beck’s sweet little girl, aren’t you? And my naughty little pup. What are you going to be for Judd, hmm? His sassy girl? Judd’s a bit like me. He likes to be in control. If you let him, he’ll probably smother you in protection and care. Are you going to be his sassy baby? Would you like to sit on his lap and have some more cuddles?”

Beck heard Judd take in a sharp breath. The look of longing and hunger on his face actually hurt Beck. Chloe must have seen it as well. She was nothing if not observant. Was she going to reject him, though?

No one would blame her ... Judd was an acquired taste. And a stubborn bastard. Judd’s face tightened.

Owen whispered something to her, and she gave him a startled look before nodding. To Beck’s surprise, she moved off his lap and crawled over to Judd. She looked nervous. As though she thought Judd might push her away.

Then Judd reached out his hand and she took it. He drew her in, and she climbed into his lap, curling up. He stared down at her with a look of such reverence that it shocked Beck.

And it gave him hope.

He glanced over at Owen, who looked smug as fuck. Who knew that bastard would be the one to find them a girl that just might unite them all again?

Jesus. He was never going to let them hear the end of this.

Chloe was feeling kind of dazed as Beck led her toward the playroom. After her cuddle, Judd had finished brushing her hair. He'd even put her hair into two braids. She couldn't believe how gentle he'd been.

Far better than Beck. Although, she wouldn't tell him that. She didn't want to hurt his feelings.

She'd checked in with Jonathan and he'd told her to keep distracting them.

She'd felt a bit sick after that. She wasn't here with the guys because of what Jonathan wanted from her.

But would they believe her if they ever found out?

The more time she spent with them ... the more her feelings for them grew.

It was dangerous.

So she'd quickly deleted the text. It was silly. And it made her feel guiltier. But what if Judd had happened to look over her shoulder at the wrong time? She could imagine his reaction. She thought it would be the worst of them all.

She still didn't fully know what had happened with Ester, but Judd had been hurt by her.

Was what Owen said true? Did Judd want her to be his baby? Judd hadn't really said anything. But then sometimes actions spoke louder than words. And perhaps it was better Judd didn't talk.

That's when he tended to annoy people.

Beck let her take in the playroom in silence. Everything was in shades of pink and white. There was pink wallpaper on the walls filled with white rabbits and doves. There were big white cupboards on one side of the room along with bookshelves and a small window seat. That looked so comfy. A pink fluffy beanbag chair made up the rest of the area.

Along the other end of the room was a daybed with a white canopy above it and a pink bedspread. Three sides of the bed had metal rails. The last side was open.

"This can turn into a crib or just be a daybed," he explained, coming over to pull another side out from under the bed. He attached it to the free side.

Her heart raced.

"Do you think you'd like to nap in a crib or bed?" he asked her.

She didn't know. She wasn't sure that she should be in here. It wasn't hers.

But you want it to be ...

"Maybe the bed."

Although she really wanted to say crib.

"What's your favorite color, Freckles?"

"Oh, um, well, I like pink."

He gave her a knowing look. "That's not what I asked. What's your favorite color? I've noticed you mainly wear dark colors. Is it black or navy blue?"

"Yellow. It's yellow," she whispered.

"I like yellow. Come here." He tugged her into his arms, and she instantly felt more settled.

Like in his arms was where she was meant to be.

He picked her up, making her gasp. But then he settled down with her on his lap on the rocking chair by the bed.

She shifted around, snuggling into his chest.

“You feel so good in my arms. And I know Judd and Owen feel the same way.”

What about Hux? What was going on with him? There was definitely something wrong. And she was pretty sure it was her.

She was the problem.

“Are you doing okay? Anything you want to ask me? Talk about?”

She loved the way that Beck always checked in with her. Everything could be overwhelming, and he could bring her back down to the here and now with a few questions.

“Freckles?”

“I’m okay,” she whispered. “I’m just ... Hux ...”

“Ahh.”

“Is he upset with me? Did I do something wrong?”

“Whoa. No, Freckles. It has nothing to do with you. Well, it does. But not like what you’re thinking.”

“What do you mean?”

He sighed, running a finger down her cheek. “I should get him to talk to you about this.”

“Please tell me ... I hate feeling like I’ve done something wrong.” Anxiety had her stomach rolling. She detested feeling this way.

“You have done nothing wrong,” he said firmly. “And I want you to stop thinking like that.”

Yeah, sure, she’d get right on that.

“Hux feels like he failed you yesterday.”

She frowned. “What? When those people from the Purity Party surrounded us?”

“Yes. He feels like he failed to protect you.”

That wasn’t what she was expecting him to say. “But that’s silly. He got me out of there. He saved me.”

“Maybe you can tell him that. Make him believe it. His father ... well, that’s not my story to tell, but Hux doesn’t like feeling like a failure and his father made him feel that way constantly.”

That bastard.

“So don’t worry that it’s you. It’s not. You could never do anything wrong, Freckles.”

She wasn’t so sure of that.

He rocked her back and forth until her eyelids started to close.

“Time for your nap, Freckles.”

She made a noise of protest as he went to move.

“Come on, you’ll get a better sleep in the bed than on my lap.”

She didn’t think that was true, but she guessed he didn’t want to just sit there while she napped.

He laid her down on the bed and she felt him place a blanket over her.

She let out a small noise.

“What’s the matter, Freckles?”

“Amy Alpaca.” She hated sleeping without her stuffie.

“Shoot. Do you want me to go grab her from your room?”

“No. No, I’ll be all right.” She was used to doing without the things she wanted. And she didn’t want to make him go over to get Amy. Plus, then he’d have to carry her over here and someone might see him ...

No, best to leave her there.

“Are you sure?”

“I sure, Daddy Beck.” She opened her eyes slightly to see him crouched beside her. There was concern in his eyes and she made herself smile to reassure him that she was good.

He placed his hand on the side of her face. “Beautiful girl. You can ask me for anything. I’ll move heaven and earth to give you what you need.”

“I’m good, Daddy.”

“Let me see if I can find someone else to keep you company.”

She shook her head sharply. “No. I’m good.”

He didn’t look convinced so she shut her eyes. She’d pretend to fall asleep. She didn’t think she actually would. As tired as she was, she was also completely wired.

Sleep was always a bit difficult. And she didn’t want to have a nightmare.

But then Beck rubbed her back.

And she didn’t have a hope in hell of staying awake.

HUX STOOD IN THE DOORWAY, watching as she drifted off to sleep. His hands tightened into fists against the urge to go to her. To take her into his arms.

Fuck.

He wanted to be with her. At the same time ... he knew he couldn’t be. As she drifted off, Beck stood. Then he glanced over at the doorway to Hux.

Hux moved out into the hallway.

“Why are you standing out here? Why didn’t you come in?” Beck asked him as he walked out to join him.

“I didn’t want to.”

“Bullshit. Hux, fuck, whatever is going on in your head, you have to stop listening to it. Stop letting your old man have a hold on you.”

“If I needed psycho-analyzing, I’d see an actual psychiatrist.”

“Fuck, man, all four of us could use some counseling. Although I don’t think anyone could help Owen.”

“He doesn’t want help,” Hux said.

Beck sighed. “I’m just worried about you. And her.”

Hux raised his gaze up to Beck. “Her? Why? What’s wrong with her?”

“She thinks she did something wrong and that’s why you don’t want to be around her.”

Fuck. Shit.

“Didn’t you set her right?”

“I didn’t want to tell her too much. It’s your story to tell. But I did tell her that it had everything to do with you and your feelings of failing her. Nothing to do with her. But damn it, Hux, don’t let this come between you both. Talk to her.”

“It’s better that I stay away. I don’t deserve her.”

“Fuck, man, that’s not true.”

It was.

Beck huffed out a sigh. “Look, just don’t hurt her while you’re sorting your head out, yeah? She doesn’t deserve it. And while she’s tight-lipped about her life and Lord Fothersam, it’s easy to see that things aren’t right with her. At least for now, she’s safe and cared for.”

Hux glanced over at him. “What? Do you think His Lordship is hurting her?”

He’d kill the motherfucker. He clenched his hands into fists. Bastard.

“I don’t know what’s going on. I haven’t seen any sign of physical abuse. And, like I said, she’s not talking. What I do know is that she watches him very carefully. She’s extremely loyal, but at the same time, worried about his reactions. You saw how she was when she realized you were back. She nearly ran out of here in her onesie.”

“So she’s dedicated to her job. That doesn’t mean anything.”

“I don’t know ... there’s other shit going on. She’s thin.”

Shit. That seemed a rude thing to comment on. And someone’s weight wasn’t usually something that Beck would ever talk about.

Unless ...

“You think she’s not eating?” he asked.

Beck just looked pensive. “She eats. But not much. We need to watch her. All of us.”

Hux shook his head. “I don’t know ...”

“Fuck, Hux. What happened wasn’t your fault. It could have been any of us looking after her when you were surrounded by that mob. I don’t get why the fuck you’re being so hard on yourself. I know that shit with Vivi’s uncle got to you ... but you were knocked out, man.”

“I didn’t see it coming. I should have. I should have been able to get Chloe safely away the other day. Instead, she was knocked around ... and Judd had to help me.”

“So? We’re brothers, man. That’s what we do. We help each other. Just ... think about what you want. And think about that girl. Because she needs you even if you can’t see it. She needs all of us.”

Hux stood and stared at the sleeping girl for a long time. This playroom was something he had helped set up. Well, he’d bought most of the toys. Judd had designed it and he and Beck had put everything together. Owen hadn’t paid much attention.

A whimper came from Chloe and he stepped forward, staring down at her frowning face.

She moved her hand out as though searching for something.

Fuck.

He wanted to soothe her, but he wasn’t quite there yet. However, he knew one thing that might help.

Chloe woke up feeling more rested than she had in a long time.

She stretched and realized that her hands and feet were trapped. Panic started to unfurl until she moved her hand in front of her face.

The onesie.

She was wearing a onesie. She wasn't trapped. And she was in the playroom. She sat up. Drat. She had to pee. Then she noticed something lying beside her.

It was Tickles, the bear.

How had he gotten here?

There was only one way ... Hux must have bought him for her. She picked him up, hugging him tight. Okay, that made her feel better.

Maybe Hux wasn't upset or angry at her.

He couldn't be if he'd left her Tickles, right?

Her bladder let out a protest. Shoot. Time to find a toilet. She slid off the bed and shuffled over to a door.

But halfway there, she got distracted by the cupboards along one wall. It wouldn't hurt to have a little peek, right?

She moved over to the cupboards, and managed to open them even with her hands trapped in the mittens, finding all sorts of toys inside. She gasped in delight as she found the

most beautiful doll she'd ever seen in her life. It was wearing an old-fashioned dress and pinafore and had glossy hair pinned back.

She drew it out and hugged it carefully.

"Hello, dolly. Do you want to be my friend?"

Okay. Seemed her Little side was totally out. She sat on the fluffy rug with the doll. Hmm, maybe she should do her hair.

Chloe searched through the containers, ignoring the pains in her lower tummy.

"Here we are! Let's get your hair done, dolly. I wonder what your name is."

"Her name is whatever you want to call her, Blue."

She let out a squeak of shock, then groaned as she had to press her thighs together.

"What is it? What's wrong? Does something hurt?" Judd rushed toward her, looking worried.

"No. Nothing." Nothing except she was an idiot. She'd gotten up to pee and had become distracted by a doll.

"Don't lie to me," Judd growled. "That's something I'll never forgive."

It was a hit to the stomach. Because she was lying in a way ... but was it a lie? Sure, she hadn't told them that Jonathan wanted her to distract them. But she truly wanted to be here.

Oh, she was a mess. She really needed to say something.

But what would Jonathan do? She owed him so much.

"Tell me what's wrong," Judd commanded.

"Toilet," she managed to say, feeling her face growing red. "Now."

To her shock, he lifted her into his arms and held her cradled against his chest as he turned and rushed out the door. He walked into a room across the hall. Was this his room?

He moved quickly to another door and opened it.

A bathroom.

Thank the Lord.

He set her down in front of the toilet and she attempted to pull at the onesie. Panic flooded her. Where was the zip? Shoot! Her hands were still in mittens.

“I can’t ... I can’t ...” This was mortifying.

“Shh, let me. I’ll help you, Baby Blue.”

“I can’t hold on! And I have nothing on underneath!” she wailed.

“There’s a drop seat. Just wait a second.” He reached around behind her and undid the drop seat, pulling it down and then settling her on the toilet.

To her utter horror, before he could move back, she was peeing.

This was ... horrible.

She leaned over, putting her hands over her face.

JUDD STARED DOWN AT CHLOE. She was hunched over as though protecting herself from a blow. But he couldn’t figure out what was wrong.

Was she still in pain?

“Chloe? Hey, it’s all right. Are you okay?”

“Nooo, I’m never going to be okay again.”

He raised his eyebrows at her dramatic tone. That wasn’t like her at all. But then again ... he didn’t exactly know her, right?

Of all of them, he was on the back foot. He hadn’t expected Beck to jump in with both feet like he had. He was usually more cautious. But it seemed he was firmly in Camp Chloe.

Owen ... well, that fucking bastard had surprised them all.

He was obsessed.

Judd wasn't sure yet whether that was a good thing or not. With Owen, one never fucking knew. And Judd had known him since they were twelve. He'd never been like this before.

Hux ... well, once he drew his head out of his ass, he'd have no problem winning her back. He was the one with charm.

Judd was the problem. The asshole. Temperamental. Grouchy. He knew it. Trouble was, he didn't really know how to be any different. His gauge was always set to expecting the worst.

So right now, his mind was going through all sorts of bad scenarios.

"I'll call Obian. Fuck. Are you bleeding? Is it sharp pains? Give me something here, Blue!"

"I'm peeing!"

Huh?

"Uh, yeah. Isn't that why you're on the toilet? Does it burn?"

She finally moved her hands away from her eyes to gape at him. "Does it burn?"

"Well, does it?"

"No! It doesn't burn."

He couldn't understand why she seemed so upset by that question.

"Could you ... could you please leave so I can clean myself up?" she asked.

"You might need some help."

She stared at him, then down at her hands which were trapped in the onesie.

"This is so embarrassing," she said.

Wait. Was that what was wrong?

"You don't need to be embarrassed."

“Yeah, I do. I just peed in front of you.” She covered up her face again.

“Hey. Everyone pees.”

*Really? That's how you're going to reassure her?
Everyone pees?*

Idiot.

He crouched in front of her and tugged her hands away from her eyes.

“Look at me.”

Right. That came out a bit harsher than he'd intended. But she did move her head, staring at him. She looked miserable and he fucking hated it. He searched for the words to reassure her.

“Are we just going to stare at each other while I sit on the toilet with a bare bottom?”

“That's how I sit on the toilet too.”

Her eyes widened. Shoot. Had he just made things worse?

“Did you just make a joke?” she asked.

“Uh. I guess. Bad one?”

“Well. No. It wasn't bad.”

“Look, my point is, we all pee, right? We all use the toilet. It's nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Yeah, but you don't pee in front of other people!”

He let out a bark of laughter. “I was in the armed services for years, Blue. You'd be disturbed by what I've done in front of other people.”

“Oh.”

“Oh, indeed. Come on, let me undo the back of this onesie. You want me to get you something else to wear?”

“Yes, please.”

“You clean up and I'll be back soon. I'll knock and leave it outside the door.”

She was staring at him like she'd never seen him before.

Reaching behind her, he slowly pulled down the zip. Then he moved to the door.

“Judd?” she called out.

“Yeah, Blue?”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Anytime.” He winked at her.

“Don't hold your breath,” she muttered.

He walked into his bedroom and grabbed her some clothes. Then he knocked on the bathroom door after setting them on the floor. He sat on the bed with his back to the bathroom.

He heard her open the door and grab the clothes. A few minutes later, the door opened again.

“Um, Judd?”

He turned around. Fuck. Giving her his clothes might have been the wrong idea. Because he liked seeing her dressed in them a bit too much. His T-shirt was so big on her that it came down to her knees and completely covered up the pair of shorts underneath. She was holding the shorts up with one hand, and in her other hand was the panda onesie.

Swallowing heavily, he stood. She held out the onesie. “What should I do with this?”

“It's yours, Blue.”

“Why Blue?” she asked.

“Uh, because of your eyes.” They were so beautiful.

“I can't accept this,” she said sadly.

“Course you can.” He frowned slightly. “You don't like it?”

“Oh no, it's not that. It's just ... I can't take it with me. Please.”

The plea on her face had him nodding and taking it from her.

“Fine. I’ll put it back in the playroom.” He took it from her. “You got out of bed on your own.”

Crap. He hadn’t meant to say that so accusingly.

Chill, man.

“Uh, yeah. I’m really sorry.”

Shit. Why did she look ashamed again? He hated that. She should never feel ashamed of anything.

“I shouldn’t have been touching things that weren’t mine. I just ... I wanted to take a peek and then I saw the doll. I don’t know what came over me.”

Ahh. She thought he was upset about her playing with the toys. He shook his head.

“I’m not upset at you for playing with the doll or looking through the stuff in the playroom. It’s there for you to play with.”

“Oh. Is it ... is it because you had to ... to take care of me? Sorry.”

Fuck. He wanted her to stop saying sorry. Right now.

There was no need for her to continually apologize.

“No, I liked that.”

“You like having to rush me to the bathroom?” She stared at him with big, blue eyes.

He shrugged. “Yeah.” That was the truth. He liked taking care of a Little in all ways. Ester hadn’t enjoyed giving up full control. Something he’d always craved. Probably because he’d had so little control over his childhoods.

“Really? I kind of thought you might have been horrified by my lack of control. I was.”

Horrified?

He frowned.

That was ridiculous.

“Of course I wasn’t horrified.”

She looked relieved, nodding. She had one arm over her front, grabbing the elbow of her other arm.

“But you shouldn’t have gotten up on your own,” he informed her.

“I ... why not?”

“Because you could have hurt yourself getting out of bed. Or lifting down those boxes of toys. You should stay where you’re put.”

Aww, fuck.

Why did he have to say that part?

Sometimes shit just came out of his mouth.

“Stay where I’m put? What the heck?” She gaped at him. “And how would I have hurt myself? By stubbing my toe?”

He narrowed his gaze, not backing down. Even though he probably should.

“While you’re here, we are responsible for you,” he informed her.

“Yeah, I remember this conversation,” she snapped back, those blue eyes sending off sparks.

He liked the fire in her.

“But as far as I knew, I was allowed to get out of bed by myself,” she said.

“Not when you’re in Little headspace.”

“That’s silly.”

“Really? What would have happened if I didn’t come in when I did?” he asked.

She chewed at her bottom lip.

“When you woke up, did you realize you had to pee? Did you get distracted on your way to the toilet?”

Yep. That was a guilty look.

He moved forward to reassure her that it was okay when there was a knock on the door. Looking over, he saw Beck

poke his head in.

“Hey, have you seen ... there she is.” Beck frowned as he took them both in. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said, smiling at Beck. The smile didn’t reach her eyes, though. “We’re just fine. I, um, had to get out of that outfit. Wasn’t very practical.”

Beck shot him a look as though to ask him what he’d done. He blew out a breath.

“I was just telling Chloe that she shouldn’t have gotten out of bed on her own. She should have called for one of us.”

“Ahh. Well, that would have been better, Freckles.” Beck walked over and cupped the side of her face, pulling her lip free from her teeth. “I got worried when you weren’t in the playroom. Next time, yell for me and I’ll come running, okay? But that was my fault for not telling you.”

She leaned into him with a happy look on her face.

Damn it.

He really was fucking all of this up. For Beck, she melted. For him, well, she looked like she’d rather punch him in the cock than suck it.

Fuck.

He rubbed his hand over his face. As Beck led her out of his room, all he wanted was to grab hold of her and drag her back. He wanted to kiss her and tell her he was sorry.

Suddenly, he felt someone’s gaze on him. Turning, he saw Owen watching him.

“You’re fucking up, aren’t you?”

“I think so.”

“Then stop.”

Things were so simple in Owen’s world. Sometimes he wondered what that would be like. How nice it would feel.

“Maybe I should keep my distance from her.”

Except he wanted her. So fucking much.

Owen stepped forward into his space. “No. You shouldn’t.”

“What if she walks away from us?”

Owen gave him a smile filled with promise. “She won’t. Trust me.”

He trusted Owen. But he didn’t trust her. Not yet.

“Remember, she’s not Ester. She’s not going to betray us.”

Judd sucked in a breath. “I’ll try. Okay?”

“Do better than try. Believe. She’s not Ester and she’s not going anywhere.”

God, that man was infuriating.

Chloe stomped into the kitchen, forgetting that she was wearing Judd's shorts. They fell down to her ankles, nearly sending her flying.

"Whoa." Beck grabbed her, lifting her into the air. The shorts fell off her feet, landing on the floor. He set her on his hip. "Careful, Freckles."

Setting her down on the counter, he then moved further into the kitchen. Owen walked up to them, the shorts in his hand. "You stripping, baby girl?"

She felt herself growing red. "Not on purpose."

"Hmm. That's too bad." Placing his hands on the counter on either side of her, Owen leaned in to nip at her lower lip. "You can strip for me anytime you want."

Then he took her mouth with his in a kiss that made her head spin. It made her forget everything else.

Her dark king had that power over her, and she wasn't complaining.

He pushed her thighs wide and drew her forward so her pussy was pressed against his lower stomach. "You're not wearing panties."

She groaned. She knew that he wouldn't give this up. "No."

“Fuck, yes.” He ran his hands up her thighs until the tips of his fingers reached the lips of her pussy.

Her breath hitched as he ran his finger over her clit.

He wouldn't. Not here, right?

Shit. This was Owen. Who knew what he would do?

“Do you guys have to do that in my kitchen?” Grumpzilla snapped as he stormed past.

She stiffened and tried to move away but Owen held her tight.

“Yes,” Owen replied. “So shut up or leave.”

Crap.

She sucked in a breath as he moved another hand under her top to her breast. He ran his finger over her tight nipple.

God damn it.

It felt so good.

She'd never done anything this naughty or dirty in her life. Heck. She'd never had sex anywhere except in a bed. And she certainly hadn't ever had someone touch her while others watched.

And yet ... she wasn't pushing him away or telling him no.

“Don't worry about Judd,” Owen soothed. “All that matters is you. What you want.”

That wasn't true.

Her wants never mattered.

“Don't shake your head,” Owen commanded. “You're my queen. You matter.”

Dear Lord.

He was breaking her into tiny pieces. She was never going to put herself back together without him. As he spoke, his finger slowly circled her clit. His other fingers played with her nipple.

Judd slammed something down behind them. “Owen!”

Owen just smiled.

Oh, he was so bad. And yet, she seemed to find that incredibly hot.

“Chloe, are you all right?” Beck asked. “You can tell him if you don’t want something. You’re always in charge.”

Was she?

With Owen, she didn’t know if she was.

And she was certain she didn’t want to be.

“How far away is dinner?” Owen asked, removing his fingers from her clit. He drew them up to his mouth and sucked.

“Twenty minutes,” Judd snapped.

“Hmm. Just enough time to make my girl scream.” He picked her up over his shoulder.

She froze for a moment.

Owen. This is Owen.

Her panic was broken as she realized that she could feel a cool breeze on her ass.

“Owen!”

He smacked her bare ass. Jerk.

“Let me know when dinner is ready!” He carried her off to another bedroom. This one was even more sparse than Judd’s.

“Owen,” she said warningly as he lay her on the bed. “What was that about?”

“That was about me needing a taste of your pussy. Spread your legs for me.”

Her heart raced. Why did she like his dominance? Why did it turn her on so much? She wanted his control. Craved it. And then she wanted Beck’s gentle calm. Hux’s humor and charm.

And Judd?

Well ... she even wanted his rough-around-the-edges bossy protectiveness.

“Baby girl, spread your legs. Let me see you.”

She gulped, but widened her thighs.

“That’s my beautiful girl. So precious. Fuck me.” He started kissing up her leg.

“Owen, what are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m going to make you scream my name.”

“Oh my God. You’re not.”

He gave her a wicked grin in between kisses to the tops of her thighs.

King of the underworld.

Dark and mysterious.

And all hers.

Reaching down, she ran her fingers through his hair.
“You’re so gorgeous.”

He scoffed. “I’m not the gorgeous one.”

He moved his lips along the top of her mound, then down the seam of her lips. His tongue played with her clit, flicking it.

She trembled.

Shit. It wasn’t going to take much for him to send her over the edge. He drove her higher and higher, taking her right to that point then pulling back.

She was breathing heavily as she stared down at him.
“You’re not really going to make me scream your name, are you?”

“Oh, I am, baby girl. You’re going to scream it so loud that they hear it at the palace.”

Holy heck.

He ate her out like his life depended on it. She was so close when he drew away from her again.

“Please! Please, let me come.”

“You’re going to have to do better than that, baby girl.”

Lord. Help. Her.

He returned his tongue to her clit, flicking it firmly, then sliding his fingers deep into her pussy. She clenched down around him.

She was going to come! He drew back to lightly kiss the top of her mound.

“Nooo,” she wailed.

“You know what to do,” he said in a low voice.

“Owen! Owen! Please!”

“Please what? Tell me what you want.”

“You ... I want you. Please! Make me come. Fuck me. Please.”

He moved over her and stared down at her, his gaze intent. “You want my cock inside you? Driving you wild?”

“Yes. Please. Please.”

“Put your hands behind your head and keep them there.”

She moved them immediately, not wanting to do anything that might make him stop.

“That’s my good girl. So precious. I’m going to come inside you, baby girl. Brand you as mine.”

“Yes. Yes. Yours.”

“Mine. And theirs. Because I’m a good sharer. But only them.” His hand rested on her throat.

His possessiveness was both terrifying and amazing.

Then he drew Judd’s T-shirt up over her breasts, leaning in to lick and nip at her nipples until she was arching up, his name a chant on her lips.

“That’s it. That’s my girl.” He moved back down her stomach. “Fucking yell my name.”

His tongue worked her up again, making her beg and scream until she came. She was lying there in a daze as he

moved over her.

“I’m clean.”

Huh?

“I don’t want anything between us,” he explained. “I’m clean.”

“So am I,” she whispered. “And I have an IUD.”

“Good. I’m taking you bare.”

That was his only warning before he thrust into her with one long movement.

So full.

Almost too full.

But she liked how good she could make him feel. She could see it on his face. The pleasure. The ache.

She wrapped her legs around him as he drove in and out of her. His thrusts became harder, faster. He leaned back and grabbed her hips, fucking her with short, sharp thrusts.

“Christ, baby. You feel so good. Fuck,” he groaned as he came.

Panting heavily, he leaned over her, kissing her lightly. “Good girl.”

She smiled up at him.

“You can move your hands, but stay lying there.”

When he returned, he had a warm cloth in his hands. She could feel herself growing red as she reached for it.

He just raised an eyebrow at her. “I don’t think so. Spread your legs.”

Chloe lay back, putting her hands over her face as she parted her legs. He cleaned her up carefully, thoroughly.

“I have something for you. Sit up and turn away from me.”

She faced the door. Behind her, he seemed to be rustling through a drawer, then she felt him kiss his way up her neck. Her hair was still braided.

Judd had done a good job.

Don't think about him right now. Also, don't think about how everyone probably heard you both just now.

Yikes.

Then something was placed around her neck. It was cool and heavy. She reached up to touch it.

“A necklace?”

“Yes. Do you want to see it?” Owen asked.

“Yes, please.”

They got off the bed and he led her into the bathroom. She stared at the simple necklace in the mirror. It was gold and had a large circle at the base of it.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

“It's lovely. But you didn't have to buy me a necklace.”

“Of course I did. I want you to wear it all the time. And look, it even has an O for Owen.”

He ran his finger around the circle. An O for Owen huh? Seemed a bit of a stretch. He hooked his finger in the circle and turned her to face him. “Don't take it off.”

“All right,” she whispered. She'd have to try and hide it from Jonathan, though.

Owen kissed her before tucking the necklace under the T-shirt.

“Come on, time to eat.”

Motherfucking bastard.

Judd slammed a tray down on the bench.

“Whoa, man. What did that tray ever do to you?” Beck walked in and sat at the island. He reached over to grab a piece of pizza. Judd slapped his hand.

“Hey! What’s going on with you?”

Judd glared at him. Didn’t he know? “Didn’t you hear them?”

“Ahh. Jealous?” Beck asked.

“Fuck, no.”

Beck sighed. “It’s okay if you are. I am. I want to be in that bedroom with her, making her scream my name.” He shifted around on the stool. “My cock is still fucking hard. But you must realize that we are all moving at a different pace with her.”

“I’m not moving at any pace at all. I’m going backward.”

“Judd, man, you’ve got to actually try. And I don’t think you’re going backward. She sat on your lap before. Twice.”

Yeah, before he’d opened his fat mouth and ruined shit.

Her soft voice reached his ears before he saw her.

Fuck. She was still wearing his shirt. His dick hardened even further. And his frown deepened.

She peeked over at him, then ducked behind Owen.

Great. Could she not even look at him now?

Definitely going backward.

“Sounds like you had a fun time, Freckles,” Beck teased as Owen sat on another stool and lifted her onto his lap. She buried her face in Owen’s chest with a groan.

Beck chuckled.

“What’s the matter?” Owen asked her.

“What do you think? I’m embarrassed.”

“Nothing to be embarrassed about,” Beck told her. “Those sounds you made were sexy as hell.”

“Told you,” Owen said, wrapping his hand around the back of her neck to tug her head back. “Won’t be a single guy in this house not jacking off to the memory of those sounds tonight.”

She groaned again, but he leaned in and kissed her.

Judd slammed a wooden platter with pizza pieces on it on the island.

“She needs to eat. Now.”

Owen drew away from her and glared at him.

“I’m going to go check on Hux.” And get the hell away from bewitching blue eyes and full plump lips.

Instead of going to Hux’s room, he slipped into his own bedroom, leaning back against the door with a groan.

Why did he keep fucking up?

Why couldn’t he just be fucking nice? He closed his eyes, breathing in deep.

She wasn’t Ester. She wasn’t going to say something to his face, then betray him behind his back.

He had to stop treating her like this.

Because he wanted those sweet smiles for himself. He wanted her laid out on his bed with her legs spread as he ate her out and made her scream.

Fuck it.

He shoved down his sweatpants and took hold of his dick. He moved his hand up and down the hard shaft. His breath came in short pants.

It didn't take much. Just a few fast swipes of his hand before he was coming, thick ropes of come landing on his hand.

Christ.

He hadn't come that quick since he was a teenager.

She was bewitching him. All of them.

He just had to find a way to win her over.



“THANKS FOR WALKING ME HOME. You didn't have to.” Chloe glanced up at Beck, then away. She was still feeling a bit embarrassed about everyone hearing her and Owen.

“Of course I had to walk you home. You shouldn't be walking around alone.”

She rolled her eyes. “You're starting to sound like Judd. I'm sorry if I upset him.”

“Upset him?”

“He kind of stormed off earlier.” Which had ruined any appetite she had.

“Oh, yeah. Upset? Maybe. Turned on? Horny? Definitely. Owen wasn't wrong when he said we'd all be jacking off tonight, thinking about those noises you made.”

She groaned, stopping to put her hands over her face.

“Hey, don't be embarrassed.”

“How can I not be?”

He moved her hands from her face. “Because I thought they were fucking hot. I'm still thinking hard about it. Owen is a lucky bastard.”

They'd stopped outside the door to her suite. Feeling brave, she ran her hand down his chest, stopping just before she got to his dick.

He stared down at her hungrily. "Put your hand on me. Please."

Owen would never have said please. But it just reminded her how different they all were.

And how much she wanted all of them.

She placed her hand on his cock, making Beck moan. "Freckles, that feels so good."

She glanced around, but there was no one close. Since they were in the shadows of the building, she pushed her hand under his sweatpants, running her hand up and down his thick shaft.

His breathing stuttered.

She'd never done anything this daring in her life. It was exciting.

"Freckles, you have to stop." He grabbed her wrist gently.

She froze. "I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

He gave a quiet laugh. "No. The opposite. It was starting to feel too good."

She licked her lips. She wanted to taste him. To hear him come. "I could take care of that for you."

"Thank you." He cupped her face between his hands. "But you're tired and you need to sleep."

"I had a nap. I'm good. I won't go to sleep yet. Please."

She winced as she said that. If he rejected her ...

"I haven't got the self-control to say no when you say please."

"Then, please, please, please," she begged.

"Oh, someone is naughty," he murmured. "Not playing fair."

“Sorry, Daddy Beck.”

She wasn't. She wasn't sorry at all.

“Sassy monkey. I think that you need to be punished.”

“Nope. I'm a good girl.”

“Hmm, we'll see. Are you asking me in?”

She sucked in a breath. It was risky. If Jonathan was home or came back and tried to talk to her ...

“Hey, it's all right. I don't have to come in.”

“I want you to, though. But Jonathan probably wouldn't like it.”

“Well, Jonathan doesn't have to know. Wait here. I have to go in and make sure that the place is secure first.”

“All right,” she said breathlessly.

“Wait here. Make sure you're a good girl for me.”

She'd do whatever he wanted if he just kissed her like that again.

He returned quickly. To her surprise, he swept her up into his arms and carried her inside, shutting the door behind him.

Then he walked with her into her bedroom.

“You're very strong.”

He snorted. “You weigh nothing.” He placed her down on the bed. His touch was so careful, reverent.

It made her feel cherished.

He switched on the bedside lamp, then sat next to her, staring down at her.

“I didn't notice this earlier today.” He touched the necklace. She'd changed back into her dress before leaving their place.

Surprisingly, she hadn't wanted to take off Judd's T-shirt.

Nope, she'd wanted to wrap it around her like a security blanket. Which was crazy since she still thought he didn't like

her.

“I, um, Owen gave it to me.”

Beck froze.

“Owen?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Did he? That’s ... interesting.”

“Why?” she asked, confused at his tone.

He shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. Owen isn’t here right now. I am. I need to make sure you want this. Want me. If it’s moving too fast, we don’t have to do anything. We can just talk and cuddle.”

She loved that he wanted to do that.

But that wasn’t what she was interested in right now. Seemed like years of going without being touched, of not having much desire to have sex was all catching up on her.

She was turning into a hussy.

“I love that you want to cuddle.” She reached up to pull him down to her. “But I want you to fuck me. Then cuddle me.”

“Yeah?” he said, wonder filling his voice.

Why would he be so shocked? He was gorgeous and kind, but with an edge of dominance ... women had to be clamoring to get to him.

“Oh yeah. Do you ... do you think it’s wrong that I want you just after Owen and me ...” She wasn’t sure exactly how this all worked. They were used to sharing, but was it okay to go from one to the other?

“Hey. Look at me.” He waited until her gaze met his. “It’s not wrong at all. This is the sort of relationship we want. It’s what we like. We’re used to sharing. Not saying that sometimes we don’t get jealous. Like I said, I think Judd felt a bit of the green-eyed monster earlier. But that is no fault of yours. You are doing nothing wrong, understand?”

She nodded. But her brain was caught on something else. “You really think Judd was jealous?”

“Oh yeah, Freckles. Now, let’s stop talking about my brothers and get you naked.” He stripped off her dress, revealing her bra and panties. “Wow.”

He ran his finger over her nipple, making her shiver.

“I know there’s not much there.”

Beck gave her a firm look. “That sounded very much like you were putting yourself down. And that’s not allowed.”

Shoot.

“I know that Owen has talked about some rules with you. But just so we’re clear. No lying, no disrespecting yourself or us. You’re to look after your health, and you aren’t to put yourself in danger. Those things will get you spanked every time. Now, Owen might let you get away with a lot. He’s let you rack up thirty spanks. The others probably would too. That’s not acceptable. But I’m the disciplinarian. So here’s what is going to happen. You’re going over my lap and it’s going to be a count of ten. It will be a punishment for speaking badly of yourself, but we will also count it toward the spanks you’re owed. Understand?”

“You’re really going to spank me?” She gave him a pouting look. Surely, she could change his mind.

“Yes. And it won’t be just a couple of love taps like Owen gave you.”

“Those weren’t love taps.” They hurt.

He just stared at her. “Are you saying your safeword or are you going to put yourself across my knee?” He sat on the side of the bed and patted his lap.

“Right now?”

“Yes. A punishment is best given straight away.”

She sat and then crawled over his lap. “Is it going to hurt, Daddy Beck?”

“It wouldn’t be a punishment if it didn’t. But I’ll never give you more than you can take.”

“Okay, Daddy. I’s ready.” She tensed up, waiting for him to smack her poor bottom.

“Not yet, you aren’t.” He slid her panties down off her bottom, baring her to his gaze. Then he rubbed the skin of her bottom soothingly.

This was weird.

Not how she’d expected her punishment to begin.

“What’s your safeword?”

“Red.”

“Say it if you need to.”

Smack! Smack!

Ouch. Shit.

Okay, he wasn’t easing into things then.

Smack! Smack!

“Daddy, no! It hurts!”

“It hurts me to hear you say bad things about yourself,” he countered.

Smack! Smack!

She started kicking her feet. A sob built inside her.

Oh shit.

She wasn’t going to cry, was she? She never cried anymore.

Smack! Smack!

By now her bottom was throbbing, stinging. She could feel herself about to let go. To give in and cry.

Smack! Smack!

“That’s it. All done. Good girl. You were such a good girl.”

She sucked in one breath, then another, trying to calm herself.

“It’s okay. Do you want Daddy to cuddle you?”

“Y-yes!”

“Here, let’s take your panties off completely. That’s it. You’re all right. You’re Daddy’s good girl.” He turned her around, so she straddled his lap, and rocked back and forth with her in his arms. “Shh. Good girl. You’re okay.”

She buried her face into his chest as he rubbed his hand up and down her back. She let him soothe her, hold her until she felt more grounded. More like herself.

“You okay, Freckles?” he asked as she shifted back.

She stared up at him, nodding. “I think so.” In fact, she felt lighter. Like a burden had been lifted off her shoulders.

Which was weird.

He cupped her face between his huge hands. “I’m sorry I had to do that. I’d rather I didn’t have to. Because right now, I could be inside you, making love to you. But it’s important that you know how serious we are when it comes to the rules. Understand?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“I’ll help you into bed. Do you want a drink of water? You’ll need to brush your teeth first.”

“But what about ...”

“About what?” he asked.

“Um, well ...”

“Chloe, you can tell me anything.”

“What about where we left off or do you not want to do that anymore?” She shifted around on his lap, wincing as her bottom throbbed.

“I wasn’t sure you’d want that after I spanked you.”

“Well, I do,” she said shyly. “If you do.”

In answer, he reached around her and undid her bra. “You are so beautiful, Freckles. My sweet baby.”

Wrapping a hand around the back of her neck, he eased her onto the bed and kissed her before moving his mouth down to her breasts. He lapped at her nipples, treating them with tender care. His caresses started to drive her wild. She writhed on the bed, ignoring the ache in her bottom.

“More, Beck. More!”

“Daddy Beck,” he reminded her.

“Daddy Beck. Please touch me. Make me come.”

“Greedy girl. Do you need me to finger your pussy? Do you need me to fuck you?”

“Oh. Yes.”

She was completely bare while he was still dressed. Sitting up, she reached for his T-shirt.

He shied back.

She stared at him in surprise. Did he not want her to touch him?

“Not yet, Freckles.”

Huh?

Before she could question him, he cupped her pussy with his hand. She moaned in excitement.

“Spread your legs. Let me see you. That’s it. I love the way you obey me. Such a good girl.”

She had lost her mind. This wasn’t her. She had never felt like this. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had an orgasm before coming here.

Yet, here she was having sex with two different men in one day.

Beck lay alongside her, his mouth on her nipple as he ran his finger over her clit. She whimpered and tried to close her legs.

He stopped moving.

No!

“Daddy, please!”

“Keep your legs nice and wide and you’ll get to come. Move and I’ll stop.”

Oh, there was his darker side.

And she craved it.

She pushed her legs apart. There was no way she wanted him to stop.

He pushed a finger deep inside her, thrusting it back and forth.

“Look at me.” She stared up at him, mesmerised by the look of need and adoration on his face. “You are so fucking perfect.”

He added another finger and her breathing hitched. “Me? Have you looked at yourself lately?”

Did he just go red? Wasn’t he used to people telling him how hot he was?

That just made her determined to tell him every day.

He added a third finger. There was something crazy intimate about him fingering her while she was being made to look at him.

“I want your eyes to stay open while you come. You’re to keep looking at me.”

She whimpered. “I want to touch you.”

“Soon,” he promised. “Do you have any condoms?”

She shook her head. Why would she have condoms?

“I left them back in my room,” he said.

“Oh, um, you don’t need them. I’ve got an IUD. Owen didn’t ... he didn’t use anything.”

“I hope he had this talk with you first.”

“He did.”

“I’m clean, Freckles.”

“Me too. I promise. It’s been a long, long time. Other than Owen, I mean. Boy, do I need to stop talking.”

He grinned. “I like seeing you like this. All flustered. It’s so different from who I thought you were when I first met you.”

“Yeah?”

“You seemed so untouchable. So perfect.”

She was hardly that.

But her throbbing bottom told her not to say that out loud.

“You best not be having bad thoughts about yourself right now,” he warned.

Uh-oh.

“Because I don’t care if I just spanked you, I will do it again if I think you need it. I will always give you what you need. Even if you don’t necessarily want it.”

She thought that over for a moment. She’d never had anyone she could rely on. Well, other than Jonathan.

There was a sense of safety that came with knowing Beck would be there for her. Would pull her up if necessary.

“Are you mad at me? Ester never liked this part of our relationship. Urgh, fuck, sorry. I shouldn’t mention her.”

“It’s okay. I know she was special to you all.”

“She was,” he said in a short voice.

Beck was nestled against her, and she could feel how hard his dick was.

“Please, can I taste you? Can I put you in my mouth?”

“You’re sure you want that?”

“God. Yes.”

“All right, Freckles. You can put my dick in your mouth.”

She slid off the bed and onto her knees on the floor while he stared down at her in surprise. Then he reached over and grabbed a pillow, handing it to her. "For your knees."

Wow. He was sweet. As she put the pillow under her knees, he stood and pulled off his sweatpants and boxers, revealing his cock.

Dear Lord. He was huge.

Was she even going to get him into her mouth?

"Don't worry." He ran a finger over the freckles on her nose. "We'll go nice and slow."

Good.

Because she wasn't sure she could handle anything else. She ran her tongue up his cock.

Damn. So good.

Placing her hands on his thighs, she took the head of his dick into her mouth and sucked.

"Heck, yes." He ran his fingers lightly through her hair. Not gripping it like Owen would have.

She loved their differences.

She ran her tongue along his shaft, learning it, then she lapped across the head.

"Baby. That feels so darn good."

She slid her hands higher, toward his stomach, and felt him stiffen.

And not in a good way. Drawing back, she stared up at him.

"You want to ride me, Freckles?" he asked in a strangled voice. "That will give you some control over how much of me you take."

She nodded eagerly. He lifted her up, then he lay on his back on the bed before helping her straddle him. He ran his hands up her inner thighs, moving a finger to play with her clit.

She sucked in a breath, her eyes closing. “Oh God.”

“Who am I?” he growled.

“Beck. Daddy Beck.”

“That’s right. It’s Daddy Beck who is holding you. Touching you. Who is going to fuck you.”

“With your monster cock.” She slammed her hand over her mouth. “I didn’t mean to say that.”

He huffed out a laugh. “You’ll get used to my monster cock. I promise you.”

She wasn’t so sure. But she positioned herself above him, then reached down to guide his cock into her pussy.

“Yes, Freckles. You feel so damn good. You have no idea. Your heat is surrounding me. Good. Nice and slow. Look at you, taking me. You’re taking my cock inside you. I’m so proud of you.”

She never thought anyone would be proud of her for being able to take their dick.

But she was going to take it. She got most of him inside her before she had to stop. She was stretched so wide, it was almost painful. Yet, it felt so right.

Then he smacked the side of her thigh. “Move, doll.”

She rose, then slid down. She didn’t exactly know what she was doing. Luckily, he placed his hands on her hips, guiding her up and down. Her breathing came faster.

Harsh pants filled the room.

His finger moved back to her clit, flicking it in time with his thrusts. It was too much.

“I can’t ... I can’t stop ...”

“Come for me. Come on my dick. That’s it. My good girl. Hell!” he groaned as she threw her head back, moaning as she came.

With one more thrust up, he followed her over the edge. She slumped against him, his cock still inside her as her pussy

pulsed.

“You all right, Freckles?”

“Oh yes,” she said, snuggling into his wide chest.

He held her for a long time before he rolled them over and slid free from her.

“Nooo,” she groaned. “Come back.”

“I need to clean you up.”

“I don’t want you to.”

“You’ll be glad I have when you wake up in the morning.”

She whimpered, but let him go. He pulled on his boxers and sweatpants before moving into the bathroom. He came back with a cloth. Again, when she reached for it, he drew it back, shaking his head.

“You’re as bad as Owen.”

“I think I should be insulted by that. But if you mean because he insisted on cleaning you up as well ... then yeah, I am.”

After cleaning her up, he threw the cloth away.

“I don’t want you to go,” she mumbled, already half-asleep.

“Then I won’t go.” He settled on the bed next to her, running his fingers through her hair.

Ooh, that was nice. She placed her head on his thick thigh and he tucked the blankets around her shoulders.

“I wish you could stay, but Jonathan will be back at any time.”

“He’s just your boss. He doesn’t have a say in who you sleep with.”

“He’s so much more than that, I’m afraid.” She yawned.

“So tell me.”

She shook her head. “Wanna sleep. Need Amy.”

“Your Alpaca? Where is she?”

“Bedside drawer. At the back. Hidden.” He moved, rustling around. Then he produced the toy.

She snatched it from his hands.

“Hey, Freckles, no snatching. That’s naughty.”

“Mine.” Why wouldn’t she snatch?

“Yes, she’s yours. But you should still take her nicely and say thank you, Daddy, for getting my stuffie.”

“Thank you, Daddy, for getting Amy. Where’s Tickle?” she asked, alarmed. She’d carried him back from the house.

“He’s here on the floor.”

“Oh no, poor Tickle. The sights he must have seen. He’ll be traumatized.”

Beck just snorted. “I’m sure he’ll see much worse.”

“He’s just a young, impressionable teddy bear, Daddy. We have to look after him.”

“No, he and I need to look after you. Now, snuggle down. I’ll stay until you’re asleep.”

“Promise?”

“Always.”

Chloe stared at the rides and games in amazement. “This is so awesome!”

Beck squeezed her hand, smiling at her. To think she’d almost pulled out of coming to the fair. But Pippa had sent a message to make sure she was coming. And for some reason, Jonathan had been eager for her to go. He’d even decided to come too.

Which had really shocked her.

This wasn’t his scene.

Lord, she wished she knew what he was up to. They only had a couple of days left in Escana. Should she tell Beck the truth about what he’d asked her to do. He might listen to her without getting upset. She would have told Hux ... if he would even look at her.

They were all here tonight, though. Which was surprising. This really didn’t seem like something Owen or Judd would like. And Hux didn’t even want to be around her.

“Hey, you okay?” Beck asked.

She nodded, smiling. She shrugged off her thoughts. Tonight, was about having fun.

“Let’s go, Daddy Beck!” She glanced around, hoping Jonathan wasn’t close by.

“Jonathan wandered off with Ian trailing him,” Owen said, walking up to her. “Let’s go play.” He tugged her toward the

games and stopped at a shooting one. “I’m going to win you the biggest toy up there.” He nodded at the panda that was about the same size as her.

“Uh, that’s probably impossible.”

Owen grinned at her. “Baby girl, that’s my middle name.”

She rolled her eyes at his cockiness.

But less than five minutes later, she was holding the biggest soft toy she’d ever seen. She staggered back under its weight. Beck came up to steady her and lifted the toy away.

“Really? How is she even going to carry this? Couldn’t you have gotten a smaller one?” Judd asked, coming up to them. He was holding a bottle of water.

“It was the biggest. And the best,” Owen said. “That is what my queen deserves.”

She flushed with pleasure. Then Judd opened the bottle of water and handed it to her. She stared at him in surprise.

“Drink,” he commanded. “Knowing you, you’ve barely drunk all day.”

She’d been in meetings most of the day with Jonathan. So yeah, she’d spent all her time taking care of him.

“Chloe. Drink,” Judd demanded.

She huffed out a breath. “And if I don’t want to?”

Something heated entered in his face. “Do you want me to make you?”

“W-what?” That wasn’t what she was expecting him to say. Actually, she didn’t know what she was expecting. “No.”

“Are you sure, Baby Blue?” He drew closer to her, reaching up slowly to run a finger down her cheek. “I think you might. Shit.” He sighed and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he gave her a look filled with regret. “I’ve been meaning to apologize. I’m sorry if sometimes I’m a jerk.”

“Sometimes?”

He sighed. “Fine. Most of the time. It’s who I am. But I shouldn’t be a jerk to you. It’s just ... shit comes out of my mouth without me thinking about the consequences. My emotions run high and I tend to see the negative in everything. I’m going to try and do better. Okay?”

“Okay,” she whispered even as guilt filled her.

Fucked. She was fucked.

“I’ll try and do better for you, Baby Blue. Can I kiss you?”

“Yes, please.”

Leaning in, he kissed her gently. When he drew back, she nearly stumbled.

“Wow.”

He grinned. “Wow, is right. Now, how would you like to go on some rides?”



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, she was clinging to Judd as they walked through the haunted house.

Something brushed her hair and she screamed and climbed him like a tree.

“Whoa, Blue. It’s okay. You’re all right.” He held her tight as she shook against him.

“I want out.”

“I’ll keep you safe. Promise. It’s just pretend. Come on, though. Let’s go.”

She knew she was acting silly, but she couldn’t help it.

“Here we are. You’re okay now. See?” Now they were outside, she could take a few deep breaths.

But all she could smell was him. And she wanted more. She nuzzled into his neck.

“There she is. My pretty blue-eyed baby,” he murmured. “I’m such an idiot. Don’t deserve you.”

“Yes, you do.” She kissed his neck, then drew back, feeling shy. She hadn’t exactly asked permission.

He started walking. She stiffened. “Where are we going?”

“Hush.” Then he pressed her to a building and, wrapping his hand around the back of her head, he kissed her.

And holy heck.

What. A. Kiss.

She forgot everything around her as she fell into the kiss.

He consumed her.

Judd was a force to be reckoned with. A whirlwind. One day you wanted to punch him in the balls and the next you wanted to worship his dick with your mouth.

It was confusing.

A throat clearing made her freeze.

Fuck. She knew that sound. It iced the heat in her veins.

She drew back, turning to look at Jonathan. She struggled to tell what he was thinking. Was he mad?

Did his hand just twitch?

Oh shit.

“Jonathan, I’m sorry. Did you need me?”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” he said.

“Well, you did,” Judd snapped. “So why don’t you leave?”

Fuck.

She couldn’t breathe.

“Excuse me?” Jonathan asked coldly.

That was definitely a twitch.

“Judd,” she whispered desperately.

“Chloe is my assistant.”

“And right now, she’s off the clock. She’s here to have fun. She’s not at your disposal all the time.”

“Judd,” she said more urgently.

This was one of those moments that she wanted to kick him in the balls. The asshole was making things so much worse. She tried to get down, but he held her still.

Jonathan’s eyes narrowed, then he smiled.

However, it didn’t meet his eyes.

“Of course she is allowed to have fun. I came to see how she is.”

“Hey, have you guys been on the Ferris wheel?” Owen popped up out of nowhere.

How the heck did he move so quietly? And where had he put that giant panda? The efficient way he’d shot down the targets ... even the guy running the game had been in shock.

Had he been a sniper in the Armed Forces? Maybe.

There was a lot about them that she didn’t know.

“Uh, no,” she said. “Sounds fun.” Not that she wanted to go on it, but anything to get away from Jonathan.

“I love the Ferris wheel,” Owen said. “Let’s go.” He held out his hand to her.

Judd glared at him, but Owen just shot him a look.

Things were kind of bad when Owen was the diplomatic one. Judd let her down, but kept hold of one hand. Shoot.

She watched Jonathan as she grabbed Owen’s hand as well. But he simply turned away and walked off. She let out a deep breath.

“Fucking dick,” Judd muttered.

She rounded on him, pulling her hand free of his. “You can’t antagonize him like that.”

“Why not?” Judd asked. “Why do you defend him? Stay working for him? He acts like he owns you.”

Because he does.

“I want to go on the Ferris wheel, Daddy,” she said as she turned to Owen. She knew it was kind of sneaky calling him Daddy in that moment because she thought it would get her what she wanted.

“All right. What baby girl wants she gets.” He swept her close. She glanced back at Judd, seeing his frustration.

Crap. She was messing up.

“Owen, if I told you something ... would you promise not to get upset?” She needed to tell someone about Jonathan. About what he’d asked her to do. About why she was tried to keep him happy and calm.

“Can’t do that, baby girl.”

“Oh.”

“But I’ll never get so upset that I don’t want to be with you. That help?” he asked.

“Yeah. A bit. You see—”

“Shit. Can this wait a moment?”

“What? Why?” She gasped as Owen lifted her into the carriage. The door barely shut behind her before the Ferris wheel was moving.

“Owen!” she yelled out. She didn’t want to be on here.

You just told Owen and Judd you wanted to ride the Ferris wheel.

Yeah, but not on her own.

Her breath came in fast pants as she glanced down at the ground. “Oh God. Oh God.”

“Hey, you’re all right.”

She let out a small scream. Somewhere above her, someone laughed. How could they laugh?

Hux slid forward on the bench seat. How had she not seen him there?

“Chloe? You’re okay.”

“I’m not. I’m not. I don’t want to be on this.” She clung to the side of the carriage.

“It’s all right, we’re nearly at the top and then we’ll go back down. I’ll flag the attendant and we’ll get you off, okay?” he said in a calm voice.

“O-okay.”

“That’s it. Just breathe. Look at me. No, don’t look down.”

She couldn’t seem to help it, though.

He reached out and grabbed her chin, making the carriage rock as his weight moved.

She screamed.

“Look at me,” he said firmly. “Not the ground. Who am I?”

“H-Hux.”

“Good. Look at me. That’s it. That’s better. See? We’re about to start our way down now.”

Except just as he said that, they came to a stop. She cried out.

“It’s okay. They’re probably just letting someone else out. It will start up again. Shh, you’re fine. I know you won’t believe this, but I won’t allow anything to happen to you.”

“W-why wouldn’t I t-think that?” Why were these people taking so long to get out?

She heard some yelling from below and tried to turn her face to look.

“No. You’re going to do as I say and look at me.”

Her breath caught. “Why isn’t it starting up again?”

“I don’t know, little darlin’. I know they’re working on it, though.”

The carriage rocked and she whimpered, shivering. “I want down.”

“I know you do. I’ll keep you safe. I promise. I know I failed before, but I have you now.”

She took several deep breaths to stave off the nausea. Then his words penetrated.

“What are you talking about? You never failed me.”

“When those Purity Party assholes surrounded us, you got separated from me. They could have hurt you. I didn’t protect you.”

“Is that why you’ve been avoiding me?”

“I don’t deserve you, little darlin’. I’m a fuckup.”

“Who the hell called you a fuckup?” she demanded. Then she whimpered as the carriage moved. Why did it have to stop when they were right near the top? This was a nightmare.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does.” Because it obviously mattered to him. She hated seeing him down. “You are not a fuckup. Don’t call yourself that. And you protected me. You took care of me. I don’t want you to say anything bad about yourself or I’ll ... I’ll have to spank your ass.”

He grinned. “Like to see you try, little darlin’.”

“Pretty sure if I asked nicely, Owen would kidnap you and tie you down for me.”

His eyes widened. “There’s that mean streak. So fucking sexy.”

She cried out as the Ferris wheel gave a jolt.

“I don’t like it. I don’t like it. I need off. Please, Daddy.”

“Are you calling *me* Daddy?” Hux asked, sounding shocked.

“Is that ... is that not okay?”

“Hey. Shh. Of course it is. You need to feel safe right now. Does being in Little headspace make you feel safe?”

“When I’m with you guys, it does. I want a cuddle.”

“Okay. I’m going to sit on the floor. I don’t want to overbalance it by coming over to your side. Then you come sit on my lap, okay?”

Not okay. But she nodded.

He moved and she whimpered. This was horrible. She clung to the side of the carriage.

“Right, now come here.”

“N-no.” She couldn’t move. She was frozen.

“Little darlin’. Do you trust me to keep you safe?”

Shoot.

“I d-do.”

But she couldn’t move.

“Daddy Hux wants you to come to him. He wants you to sit on his lap so he can take care of you. And good Little girls do what their Daddy wants, don’t they, little darlin’?”

She took a deep breath in, then nodded. “Yes, Daddy Hux.”

“Good girl. Then you take my hand or I’m going to have to get stern with you and I don’t want to do that with my precious girl.”

She reached out one hand, and he slid his hand around it. Instantly, she felt better.

“You won’t let me go?”

“Never. I’ll never let you go.”

She let him pull her onto his lap so she was straddling him. She buried her face into his chest, heaving for breath.

“Easy, I have you. I have you. I’m not letting you go.”

“You were going to.” She felt a lot better now that she was in his arms. Her head felt clearer.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“You pulled away from me before. You haven’t really talked to me since that day. Because you thought you fucked up.”

“Don’t let Beck hear you swear in Little headspace. So here’s the deal.”

“Yes?”

“I’m a dickhead.”

She made a scoffing noise. “Naughty Daddy. You’re not allowed to put yourself down.”

“No, that’s you.” He ran his hand up and down her back, his other hand pressed her face to his chest. “My dad is a complete asshole.”

She stilled. She wanted to hear this, despite the way her heart pounded with fear and she longed to fall completely into Little headspace.

“Was he the one who told you that you’re a fuck up?” she asked.

“Yeah. All my life he’s constantly put me down. After a while, I just believed it. Even if everyone else said I was good at something, if he said I was shit at it, I believed him. What made it worse was that our entire community thought he was this amazing guy. He’s attractive, has charisma. My mom died when I was young and people would always say how tragic it was he had to raise me alone, and what a good man and father he was. Fucking asshole hid his monster so well.”

“I’m so sorry, Hux.” Her heart broke for him. Her mother hadn’t been much of a parent. But at least she’d never verbally or physically abused her.

“I’ve worked long and hard to separate myself from him. I have nothing to do with him anymore. But sometimes his voice gets in my head telling me I’m a fuckup.”

“Well, you’re not.” She leaned back to cup his face. “You’re my Hux. Gorgeous, funny, sweet. Mine.”

“I’m sorry I pulled back like that.”

“I’ll forgive you if you promise not to do it again. And you kiss me.”

“I think I can manage that.” He tilted her head back to kiss her. Lightly at first, then he deepened the kiss. “Pretty little darlin’, aren’t you? So delicious. I wonder what you’d taste like if I was to kiss you all over?”

She whimpered. Then the carriage rocked again.

“Daddy,” she cried.

“Shh. You’re all right. Would you like Daddy to take your mind off things?”

“How?”

“I was thinking of a game of I spy.”

She gaped at him. “What?”

“Hmm. I spy with my little eye something beginning with L.” He kissed her lips.

“Lips,” she whispered.

“Good girl. Your turn.”

“I spy with my little eye something beginning with N.”
She kissed his nose.

“Nose. I spy with my little eye something beginning with B.” He leaned down and kissed the top of her breast.

“Breast,” she said, feeling herself growing aroused.

Which was utterly bizarre given the circumstances.

“That’s my good girl. Would you like me to make you feel better in another way? Do you want me to make you come?”

“We can’t ... I can’t.”

“Sure you can. No one will know, and it will take your mind off your fears. Tell me your safeword.”

“What? Why?”

He gave her a firm look. “Because I asked, little darlin’.”

“Red.”

“You’ll say it if this gets too much or you get scared. But just give me a chance to help you ...”

This was nuts, but she didn’t say no or her safeword as he tugged the top of her dress down.

“No bra?”

The dress had a built-in bra, and it wasn’t like she had much to support.

“I like your style.” He ran his thumb over her nipple, making her gasp and thrust against him.

The carriage moved and she cried out. “Hux!”

“You’re going to stay very still and very quiet. Understand? Let Daddy make you feel good.” He leaned down and took her nipple in his mouth.

Shit. She shouldn’t let him do this. It was madness.

And yet it felt like heaven.

One hand reached under her dress, pushing her panties to one side so he could slide a finger inside her.

“Ohhh.”

“That’s it, little darlin’. You just focus on what I’m doing to you. Don’t let anything else intrude. Be a good girl for Daddy Hux.” He added another finger inside her, rubbing over that spot inside her that made her cry out.

“Uh-uh, no yelling out. Shh, now. Sound travels and I don’t want anyone to know what we’re doing up here.”

She pressed her face to his neck as he used his thumb to torture her clit. She clenched down around his fingers.

“That’s it, my precious girl. Well done. Just suck on my throat. Good. You’re going to come for me, aren’t you? But you aren’t going to make any noise. If you do, I’ll have to punish you. And we don’t want anyone hearing me spank your ass, do we?”

She let out another small cry as they rocked back and forth.

“No. You just concentrate on me. You’re going to come for me. Come for me right now.”

She buried her face in his neck, her body shaking she came. She sucked in a breath, her orgasm racing through her. It was so intense that she swore the whole world spun. She turned her face, resting her cheek on his shoulder as she tried to come back into herself.

“Yum. Fucking delicious.”

She leaned back, staring down at him as he sucked his fingers into his mouth.

“You taste so good, little darlin’.”

She knew she was red. But there was something so hot about seeing him suck her release off his fingers.

“Would you like a taste?” he asked.

What? No. She shook her head.

“I don’t know ... I think you do.”

He reached down and ran his fingers through her slick lips. Then he held them up to her mouth. “Open.”

Nope. Not happening.

“Little darlin’, you open up right now or you say your safeword. Those are your choices.”

She let out a small protest, but her lips parted at the firm look on his face. He placed his fingers into her mouth, sliding them in and out. She found herself pressing her pussy against his firm cock, trying to mimic the movement of his fingers.

“Easy, little darlin’,” he told her, gripping her hip with his free hand. “Stay still.”

He removed his fingers from her mouth, and she tried to chase them.

Then reality crashed over her as the Ferris wheel started up, then stopped again. A cry came from below. Shoot. She forgot there were other people on the ride.

Hux placed his fingers back at her mouth again. She opened her lips, sucking on them.

“That’s it. Just concentrate on my fingers, little darlin’. Nothing is going to happen to you.” He moved her so she was sitting sideways on his lap. “I have you. I’ve got you.”



CHLOE PRESSED herself to his chest, sucking on his finger. If anyone saw her ... breasts naked, her panties damp, Hux’s fingers in her mouth ...

Yeah. Best they didn’t.

“Shh, it’s okay. You’re shivering, let’s get you covered up.” He drew her dress up with one hand, which was awkward, but she didn’t want to let his fingers go.

“That’s it. Just suck on me. I have you.” He held her tight until the wheel moved again. She turned toward him, clinging

to him. Only this time, it kept moving. Then it stopped. She wrapped a hand up in his shirt.

“Shh. I think this time, they’re just stopping to let people off.”

Sure enough, it started up again.

Then it stopped.

It was like her own personal torture. How many people were on this damn thing?

Finally, they were nearly at the bottom. Hux managed to get them up onto the seat. The carriage rocked at the shift in weight, but Hux held her, speaking to her soothingly.

The wheel stopped, and he stood with her in his arms. Stooping over, he carried her out.

“Fuck!” Owen snapped, moving into her eyesight. He took her in.

She probably looked terrible. She felt it. And she was still sucking on Hux’s fingers. She made herself let him go.

“Baby girl,” Owen said huskily. He placed his hand over her throat. Something that was coming to feel safe to her.

She was so weird.

“What the fuck happened?” he snapped at Hux.

“You tell me. You shoved her into that carriage with me. Then it stopped. Did you do that?”

She sucked in a breath. Had he? No, Owen wouldn’t do that ... but then, Owen didn’t always think the same way everyone else did.

“What? Fuck no! As if I would ever put her at risk.”

No, of course he wouldn’t. She breathed out a sigh of relief. Because then, she’d have to get really mad at him if he had done that. Although it seemed he had been doing some scheming of his own if he’d put her on that wheel with just Hux.

He was lucky things had worked out.

“Is she all right? What’s going on?” Beck appeared, looking worried. “She’s so pale.”

“She’s terrified of heights,” Hux explained. “She nearly had a panic attack.”

“Fuck,” Owen said. “I’m so fucking sorry, baby girl.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” she said.

Hux sent her a fierce look. “Do not downplay your feelings. I don’t like that. That’s another rule.

Her mind whirled from everything. “Do you all talk to each other about the rules?”

Or did they just make them up willy-nilly?

“Of course we talk,” Owen said. “How else will we know when to smack your butt when you break them?”

“Here, give her to me. I want to check her over,” Beck said.

“What’s going on?” Judd demanded, striding over. “What’s wrong? Why is she so pale?”

She sighed. “Hux, let me down.” She still wasn’t happy with Judd.

“No.”

She raised her eyebrows. What was going on with Hux?

“I’m taking care of her. Just like I did up there. And you all can fuck off.” Turning, Hux strode away with her in his arms.

She gaped up at him. “Um, Hux?”

“What?” Then he looked down at her with a wince. “Sorry, little darlin’, didn’t mean to snap.”

“You’re not really mad at them, are you?” He sighed and stepped into a bathroom. He kicked the door shut, then set her down on her feet before turning to lock it. “No, I just get annoyed that they seem to think I can’t look after you.”

She cupped his face between her hands. “But you can. You took care of me so well. Thank you, Daddy Hux.”

He closed his eyes, letting out a deep breath. “You’re welcome, little darlin’.”

“What are we doing in here, though?”

“I thought you might want to get cleaned up.”

Oh shit.

She probably looked awful. Owen, Judd, and Beck seemed to think so. Turning to the mirror, she gasped and tried to tame her hair which had gone crazy.

“Actually, I wasn’t talking about your hair,” Hux said, moving behind her to look at her in the mirror. “I was talking about this.”

He slid his hand up under her dress to cup her mound. “I think you likely need some cleaning up, don’t you?”

“Y-yes.” She watched him wide-eyed in the mirror.

He turned her, then dropped to his knees in front of her. Lifting the bottom of her dress, he pulled aside her panties and took a long lick of her. She reached back and gripped hold of the counter. He took her foot and placed it on his shoulder, pushing her thighs apart.

Then he ran his tongue over her slick lips again.

“Hux,” she moaned. “More.”

“I’m cleaning you up, little darlin’. We’re not meant to be making more of a mess.”

“I want you. Please.”

He gave her another lick before lowering her leg and standing. Then he caged her in, his hands on the counter next to hers. “Not here. I’m not taking you for the first time in a public bathroom.”

“Please.”

He shook his head. “Not here.”

Then where?

Taking hold of her hand, he unlocked the bathroom door. Shoot, she hadn’t had a chance to tidy herself up. Hopefully,

they didn't run into Jonathan.

As they stepped out, she gasped as she saw Owen, Beck, and Judd standing there.

Owen moved toward her, giving Hux a dark look. He ran his gaze over her, then grasped hold of her chin, tilting her face back. "Baby girl?"

"I'm fine. Really, I just ... I got a fright. But Hux took good care of me."

"Did he just?" Beck drawled, raising an eyebrow. He took hold of her hand, placing his fingers over her pulse. "Pulse is fast."

"That could be because I just had my tongue in her pussy," Hux said.

"In a fucking public bathroom?" Judd snapped.

"Asshole, I was cleaning her up."

"With your tongue?" Owen asked. "I like your style."

Hux grinned at him, then his gaze moved to her. "Our girl had a fright and now she needs some extra special attention. I was going to find somewhere ... private and more comfortable to give her that attention. Are you guys in?"

She sucked in a breath. Was he ... was he saying what she thought he was?

Beck frowned at Hux. "I think that it's Chloe you should be directing that question to."

"Fuck. You're right." Hux sent her a sheepish look. "Sorry, little darlin'. If you just want me, that's fine. More than fine."

Judd made a scoffing noise.

"Or two of us or more. Whatever you desire."

"I want ... I want all of you."

Shit. She really wasn't prepared for this. How could she handle all of them? She could barely manage one.

Hux sent her a hungry grin. "Then that's what you get, little darlin'. Come on."

He walked away, tugging her along. Owen and Beck fell in behind them. But when she looked behind her, Judd was standing there by himself.

He looked so ... alone.

Almost defeated.

“Judd?” she called out, stopping. “Aren’t you coming? Don’t you ... don’t you want me?”

He moved so quickly that he was almost a blur. Suddenly, he was in front of her, his hand wrapped around the back of her head as he leaned down, his lips a breath from hers.

“I want you so badly, it hurts. Never doubt that.”

“Then why were you staying back?”

He straightened. “Because you don’t want me.”

Beck sighed. “Judd.”

“What?” Judd snapped.

“You need to listen to what she’s saying, not what you think she should say,” Beck explained.

Hux moved behind her, wrapping his arms around her and lending her his strength.

Judd eyed her. “You really want me?”

“I really want you. All of you.”

“So, you going to give our girl what she really wants, Judd?” Owen asked in a dark voice that said Judd better answer right.

Or else.

She didn’t want anyone pressured into anything they didn’t want. But she swore that she could see the hunger in his face. Still, he said nothing.

She dropped her gaze to the ground.

Judd groaned and swept her up into his arms. She was pressed against his chest, his arm under her ass, her legs dangling in the air.

“I’m in,” he said in a low voice. “You’re going to be ours, Baby Blue.”

She wanted that so much.

Judd turned and walked with her in his arms.

“Judd, you should put me down.” She wriggled in an attempt to get free.

“No.” He smacked his hand down on her ass. “Stay still.”

Lord. Save. Her.

A wave of arousal washed through her, making her gasp. He sent her a knowing look.

Oh, he was so arrogant

“Chloe! Chloe!”

She froze and then turned to see Pippa rushing toward her, waving her hand in the air.

“Judd, let me down.”

“No.”

The possessive ass.

“Judd, let me down, Pippa is coming.”

“No, she can’t have you. You’re mine.”

“Judd, let me talk to her.”

He grunted, but let her down. She turned with a smile. “Your Majesty.”

“Just Pippa, remember?” Pippa waved her hand through the air. “Are you all right? Aric said you were on the Ferris wheel too when it broke down?”

“Oh yes, I was. You were as well?”

“Yes. That was scary ... luckily, Aric and Tavi were there to distract me.” She looked over her shoulder at the two men behind her. Aric winked at her, and Tavi smiled.

“Were you leaving?” Pippa asked her.

“Yes.”

Shoot. Say more.

“We’re leaving.”

Damn it.

“Uh, Chloe is a bit flustered,” Beck said. “She doesn’t like heights and she got a fright.”

“Oh no, I’m so sorry.” Pippa reached out and hugged her. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Uh-huh.”

Dear Lord. There was something wrong with her. Seriously.

Pippa drew back.

“Perhaps it’s best that Beta team take Chloe home and let her rest,” Tavi said, pulling Pippa away.

“Of course. Have a good night. Hope you sleep all right.”

Chloe just stood there, staring at Pippa.

“Say goodnight, Freckles,” Beck ordered.

“Good night, Freckles,” she said.

Pippa gave her a strange look before turning away with a wave.

“Oh my God! I just called the princess Freckles.”

“Uh, what is wrong with you? Why did you go all odd?” Judd asked. “Shit. She didn’t hit her head or anything did she?”

“No.” She glared up at him. “But thanks for telling me that I acted like someone who’d hit their head.”

“Uhh.” He scratched at his head. “I know there’s some logic in there somewhere.”

“Chloe gets nervous around Pippa,” Hux explained. “It’s cute.”

“It’s not cute!” she moaned. “Oh my God.”

“What is it?” Owen asked. “What’s wrong?”

“She touched me. She hugged me. I’m never showering again.”

“Yes, you are.” Judd swept her back into his arms.

“No! You can’t touch me. Pippa touched me.”

“You’re being weird. So what if she touched you?” Judd asked.

“Hux! Hux!”

“Yeah, little darlin?” Hux appeared beside her.

“This dress can never be washed.”

He grinned at her like he thought she’d lost her mind. “All right. We’ll never wash that dress.”

“Good. That’s good. Because the princess touched it. It’s special.”

His face softened and he brushed his finger down her cheek. “Not as special as you.”

Oh Lord. She was in so much trouble here.

They quickly made it to one of the cars. Judd and Hux got in the back with her, while Beck slid into the driver's seat. Owen got in the front passenger seat

Judd had her sitting sideways on his lap.

"She needs her own seat," Beck said firmly.

Judd growled at him. Even though he'd been the one the other day telling Owen the same thing.

"It's not safe," Beck told him. "And I'm not going anywhere until she's belted in her own seat."

"Come on, Judd, man. I want to touch her too. Besides, she doesn't need to be in your lap for us to have fun," Hux said.

Yeah, she was definitely in trouble.

Judd slipped her off his lap to sit between them in the backseat. Pulling the seatbelt over her, Hux made certain to brush his arm over her breasts.

The bastard.

She was certain he'd done that on purpose. She sucked in a sharp breath.

Then Beck started the car and Hux grasped hold of her chin, turning her toward him.

"Hello, little darlin'."

"Hello, Daddy Hux."

He took her mouth with his, his tongue taking ownership of her. She moaned in pleasure as he deepened the kiss, his hand firm on her chin, not letting her move.

Not that she wanted to.

Behind her, Judd kissed his way along her neck. It was intense, having them sandwich her between them, their bodies hot and muscular.

Hux undid her dress, drawing it down to reveal her breasts. “Little darlin’, you are so freaking beautiful.” He cupped one breast, raising it up so he could lap at her nipple. “Utter perfection.”

Judd slid his hand along her leg.

“We want to make you feel good,” Hux told her in a husky voice as Judd reached her pussy, cupping it. “Do you want that too?”

“Yes, Daddy. Please.”

“That’s my girl. You’re going to give us everything, aren’t you? You’re going to let me and Judd pleasure you in the back of the car and then when we get home, you’re going to let all of us make love to you. Aren’t you?” He plucked at her nipples as he spoke, making her gasp and groan.

“Fuck,” Owen groaned from the front seat. “Why didn’t I sit in the back?”

“I know,” Beck said grimly. “The noises she makes as they touch her are killing me. I’m so hard it’s difficult to concentrate.”

“Don’t crash,” Judd barked.

“You want to drive then?” Beck asked.

“Hell, no. I’m in heaven back here.”

Hux had her turn so her back was against the seat once more as Judd pulled her dress and panties off.

She was naked in a car with four men.

What was happening to her? This wasn't her ... and yet, there was no way she was saying no to this.

"You haven't answered me," Hux said.

"She will," Owen replied confidently. "She's going to let us all pleasure her. Aren't you, baby girl?"

"Yes, Daddy Owen."

"Fuck," Judd groaned as he and Hux moved one of her legs over their thighs, spreading her for them. "You're so fucking perfect for us, and I've been a fool."

"Yeah, you have," Owen barked.

"Me too," Hux said. "Think of all the time we've wasted when we could have been fucking our girl."

They both slid a finger into her pussy.

Holy. Crap.

That was crazy.

She could feel their fingers inside her. They moved them together. In and out of her pussy as their mouths dropped down to her nipples. Judd sucked while Hux lapped at her. She could feel her arousal growing. Could feel herself getting close. Whimpering, she shifted around on the seat, needing more.

"We're nearly home," Beck warned. "Push her over the edge."

"You're going to come for us, Blue," Judd told her in his commanding voice. "You're going to come hard. I want to hear you fucking scream." He put his thumb on her clit, flicking it with firm strokes.

She arched up, a low moan coming from her as the first wave of her orgasm hit her. Then it dipped and peaked.

And she screamed.

Both men slid their fingers out of her. She whimpered, wanting them back.

"More," she demanded.

“No, not yet. We have to get you to our place first,” Judd explained.

“Mean,” she muttered. “I want more.” She felt like she was floating.

“Be a good girl or you won’t get to come again tonight,” Owen warned.

“Daddy,” she complained. “Don’t be a stingy-bum.”

“A stingy-bum?” Owen repeated.

“Yeah, stingy with the orgasms.” She held out her hands and pretended to grab at the air. “Gimme, gimme, gimme all the orgasms.”

Next to her Judd let out a chuckle. She’d never heard him laugh before.

“You’re sexy when you smile.”

“How do you know that, Baby Blue? You can barely see in this light.”

“I just know.” She leaned into him. “You should do it more often.”

“I’ll try.” He kissed the top of her head.

The back door opened and Judd got out.

“No! Where are you going?” She reached for him, but Beck appeared.

“Whoa, Freckles, you’re not going anywhere until you’re covered up.”

She glanced down at herself and blushed.

Oh yeah. She was naked.

“I have a blanket,” Beck explained. “I’m going to wrap you up and carry you out of here, all right? We don’t want anyone else to see our girl.”

Pleasure filled her at being called their girl.

That was what she wanted. More than anything.

Beck managed to wrap her up like a burrito before walking with her in his arms to their house.

“Where are the others?”

“I sent them inside. I want to check that this is what you want.”

That was her Beck. Always there to make sure that she was okay.

“This is what I want, Beck,” she told him.

There might never be another chance for her to have this again.

“Thank God,” he muttered. “I’m so hard I could pound nails with my dick.”

She let out a surprised giggle. That wasn’t something that she expected Beck to say.

He carried her through the house and into a bedroom she hadn’t been into before. This one had more personality than the other two. There was a bookshelf filled with books and photos. And what looked to be a knitted afghan over the bed.

“This is your room?” she asked.

“It is. I have the biggest bed. For obvious reasons.”

“Because we can all fuck you on it,” Hux said from where he sat on the bed. Naked.

Holy. Crap.

He wiggled his eyebrows.

“Hux!” Beck barked. “Someone slap him.”

“Hey!”

She giggled as Judd reached over to smack his head. “Don’t talk like that to her.”

“She likes it when I talk dirty, don’t you, little darlin’?”

Beck set her down and started pulling off the blanket. Hux was lying back on the bed, completely naked, and uncaring

that they could all see him running his hand up and down his firm dick.

Judd stood off to the side, still dressed, looking a bit awkward. As though he wasn't sure if he was welcome.

Even though he'd just helped bring her to orgasm in the car.

Chloe didn't have a lot of experience with sex. But she did know what it felt like to be on the outside looking in.

So she gathered up her courage and moved toward him. He watched her warily until she wrapped her arms around him.

“What? What is it?”

“She's hugging you, idiot,” Hux told him. “Hug her back. Then give her to me. Because I need to get inside her pussy.”

“Hux,” Beck groaned.

“What?” Hux asked.

“Have a bit of finesse.”

“I have a lot of finesse. My tongue can talk the talk and walk the walk. You want me to show you, little darlin'?”

She did want that.

Before she could move, Judd's arms came around her, hugging her tight against his wide chest.

“Judd, hand our girl over to Hux. He's going to fuck her pussy until she's on the edge. You're going to strip and finger her ass, get her nice and stretched,” Owen commanded.

Shit. Where was he? She turned away from Judd and looked over to find Owen in the corner. He was only wearing a pair of shorts, his chest on display.

Was he going to order them all around? That would be hot.

“Beck, get ready to feed her your cock.”

“I think I'll just watch,” Beck said.

What?

She turned to him. “You don't want me?”

Beck's eyes widened. "Fuck. No. Of course I do. I just ..." he swallowed heavily. "You know what? It doesn't matter. Do what Owen said. I want you. I have never wanted someone more."

She wasn't so sure, but she nodded and Judd helped her onto the bed before he started stripping. Hux lay on his back, then drew her over him so she straddled his hips.

"Thank fuck," he groaned. "I thought I was going to have a five-fingered party over her. All pop and no sizzle."

She grinned down at him. "We can't have that."

"No, we cannot. Come here, my little darlin'." He wrapped his hand around the back of her neck and drew her down for a head-spinning kiss. She found herself grinding against his dick as he tortured her with his mouth.

"Fuck me. Enough of this," Hux said, drawing back. "I need to be inside you. Condoms?"

"No need," she whispered.

He grinned. "Oh, little darlin'. I've never come inside a woman without a sheath. This is going to be one hell of a ride."

She liked that she could be his first. Hux drew her up, then grabbed his dick. She gasped as he slid inside her, bit by bit.

"Oh. Ohhh."

"That's it, take him inside you, Blue. Good girl. Fuck you look perfect." Judd kneeled beside them, watching as Hux fucked her.

"Hux, stay still once you're fully inside her. Do not move," Owen ordered.

She whimpered.

"Fuck, you're fucking kidding me," Hux complained.

"I never kid. Judd, stretch out her asshole."

She tensed, clenching down around Hux, who moaned. "How am I supposed to stay still?"

“You’re not going to let him boss you around, are you?” she whispered in Hux’s ear.

“Are you scheming, baby girl?” Owen asked.

She yelped and turned her head to find him right there.

“Who me? Never.”

“Did you just lie to me? Hux?” he asked.

Oh, crap.

“She sure did. She’s naughty.”

“That’s what I thought. I’m going to add that to your tally.”

“No more tally,” Beck ordered. “Punishments are to be given as soon as they’re earned. That’s five. Right now.”

“Sounds good to me,” Owen said.

“No!” she cried. “You can’t!”

Owen slid in behind her. “Are you saying your safeword?”

Well, crap.

“No.”

“Then you’re getting five. And you can count and then ask me nicely for another one.”

Damn it.

Smack!

She gasped as her body tightened. Hux moaned. “Fuck, who are you trying to torture here?”

“Count and ask for another,” Owen said in a dark voice. “Or you’ll get extras.”

So. Mean.

“One. Can I have another?”

“Can I have another, please, Daddy,” Beck told her, crouching beside her. He had his T-shirt still on, but his bottom half was bare, his dick standing at attention.

She licked her lips. “Pretty.”

“Did you just call my dick pretty?” Beck stared down at her in shock.

“Um. I think so. But it is so pretty.”

“Calling my dick pretty isn’t going to get you out of your punishment,” he told her. “But it will allow you to have it in your mouth. After you take your spanking. Now, do as you were told.”

Hux was dying.

Utterly dying. Why were they torturing him like this? Did no one love him?

He felt very unloved. It was the only explanation for why they expected him to lie here while his girl had her hot body pressed up against his, and her pussy was clenching down around his dick.

Yep, no one loved him.

“One, Daddy. Please, can I have another?” she finally asked.

Smack!

Another slap landed. And her pussy tightened around him.

Jesus.

“Two, Daddy. Please, can I have another?”

Smack!

“Three, Daddy. Please, can I have another?”

He tuned them out. All his concentration focused on not losing control and coming. It was hard. All he wanted to do was grab her, roll her over, and fuck her until she screamed in pleasure.

Was it really too much to ask for?

“There you are, all done,” Owen murmured to her. He moved onto his side beside them and patted her on the back.

“There. There. Now. Now. Do you need to come here to me?”

Hux turned his head toward the other man. “What the fuck?”

“She was just punished. She needs comfort. That’s what Beck always says. Pretty sure it’s why he likes smacking butts. So he gets the cuddles afterward.”

“Now you get it,” Beck said with amusement.

“You aren’t getting her. Now fuck off. If she needs comfort, I’ll give it to her.” Hux ran his hand up and down her back. “Well done, little darlin’. You took your spanking like a pro.”

“Still think I should give her a cuddle,” Owen muttered.

She leaned up, pressing her hands to Hux’s chest as she stared at the two of them. “Are you really fighting over who gets to cuddle me?”

“Sure am,” Hux said with a grin. “Although it’s more because I don’t want you to move off my dick.” He rolled his hips, making her moan.

“Are you good, baby girl?” Owen asked, kissing along the back of her shoulder.

“Nooo,” she moaned.

Both of them froze.

“What is it?” Hux asked.

“What’s wrong?” Owen brushed her hair back to look in her face.

“What the fuck did you two fuckers do?” Judd snapped, coming over to sit on the bed so he could get close to her. Beck stood behind him.

She froze, staring around at them all.

“Okay, everyone, ease up,” Beck said. Always the voice of reason. “Let the girl speak. Chloe? What’s wrong?”

“She probably needs a drink of water,” Judd muttered. “And food. I need to get her some food.” He climbed off the

bed and looked like he was going to walk away.

“Stop!” she ordered. “Freeze, buster!”

Judd actually froze.

Damn. This girl. Hux was filled with admiration.

“I don’t need food or water. And you’re not going anywhere.”

Judd frowned slightly. “Oh, I’m not?”

“Nope. Sit your butt down. Before I get off Hux and make you.”

“Please, don’t do that,” Hux begged. “I’m so fucking close to blowing my load.”

“You are?” She stared down at him. Then she deliberately clenched down around him.

Oh. The brat.

“Are you trying to make me come?” he growled at her.

She grinned down at him.

“Seems like someone thinks she’s in charge.” Judd came over and ran his hand down her back, then slapped her ass.

She jolted. “Ouch! What was that for?”

“That was for being a brat and trying to top from the bottom.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said.

“Uh-huh. You need close watching,” Judd warned her.

“You better stick around and watch me, then, huh?” she challenged.

Judd kissed his way down her back and Hux gave her a knowing look.

She winked at him.

Yeah, she knew what she was doing. She’d known that Judd had been pulling away and she’d done what was needed to get him to stick around.

This girl.

She was changing. Becoming more confident. Letting down those shields and showing her true self. Something he was certain no one else got to see.

And that made it all the more special.

“I need to come,” she groaned.

“No coming without permission,” Owen told her.

“What? Nooo.”

“Yes.”

“You were naughty. That means you don’t come until one of us lets you.” Owen moved back to his chair in the corner.

She gave Hux a begging look. “Hux will say yes, won’t you?”

“Don’t even think about it, Hux,” Owen barked.

“Sorry, little darlin’. You’re being punished.”

She pouted and it was about the cutest thing he’d ever seen. Reaching up, he grabbed the back of her head to kiss her. Then he felt someone move up beside him. Turning, he got an eyeful of cock.

“Beck. Dude. Get that thing out of my face. You’ll give me a complex.”

Beck chuckled. “Freckles. Come here. Get your mouth around my dick before Hux starts to cry.”

“Wasn’t going to cry,” he muttered as he grabbed Chloe’s hips and slowly rocked in and out of her pussy.

Damn. This girl. Heaven.

CHLOE WRAPPED her mouth around Beck’s cock.

She hummed in satisfaction. So good. Although she didn’t like this no coming without permission rule.

Damn Owen anyway. She bet no one ever told him he couldn't come without permission.

She wondered if she could try.

Nah. That would probably just get her bottom spanked again. And she really wanted to come.

Beck thrust his hips, pushing his dick slowly in and out of her mouth.

He didn't have to be so careful. She wanted to take more. Drawing back, she glanced up at him. He was still wearing his shirt, and she wondered why he was so reluctant to be completely naked in front of her.

Scars? Burns? A third nipple?

She had no idea, and she didn't care. She just wanted him.

"I can take more," she said.

"Sure? I'm a big guy."

"I know. I like it." She grinned at him, and he gave her a surprised look back.

"All right, Freckles."

"Judd, start prepping her ass," Owen ordered. "Hux, reach back and part her cheeks for him."

"Motherfucker," Hux muttered. "I'm holding on by a thread here."

"Do not come yet," Owen ordered.

"Yeah, or I might spank your ass," she said with a sassy grin.

He snorted. "Not in this lifetime, little darlin'."

Beck guided his dick back into her mouth, moving faster and going deeper this time.

"Chloe? Is that what you want? My fingers in your ass?" Judd asked. "You want me to stretch you out so you can one day take us in there? Then Hux and I would be taking you together while Beck fucks that sassy mouth of yours."

She moaned.

Lord. Yes. That sounded perfect.

Beck drew back and swiped his thumb over her bottom lip.
“Yes?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Thank fuck,” Judd muttered, and she felt something cool on her asshole.

Lube.

Then his finger slid into her ass and she groaned, tightening around Hux’s cock.

“Fuck, man,” Hux groaned. “It’s too much. I need to fuck her.”

“Not yet,” Owen said. “Let Judd get her asshole stretched for the plug first.”

Plug? What fucking plug?

But then she was lost to the pleasure as Judd filled her back hole with two thick fingers, thrusting them in and out. She couldn’t help but rock against Hux, who moaned.

“That’s it,” Beck told her, brushing her hair back as he forced his dick even further into her mouth. “Take all of us. You’re being such a good girl. You’re going to get to come soon.”

She better.

“Judd, plug her,” Owen said.

Plug her? What? They just happened to have a plug handy? Actually, of course they had a plug close by. They were the Boy Scouts of Doms.

And she was grateful for it.

“Baby girl, you’re going to take a deep breath in,” Owen ordered. “That’s it. Now let it out slowly and relax.”

Relax? Was he nuts?

How was she supposed to relax while Judd pressed a hard piece of plastic into her ass? But once he got it past the tight ring of muscle, it slid inside her, filling her up.

“That’s a good girl,” Beck praised. “You are being so obedient for your Daddies, aren’t you? Our little princess.”

“Good,” Owen said. “Judd, sit back. Hux, slide her off you and then put her on her hands and knees.”

Hux made a noise like he was dying, but he drew her back. Judd helped arrange her on her hands and knees, then Beck sat in front of her, his hand around the base of his cock.

“Come here, Freckles.” He placed his hand on the back of her head and drew her down, just as Hux thrust into her from behind.

She moaned in pleasure.

Shit. It felt so different when she was plugged. He was filling her up.

“Fuck. I’m not going to last long,” Hux said as his movements became harder. Faster.

She whimpered, wanting more. Wanting to come. Someone’s finger moved to her clit, playing with it.

Not fair.

She sucked on Beck’s dick, loving the noises he made.

How was she going to hold herself back from coming?

She slid her mouth off Beck’s cock. “Owen, I need to come.”

“No. And that’s an extra five minutes of waiting because you moved your mouth away from Beck’s dick without permission.

Oh. My. God.

He was the worst.

“Fuck, I’m coming,” Hux announced.

Lucky fucking him.

She took Beck's dick back into her mouth, humming in pleasure.

"Freckles, that feels so good. You have no idea. That's it, baby. Take as much of me as you can. You're doing such a good job."

She heard Hux moan behind her as he found his release and she whimpered, wishing she could follow him over.

Beck tangled his hand in her hair as Hux slid free of her pussy. He guided her mouth up and down his cock.

"Yes, sweet baby. That's it. Take my dick. Good girl. So sweet. Your mouth is so hot. When I come, you're going to swallow, aren't you? You're going to swallow everything that Daddy gives you."

She moaned and then she tasted him on her tongue as he gave a shout and came in her mouth. She hastily swallowed, not wanting to disappoint him by missing a drop.

"Such a good girl. Come here."

She drew her mouth off his cock and let him pull her up so she was straddling his lap. Cupping her face between his hands, he wiped at the corner of her mouth with his thumb.

"Missed a bit. Open."

She parted her lips, and he placed his thumb in her mouth for her to suck clean.

Pleasure lit up his face and she hummed, happy.

"You like that, don't you? You like having something to suck on?"

She nodded.

"Good to know. Judd, you hear that?"

"Sure did." Judd sat beside Beck and studied her. "You doing okay, Blue?"

"Yes," she croaked.

"Climb onto Judd's lap," Owen ordered. "But facing away from him."

She glanced over into the corner of the room where Owen sat. He was completely naked and slumped back in the chair, looking like a dark God. Sexy and intense.

In charge.

Judd grasped hold of her chin, turning her face back to his. “You don’t have to.”

“What?” she asked, staring at him.

Beck slid her off his lap and over onto Judd’s. He moved his hand behind her head, cradling it.

“You don’t have to do anything with me that you don’t want to. I know we had a rocky start. And you don’t know me as well as the others. So we can take it slower.”

They could ... and he was right. Out of all of them, it was probably Judd that she felt the most reserved with.

She’d sensed him pulling away earlier when he’d said he was going to get her food and water. And she’d made him stay.

Because she wanted him.

Feeling daring, she grabbed his face and moved her mouth to his, kissing him lightly.

Was he going to kiss her back?

Suddenly, Judd grasped the back of her head and his mouth took hers in a fiery kiss that had her toes curling and her insides heating up. By the time he pulled away, she was rocking her pussy against his dick.

“Please, Judd. Please,” she begged.

“You want my dick?”

“Yes.”

“You want me to fuck you?”

“Please. Please.”

“Then turn around. Let me fuck you the way you need.”

Heck. Yes.

Judd helped her spin around, so she faced away from him. Then he slid into her pussy with one stroke.

She moaned, closing her eyes as his hands came around to cup her breasts.

“Uh-uh, no closing your eyes, baby girl,” Owen ordered. “You keep them open and on us.”

Oh hell.

She hadn't really thought about how this position would mean she was facing the others. That all of her would be on display. But she opened her eyes to take in Hux who lay on the end of the bed on his side, his head propped up on his hand as he watched her.

Beck leaned against the wall, his boxers already on, but his gaze hungry as he took her in.

Then there was Owen.

The puppet master.

Watching from the corner. Waiting to strike. Her heart skipped a beat then started racing.

“Hux, play with her clit,” Owen ordered, his hand still moving up and down his shaft. “Take her to the edge but don’t let her fall over.”

“Daddy,” she moaned. She wasn’t sure who she was pleading with. All of them. She just hoped one of them would listen and let her come. “Please.”

Hux lay in front of her, flicking her clit, not even seeming to care that Judd’s dick was right there.

“Please, what, baby girl?” Owen asked.

“Please, let me come. Please.”

“What will you do for us?” Owen asked.

“Anything.” And she meant it.

“Will you agree to be ours forever?” Owen’s gaze held hers.

Shit.

“Owen,” Beck barked. Judd stopped playing with her breasts. Only Hux didn’t seem to care, his tongue playing with her clit. “You can’t do that to her. It’s not fair.”

“All’s fair in love and war. Wouldn’t your Ma say that?” Owen asked.

“Ma would whack you over the head with a rolling pin for pressuring a girl.”

Owen grunted. “I like to get what I want. And I want her.” Then his gaze moved back to hers. It was filled with possession. Hunger.

Hux drew back to stare up at her. “We all want her.”

“Fuck. Yes.” Judd moved her up and down his shaft. Slowly at first. Then he gained momentum. “We all want you, princess, Baby Blue, fuck. You feel so damn good.”

“We might want her. But she has free will,” Beck said, watching her closely. “And no one is going to force her.”

She gave him a thankful look.

Because if it wasn't for Beck, she may well have caved and given these guys everything they demanded of her.

And more.

“Understand?” Beck said firmly.

Hux nodded.

“Yeah,” Judd said. “Consent is key. I don't need a lecture on it.”

Owen was silent. Beck sighed and gave the other man a look. But Owen never looked away from her.

Shit.

“Hux, lick her clit until she's right at the edge,” Owen ordered.

“Dude, I'm on it,” Hux replied.

Hux drove her insane. Taking her up to the edge, then pulling away. She was near tears by the time Owen ordered him back. Judd's hands were firm around her hips as he started fucking her with hard, fast thrusts that took her breath. She could feel herself getting close to the edge. She was right there when he groaned, finding his release.

“Fuck, Baby Blue. So good.”

She whimpered, needing just a bit longer. Just a few touches on her clit.

Small noises of need filled the room and she suddenly realized they were coming from her.

“Come here, baby girl.” Owen held out his hand. Judd helped her off his lap, kissing her briefly before Hux lifted her

off the bed and led her over to Owen, who pulled her onto his lap, so she straddled him.

“You want to come, baby girl?” he asked as he drove his dick deep inside her.

“Yes. Please. Please.”

“You’re mine. Remember that. I won’t let you go.”

Suddenly, he stood with her in his arms, impaled on his cock, and moved toward Beck. The other man took hold of her, his hands resting under her knees and holding her wide open.

Then Owen dropped to his knees and started playing with her clit. He didn’t seem to care that Hux and Judd had just come inside her. No. He played with her until she reached that peak, then he drew back and stood, watching her as he used his fingers to fuck her, his thumb on her clit.

“Come, baby girl.”

Just like that, she shattered. She cried out, clenching down around the fingers in her pussy as her entire body shook.

Then she was back in Owen’s arms. He laid her out on the bed before driving himself inside her. She was still riding the high of her orgasm, barely able to catch her breath as he pounded her.

There was no way she was going to be able to walk tomorrow. He fucked her until she felt herself coming again and then he finally found his release, burying his face in her neck.

His words were nearly silent, but she could almost swear she heard him whisper his love to her.

But she couldn’t accept it or say it back ...

Because she wasn’t free to love anyone. Let alone the four of them.

Chloe woke up not knowing where she was. She glanced around in panic. A soft snore greeted her and she stared at the face next to her.

Holy. Shit.

Hux. It's just Hux.

Turning carefully, she saw Owen behind her. He had his arm around her, holding her down.

Okay. She remembered now. After they'd all fucked, Beck had picked her up and taken her into the shower. Hux had joined them and together, they'd washed her.

Judd had been waiting to dry her off, then he'd dressed her in a large T-shirt that had smelled like him. Finally, Owen had carried her to bed.

Where were Judd and Beck? They weren't in the bed. Mind you, there wasn't a lot of room.

In fact, she felt slightly hot between the two big men.

And thirsty.

She wiggled her way out from between them. And stood. A groan nearly slipped out of her mouth. Ouch.

Yeah, she definitely wasn't going to be walking right tomorrow. She shuffled out of the room and along to the kitchen. Searching through the cupboards, she tried to find a glass.

“You okay?”

She had to muffle the scream that came out of her mouth as she jumped into the air.

“Shit. Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you.”

She glanced over at Judd.

“Why are you up?” she asked him. “And sitting in the dark?”

“I was lying awake in bed when I saw you waddle past,” he told her.

She gasped in horror. “I was not waddling.”

“You were definitely waddling. We were too hard on you.”

“No. I’m fine.”

He grasped hold of her chin. “I might not like spanking you, but I will do it if you break the rules. And lying is breaking the rules, Baby Blue.”

Shit.

“You weren’t too hard on me. But I might be a little stiff.”

He nodded. “You need sleep. Did you get out of bed on your own?”

“Uh, yep.”

“You should always wake up whoever is sleeping with you.”

“I can’t do that!”

“Sure you can. Just shake them until they wake up.”

“No, I mean ... I can’t wake them up because I know how hard it is to get some decent sleep. They need their sleep.”

“You find it hard to sleep?” he asked.

“Yeah. If I wake up during the night ,I find it difficult to go back to sleep.” Mostly because she usually woke up from nightmares.

“I find it hard to sleep too.”

“You do?” He didn’t seem the type to find anything difficult. He always seemed so confident. “I’m so sorry.” Before she even thought about it, she had her arms wrapped around him. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Shit.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“You’re really fucking sweet, aren’t you?”

“Is that a bad thing?”

Judd sighed and lifted her up, holding her against his chest with her legs dangling in the air. “No, I’m just a fucking idiot.” He set her down on the counter and then put his arms on either side of her, trapping her in. “I know I can be a bossy asshole. I am ... protective of my brothers.”

“And you think I’ll hurt them. I get it.”

She did.

Because she thought that too.

He shook his head. “You shouldn’t be so understanding, so forgiving.”

His grumpy, bossy nature ... it was just him. And it was only because he cared.

He cared so much that he took everything on himself. Every failure was his failure.

She ran her fingers through his short hair, massaging his scalp. “You were lying awake?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re sure there’s nothing I can do?”

“No.” Then he looked thoughtful. “But maybe I can help you.”

“Judd. It’s okay to let other people take care of you, you know.”

“I think we can look after each other. I feel more relaxed when I’m looking after someone.”

“Oh. Like me?”

“Like you. And I know you feel more relaxed in Little space. I might not feel like your Daddy yet, but maybe you can trust me enough to help you?”

“I ...” She didn’t know what to say to that. He didn’t exactly feel like her Daddy. Not like the others did.

But she wanted that with him.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Good girl. Let’s get you ready for bed. All Little girls need to feel snugly and safe. So let’s see what we can find to make you feel that way.”

She half-expected him to pick her up and carry her to his bed. Instead, he moved into the kitchen and started searching through a drawer.

She slid off the counter and walked over to him. “Whatcha searching for?”

Startled, he turned to look at her. “What are you doing? You shouldn’t get down off the counter on your own. It’s not safe.”

Oh. Right.

“But I did it fine.”

He shook his head at her. “No. You stay where you’re put, understand?”

“Yes. Sorry.” She glanced down at her feet. She hated disappointing him.

“Look at me.” He tilted her face back. “Nothing to get too upset about. I didn’t tell you that you weren’t to move, so it’s my fault, really.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

He drew out a baby bottle with a panda on it. She bit her lip, feeling nervous. And excited.

Then he grabbed some milk and warmed it in a pot before pouring it into the bottle.

She reached for it, but he shook his head.

“No, not yet. It’s too hot for you. Come on.” He picked her up with one arm, settling her on his hip. He carried her into the playroom she’d slept in the other day.

She tensed. “I don’t want to stay in here.”

“You don’t like it?” he asked as he set her down on the bed she’d slept in.

She chewed at her lip.

“You can tell me.”

She stared up at him. He looked so calm. So worried.

“I don’t want to be on my own,” she confessed.

“That’s good. Because neither do I. And it’s going to be hard for me to watch over you if we’re not together. Would you like to sleep with me? In my bed?”

She nodded.

“I just brought you in here to get you a onesie.”

“No. Like this.”

Heat filled his gaze. “You like wearing my T-shirt?”

She nodded.

“Good. I like that too.” He moved to a drawer and pulled out a pacifier, then he picked her up again and carried her to his room. He set the bottle and pacifier down on the bedside table. “Do you need to go potty, Baby Blue?”

She shook her head.

“Sure? You wouldn’t be lying to me?”

“No. I don’t need to go.”

He drew back the covers and sat on the bed with her on his lap. Reaching over, he grabbed the bottle. To her shock, he tested the milk’s temperature by squirting some onto his wrist.

“There we are. Just right.” He held the nipple up to her mouth and she parted her lips.

She drank the milk, cuddling into his chest. His strong arms held her tight, and she felt this sense of safety wrap over her.

What would it be like to have Judd take care of her the way he did the men he considered his family? With such passion and strength.

When she'd had enough, she drew away.

He rubbed her back for a moment as she yawned and snuggled into him.

“Good girl. I like that you’re letting me take care of you. So much. You’re doing so well. Here you are.” He held the pacifier to her mouth.

She parted her lips and took the pacifier into her mouth, sucking on it. He hummed and it helped her relax and she found herself drifting off to sleep.

Chloe felt him move her, laying her on her side on the bed. He lay on his back, pulling her against his chest.

“Go to sleep, Baby Blue. I’ll watch over you.”

“**W**hat are we going to do?” Hux asked, looking around at them all. “We can’t let her leave.” Panic filled him at the thought of living his life without her.

They were all sitting in the living room while she slept in Judd’s bedroom. Judd kept looking at the door, as though worried she might disappear unless he was watching over her.

“We’re not going to let her leave,” Owen said calmly.

“Yeah?” Hux asked. “So what’s the plan?”

“It’s simple. We’re going to take her as our intended bride.”

Beck gaped at him, and Judd’s frown increased.

But Hux just smiled. “Fuck yeah. We are.”



“TONIGHT IS THE NIGHT, MY DEAR,” Jonathan said with excitement. “When we get the go-ahead to open up trading lines. I expect the Kings to be here tonight as well. Or in the near future, at least, to help us celebrate.”

Chloe eyed him nervously. What if they didn’t give the go ahead? How was he going to handle that?

Not well.

That was the answer. Not well at all.

She decided not to mention that possibility, though. He never treated the messenger well, as she'd learned that the hard way. And she was already feeling down.

She'd have to say goodbye to her guys tomorrow. The last two days had been amazing. She'd spent as much time as she could with them.

They'd started doing rock, paper, scissors over who got to guard her.

She'd thought about telling them a couple of times about what Jonathan had asked of her. But she kept chickening out ... and what was the point? It would only make them upset with her. Tomorrow, she'd be leaving anyway.

“My father would always tell me how much I disappointed him. How I should be more like the Kings of Escana. He always kept up with what they were doing.”

Sympathy filled her for him. How awful.

“I'm sorry, Jonathan.”

He snapped his head to her. “Why? It made me the man I am today. And I am successful. Look at me. Now, I'm here, making business deals that no one else would have been able to make.”

She guessed in a way that was true—if those deals went ahead.

And she had a bad feeling ...

She followed Jonathan into the large dining room.

“Damn it, they're not here,” Jonathan said with a snarl.

Shoot. She looked around, but didn't see the Kings of Escana.

“But you knew there was a possibility they wouldn't be.” She glanced down at his hand. Twitching.

Shit.

Not a good sign.

“Yes, of course. You’re right.” He breathed out and plastered on a smile as Prince Kassim came walking toward them.

“Here we go.”



AN HOUR LATER, Chloe was exhausted. She felt on edge and was unsure why. She glanced across the room at where Judd stood. He was frowning. But that wasn’t unusual.

Turning, she saw Beck. He gave her a quick wink, then went back to studying the room. As well as the Princes and Pippa. Their cousins and Alina were also there.

She pushed the food around on her plate, not feeling hungry.

Jonathan was practically buzzing beside her.

Caleb and Aleki were in here as well. Caleb was behind Prince Kassim while Aleki stood behind Princess Pippa.

Who looked beautiful tonight.

Where were Owen and Hux? Why weren’t they here?

“Eat your dinner, Baby Blue,” Judd whispered in her ear. “I want to see five more mouthfuls eaten before you push your plate away. Or you’re going to be in trouble tonight.”

Tonight. Their last night.

She didn’t want to spend it over one of their laps or in the corner. She’d experienced that punishment yesterday when she’d lied and said she wasn’t tired.

Then she’d promptly yawned.

Typical.

She turned to frown up at Judd. How had he moved over to her so quickly and quietly?

“You’re so bossy.”

“And your bottom is toast unless you start eating.”

He strode away before standing opposite her again. He gave her a firm look and nodded to her plate.

“So, Prince Kassim, I am surprised that your fathers didn’t want to come for this announcement.”

“Announcement?” Kassim asked, staring at Jonathan in mild surprise. “There won’t be much of an announcement.”

Shit.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

She knew this wasn’t going to go well.

Jonathan frowned.

It’s okay. He can’t flip out here. Hopefully.

“I thought I would talk to you in my office after dinner,” Prince Kassim said.

“Tell me now,” Jonathan countered.

Kassim gave him a stern look. “Very well. Jonathan, I know this is something you desire and that you have a tie to our family, but at this time, I’m sorry, we will not be opening up more trade lines. Nor will we be making any more business arrangements between Escana and any other countries.”

Jonathan stood up abruptly. “What?”

“I believe I made myself clear. The answer is no.”

Jonathan turned and started to pace. When he swung back there was a gun in his hand.

And it was aimed at Pippa!

Chloe screamed, jumping out of her chair.

Where the fuck did he get a gun from? He didn’t own a gun and they would never have gotten it through security after leaving the plane.

What. The. Fuck.

“Jonathan, no!” She tried to move to him, but Beck wrapped an arm around her, pulling her away. “Let me go! I can stop him!”

“Let her go,” Jonathan said, glancing briefly at them. “Let her go or I shoot. And pretty Pippa’s brains will decorate this table.”

Oh Lord. She was going to be ill.

“Let her go, Beck,” Tavi ordered.

All of the Princes were on high alert, glaring at Jonathan. While two of their cousins had drawn Alina in between them, guarding her.

“Nobody else move, except for Chloe,” Jonathan warned. “I won’t hesitate to shoot Pippa. Got nothing left to lose now.” A crazy laugh exploded from him.

“Jonathan? What are you doing?” she asked, moving slowly closer. She ignored Beck who was shaking his head and glaring at her.

“Chloe,” Judd growled. “Stay still.”

She knew she was the safest one in the room. She didn’t think Jonathan was going to hurt her.

Well, she hoped not.

“What do you mean you have nothing to lose?” she asked calmly. “This is a disappointment, but there are other deals. Don’t you want to go back home to London and have a decent cup of tea?”

“Won’t be my home much longer, my dear. I am flat broke. Oh, and I may have made a deal with the devil. He won’t be happy. The devil always gets what he wants. He wanted the trade agreement. Needed a way to weaken this country. He wants the Princes to suffer. All of them.” Jonathan glanced over at the cousins. “I didn’t get the agreement, but I can make you all suffer. So after I shoot Pippa, I am coming for your bride.”

“Motherfucking bastard, don’t you dare!” Aric cried.

“Aric, hush,” Kassim ordered. “Who did you make this deal with, Jonathan?”

Jonathan laughed bitterly. “Oh, I am not telling you. But the devil hates you all. He wants revenge.”

“Pinky,” Kassim said grimly.

Who was Pinky? Shit. It didn’t matter. She had to get Jonathan to stop aiming his gun at Pippa.

“Jonathan, how did this happen? Why are you threatening Pippa?” She couldn’t look at Pippa, scared for the other woman.

“Like you don’t know, my dear.”

She frowned at his weird words.

“You’ve been helping me this entire time. You helped cause the distraction with those idiot purists so I could meet with my contact and private and smuggle this gun into the palace. The devil has been funneling money to the purists, helping them to cause more problems. He wants you all to suffer.”

“I didn’t ... I never ... I wouldn’t do that.” She glanced around the room. She could see some doubt on people’s faces. And it floored her.

Did they believe him?

“I am as good as dead. So I might as well take you all out with me. Don’t pretend to be innocent, my dear. You knew the risks when you agreed to this. You didn’t want to lose your expensive lifestyle.”

What the hell?

“Why ... why are you doing this to me?” she asked, staring at him, stricken.

All these years ... she’d stuck by him. Worked for him for nothing. And he was trying to implicate her in his awful plans.

“If I am not getting out of this, then you shouldn’t either,” he spat at her. There was such hatred on his face that it took her breath away.

But why? What had she done?

“Chloe,” Beck said, moving up beside her.

Beck didn’t believe him. Surely. She didn’t see any doubt on his face. She looked over at Judd, though, who was frowning and unable to look at her.

Shit.

“Jonathan, you know I didn’t have anything to do with this,” she said.

“Didn’t I ask you to keep those men you’ve gotten close to distracted, my dear?”

She gasped, but she couldn’t say anything.

“Chloe?” Beck asked. “Did you do that?”

She glanced over at him, horror filling her. “It wasn’t ... it wasn’t like that. You have to believe me.”

“But you agreed to distract us for him?” Beck asked.

“I ... I ...” Why hadn’t she told them? She was such a coward. She hadn’t wanted them to be disappointed or angry in her and now they thought the worst of her.

Owen. Where was Owen? He’d believe her, right?

She stumbled back, away from everyone who was staring at her accusingly.

“Why would I lie about this? Why would I throw my dear, darling daughter under the bus?” he drawled.

She tried to suck in one breath. Then another.

She couldn’t ... she couldn’t breathe.

Was he telling the truth? Was she really his daughter?

Suddenly, there was an explosion of smoke from the middle of the room. Someone yelled and a shot was fired. She was tackled to the floor. A large body lay over her. She knew this body, but in her panic, she started to fight.

“Stay still!” Beck ordered. “Don’t move.”

He jumped up, then grabbed hold of her, carrying her to the side of the room.

“Beck!” Judd roared.

“Stay there,” he ordered her. “I’ll be back. Just stay there. You’ve already done enough damage.”

He left before she could say anything. Not that she could really speak, she was coughing so hard, she thought she was going to be ill.

Then someone grabbed her, hauling her up onto their shoulder and out of the room.

Who was it? Was it one of her men?

They carried her through into another room and shoved her, locking the door behind her before she could even say anything.

She was still coughing, trying to take a decent breath. She didn’t know how long she sat there before the door opened. She glanced up, expecting to see one of her men.

Shock filled her.

“Miss Reed, you’re under arrest for aiding in the attempted assassination of the Princes’ intended bride.”

The man stood her up and turned her, secured her arms behind her. As he led her through the palace, she searched for her men.

Where were they?

Why weren’t they helping her?

But they were nowhere to be seen. Then she remembered the disgust on Judd’s face, the anger in Beck’s voice.

They didn’t believe her.

They thought the worst of her.

And no one was coming for her ...

Owen slammed his hands against Beck's chest, getting into his face. "Why the fuck did you let them take her? Why did you leave her there? You should have protected her."

Fuck.

Owen was losing his mind. Beck felt each accusation hit him like a blow.

But Owen wasn't wrong. Beck hadn't protected her.

Only ... did she deserve his protection or was she guilty of what Jonathan accused her of?

Fuck.

"Owen!" Judd snapped. "For fuck's sake. You were watching the camera feed. You know what she did. She was in on his plan. He nearly killed Pippa! Chloe helped him. She's his goddamn daughter. She deserved to be arrested."

"So. Fucking. What!" Owen yelled. "She's our girl. Maybe she knew, maybe she didn't. But I don't care. She's ours."

"Not anymore," Judd said grimly.

Beck felt conflicted. He shouldn't want her anymore. But he did.

"Hux?" Owen snarled, turning to him.

"I don't ... I don't know," Hux said. "I rewatched the feed several times. She looked so shocked."

It had been hours since it had all happened. They'd been so caught up in the aftermath of Pippa nearly being shot that they hadn't realized Chloe was gone.

Arrested.

Beck wasn't even sure who had carried her out of there or when the police had gotten to her.

Now, she and Jonathan were down at the police station, under arrest for attempted murder.

And they were all here, losing their minds. Both the Princes and their cousins were on lockdown with their intended. And the police were currently rounding up anyone who might have helped Jonathan.

"I just don't think she'd do anything to hurt Pippa," Hux said. "She loves her."

Beck frowned. That was right.

Judd huffed. "She was a good actress."

"I don't know," Beck said. "She seemed really genuine about her love for Pippa."

"I'm going to go get her," Owen said, opening the front door of their house.

He nearly stepped right into Caleb, who moved inside. "Good, you're all in here. I have to go down to the police station. I need you all to help guard the Princes. Wolfe is in the security room and Aleki is in their suite with them."

"I'm going with you," Owen said.

Caleb eyed him. "I don't think so."

"She didn't do this. And even if she did, I still want her out of there. It's not right for her to be there, Caleb. And you know it."

Shit. Beck hadn't known Owen to ever be this passionate about anything. And if they didn't watch him, then they were going to be bailing him out of jail as well for trying to rescue her.

Caleb sighed and ran his hand over his face. “For what it’s worth, I have my doubts as well. But there is no way the police will let you see her. Also ... the police found messages on his phone that make her look guilty. They were deleted from her phone.”

“What sort of messages?” Judd asked.

“Things about how he’d told her to distract you all.”

“Shit,” Beck said.

“So that part was true,” Hux said, looking ill.

“I don’t care,” Owen snarled. “She’s mine.”

“Look, I will try and see her,” Caleb said. “Okay? And I will let you know how she is.”

“Promise?” Hux asked.

“Yeah.”

“How did we not see what Lord Fothersam was up to?” Judd asked angrily.

Judd prided himself on being good at his job. This had to be eating at him, the way it was killing all of them.

“Don’t blame yourselves,” Caleb said tiredly. “I let him into the country at Kassim’s request. We’re going through all his meetings, but so far they all seemed legitimate other than his meetings with Mr. Fical, who is being questioned now. There was little indication of what he was up to. I have to go, and I need you guys to do your job.”

“We always do our job,” Judd barked, insulted.

“We will,” Beck said with a sigh.

“Owen?” Caleb asked.

“I need to get something for you to give her,” Owen said. “I’ll meet you out front of the palace. And just tell her I don’t care what she’s done. She’s mine.”



CHLOE LOOKED UP WEARILY as someone else entered the interrogation room she was being kept in.

How long had she been in here? She really wasn't sure since the room didn't have windows.

They were just the same questions. Over and over.

They'd put her in a holding cell for a while before bringing her back again for more questions.

She was scared. Exhausted. And also ... angry.

They hadn't come for her.

They weren't coming for her.

Because they believed Jonathan.

Why would I lie and implicate my dear, darling daughter?

His daughter?

She was his daughter?

How had she not known? Why had he never told her? Her hands clenched into fists. All that time, she'd lived in poverty, scared and alone, and he could have done something.

Bastard.

And that's the way he decided to tell her?

She closed her eyes tight. Why would he do this? And why did he lie and say that she'd known what he was up to? Did he secretly hate her? He'd saved her in order to throw her under the bus?

She blinked blearily, surprise filling her as Caleb entered the room. Alarm and concern filled his face.

"Chloe. Shit. You look terrible."

"I feel worse," she replied. Her clothes stunk of the smoke bomb that had been set off. She guessed it was a security measure they'd had in place for situations like this. She was probably the only one besides Jonathan who hadn't known it would go off. Her throat was raspy from coughing. And she was shaking from exhaustion.

“Shit. Did they even offer you any water?”

She shook her head.

“Wait there.” He grimaced. “I mean ... I’ll be right back.”

Sure enough, less than ten minutes later, he was back with a bottle of water and a chocolate bar. She ignored the candy, but gulped down the water.

Judd would be so proud of her.

Except for the fact that he hated her.

“I’m sorry you haven’t been treated well. I’ll be having words with whoever left you in here.”

“It’s all right.”

He frowned. “No. It’s not all right. And you shouldn’t accept it as all right. Chloe, you have to fight back when someone does you wrong.”

She stared at him in confusion. “Shouldn’t you be yelling at me? Don’t you think I’m the enemy?”

Caleb shook his head. “No, sweetheart. I don’t. And Wolfe is working on gathering evidence to help you. I have to ask, though... did you agree to distract Beta team for Jonathan?”

“Yes,” she said, knowing there was no point in lying. And now, he’d hate her too. “But I didn’t spend time with them because he asked. I like them, Caleb.”

Even if they had to hate her. Guilt flooded her.

“I should have told them. I was stupid. It’s just ... Jonathan.” She sighed. “My relationship with him is so complicated. I felt indebted to him. But I don’t know why he said I was helping him in any other way. I wasn’t. I swear, I’d never do anything to harm Pippa. I really thought we were here to set up some trade agreements. But I should have realized something was wrong. I should have told someone what he asked me to do.”

And she’d have to live with that guilt.

His phone rang and he glanced down at it. “Shoot, I’ve got to go. I’ll be back soon. I’ll get them to move you to a more comfortable room.”

What would be the point when she was going to jail?

“Oh, and Owen said to tell you that he doesn’t care what you’ve done. You’re his. Here, he sent this for you.” He drew Amy Alpaca out of the bag he’d carried in with him. She reached for the toy with a small cry.

“They let you bring her in here?”

“I have some connections.”

She hugged the toy against her chest. Relief flooded her. Owen still cared about her. He’d known she would need Amy Alpaca.

But she was well aware that he’d only mentioned Owen.

“The others?” she whispered.

Caleb grimaced. Which was answer enough.

“I’ll be back.”

But he didn’t return and a few hours later, one of the men who’d been interviewing her walked into the room she’d been moved to.

“Miss Reed, you are free to go.”

“What?” she asked. She was now in a comfortable room with a bed and private bathroom. But she couldn’t sleep. Couldn’t relax.

“We have questioned in Mr. Fical, who was working with Lord Fothersam. He supplied the gun to His Lordship. Apparently, Mr. Fical been unhappy with the current regime and practices for years. I wouldn’t be surprised if he has close ties to the Purity Party, or has been funding them. However, we’ve yet to prove that. But he’s a smart man who knows things are over for him. He told us that Lord Fothersam told him that you had no idea what was going on.”

“Oh, thank God.” Relief flooded her.

“After we put pressure on His Lordship, he confessed that he’d lied about your involvement. We don’t know why His Lordship said that you were part of his plans. He isn’t saying much. We are guessing that this ‘devil’ that His Lordship keeps speaking of set Mr. Fical up as a contact to help him.”

So that’s why he’d wanted to meet with him twice.

“I ... I’m really free to go?” she asked.

“Yes. You can leave right now. I’ll have someone return you to the palace.”

“No.”

“No?” He gave her a confused look. “I could try to contact one of the security team members at the palace to come and get you. Mr. Pierce was here earlier, but he got pulled into a conference call with some MI6 agents.”

“No, I don’t want to go to the palace. I want to leave the country right now. Can you organize that?” She couldn’t stay here any longer. Anxiety flooded her at the idea of seeing them.

“I suppose I can arrange that. There will be a plane that leave in two hours. There’s only one a day.”

Reaching up, she undid her necklace and handed it over to him. “Good. Could you please see that this gets back to the palace to Beta team. They’ll understand.”

“You don’t wish me to tell them where you are going?” he asked. “I should inform the Princes.”

“Am I not free to leave?” she snapped. “Are you keeping me here against my will?”

His eyes widened. “No.”

“Then you won’t tell anyone until I’m gone. They don’t need to know. Just ... I’ll get in contact with someone about my luggage. Although I’ll need my passport and wallet.”

“We have those here. We brought them over from the palace.”

That was one less thing she had to worry about. She needed to get out of here. Now.

Because she knew that if they still cared about her that they would be here.

“**W**hat do you mean, she’s gone?” Judd asked in a tight voice.

They were all in the main security room of the palace. Caleb was standing. Wolfe was at his desk, ignoring them as he worked on something. Aleki was leaning back in his chair, munching on one of those cookies he liked.

A Tim-Tam.

Owen had given one to Judd once. Lord knew where he’d gotten it from ... well, he did know. He must have stolen it from Aleki’s personal supply.

It had been too sweet for him.

Judd wasn’t into sweet things.

Except for Chloe.

Stop thinking about her!

That was the thing, though. He couldn’t stop thinking about her and the shocked look of betrayal on her face when he hadn’t believed her.

And now, they knew she was innocent. Well, partly. His Lordship had confessed that she hadn’t known what he was up to.

But that didn’t mean she hadn’t kept things from them.

“She left on a plane about fifteen minutes ago,” Caleb said. “Unfortunately, I was in a meeting at the time, and I wasn’t

informed until I got out. By that time, the plane had left and I came back here to tell you.”

Judd clenched his hands into fists, then unclenched them.

“What the actual fuck?” Hux snapped. “Who the fuck put her on that plane?”

“A police officer just doing his job,” Caleb said calmly. “We couldn’t keep her here against her will. Do you know what would’ve happened? It would be an international incident.”

“So they just let her go?” Judd asked.

“Kassim gave the go-ahead,” Caleb answered. “And I wasn’t aware that you were still claiming her. Seems like the four of you dropped her as soon as Lord Fothersam laid out those accusations about her.”

“Not me,” Owen said darkly. “Did you tell her what I said?”

“Yeah, but you didn’t exactly say you believed in her,” Caleb said.

“We fucked up,” Hux said. “We should have stuck by her no matter what.”

Judd swallowed, feeling ill.

“She left this with the officer to give to you.” Caleb held up the necklace Owen had given her. He came forward and snatched it.

Judd ran his hand over his face in frustration. “What do we do now?”

“We made a mistake,” Beck said, looking ill. “So now we find her and we apologize.”

“And beg her to take us back,” Hux added.

Judd laced his fingers behind his neck. Fuck. He hated this. Hated not knowing where she was. If she was safe.

They’d completely messed up.

Especially him. And she was never going to forgive him

“He told her to distract us,” Judd said. “That part wasn’t a lie, right? She looked guilty.”

That was the part he had the most trouble with. Had she been with them because she liked them? Or because she’d been ordered to by her boss. Her *father*.

And that was something else that she hadn’t told them.

“She said that he did ask her to keep your attention on her, but that she spent time with you all because she liked you,” Caleb explained.

“Hey, where’s Owen?” Aleki asked.

“What do you mean ... he’s ...” Judd looked around. “Where the fuck did he go?”

“Shit,” Beck said.

“He took off when you gave him the necklace,” Wolfe said. “I’d say he’s on his way to the airport. That’s what I’d do if my girl had taken off on me. Then she wouldn’t sit for a week.”

Judd turned back to Caleb. “We’re taking a leave of absence.”

Caleb nodded. “Figured.”

They took off running. Maybe they could catch up to Owen before he boarded a plane.

Bastard needed to learn to wait for them.



CHLOE GOT out of the taxi and looked up at the house she’d lived in for years.

It had never been her home.

It had been more like her prison for most of her time here. What was she going to do?

Fatigue had her swaying on her feet. When was the last time she’d slept? Since before Jonathan had lost his mind.

“Hey, miss, you okay?” the taxi driver looked back at her. “Isn’t this where you wanted to go?”

She wanted to say no. To tell him to drop her off somewhere else. But she needed to get some things before ... well, she didn’t know if Jonathan was coming back here. But she wanted to be gone by the time he did.

“Do you think you can wait for me? I’ll only be ten minutes.”

“Sure, I’ll wait.”

Shakily, she made her way up the front stairs. This house had been in Jonathan’s family for generations. It screamed old wealth. She hesitated at the door, her hand shaking.

You can do this.

After using her key to unlock the door, she walked in. It was so quiet. But then ... it often was. Most of the time it had been just her here. What would it have been like to grow up here? To be a child in this cold, lifeless house?

She couldn’t really imagine it.

Forcing those thoughts to one side, she moved up the stairs to her bedroom. She didn’t have a lot of money. Jonathan had never really paid her. He’d told her that she was working off her debt.

The money he’d used to save her, and to imprison her all at once.

But the one thing he’d never been stingy about was the things she wore. He’d always insisted that she had to look perfect. All the time.

Grabbing a bag from the storage room, she filled it with all the jewelry she could find. She didn’t know why he’d bought it for her when he was obviously broke.

But appearances were everything to him.

Screw that asshole. He was probably going to jail for a long time.

He’d tried to kill Pippa.

Head throbbing, heart torn into pieces, she grabbed some clothes, then carried the bag downstairs. She thought about taking some food, knowing money would be tight.

But that felt like stealing. This stuff, she'd earned. Everything else ... that didn't belong to her.

Shutting the door behind her, she made sure it was locked before she took off the keys and slid them through the slot in the door.

Then she hauled her suitcase to the taxi.

“Where to now, love?”

“The airport.”



FOURTEEN HOURS LATER, she stepped into a grubby motel room. After paying for a one-way flight to Florida, she didn't want to waste more money on accommodation.

This would do for now. At least until she could sell some of her jewelry. She probably wouldn't get much, but she just needed a nest egg to help her breathe.

What was she going to do? She had nowhere to live. She didn't know anyone here, but she'd felt like she needed to come back in order to move on.

A wave of dizziness washed through her. When was the last time she'd eaten? Drunk anything? She hadn't slept for more than thirty minutes at a time since she was arrested. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. She reached up for her necklace, only to realize it wasn't there.

They hadn't believed her. Believed in her.

They'd thought the worst of her.

But you did lie to them.

And now they were gone and she was on her own and it was so much worse than she'd imagined it would be.

“It’s okay,” she said to herself. “You don’t need anyone. All you need is yourself.”

But she wasn’t sure that was true. She’d felt alone for most of her life. As though no one was on her side. But at the same time, she didn’t know how to do this.

She missed them.

So damn much it hurt. Far more than anything Jonathan could have done to her.

She reached into her handbag to pull out Amy Alpaca. She’d had to leave Tickle behind, which had hurt but at least she had Amy.

After getting undressed, she had a quick shower. She felt filthy and she couldn’t remember the last time she’d showered.

Putting on a nightgown, she and Amy Alpaca climbed between the sheets. She hugged the toy close as she closed her eyes.

She didn’t know if she’d really sleep, even though her body was exhausted. But she had to try.

Tomorrow ... tomorrow was the start of her new life. Whatever that was going to look like.



OWEN STARED at her as she slept in the flea-ridden motel.

This wasn’t the sort of place she should be sleeping in.

Only the very best was acceptable for his baby girl. He hated that she was here. Wanted to sweep her up into his arms and carry her out of here.

At the same time, he wanted to pull her over his lap and spank her ass until she promised that she’d never leave him again.

Sure, she hadn’t had much choice when she’d been arrested. He should have gotten to her quicker. But one of the palace staff had gotten to her first, carrying her away and

locked her in a room. He'd interviewed the guy briefly. He'd been in the room at the time when Jonathan pulled the gun and he'd thought they were helping by grabbing her and locking her up.

He didn't care if Chloe had agreed to keep them distracted for His Lordship. It was obvious he'd had some kind of hold on her.

He was her father.

Shit father. Worse than his own. At least he'd had the good manners to just walk out.

He wasn't letting her go. Locking her up sounded better than ever.

That wasn't what had him most upset, though.

She'd just left. Even after he'd sent that message.

That part was going to earn her some punishment.

He'd followed her halfway across the world. He'd gotten to London and missed her by a few hours. He would have arrived there earlier if he hadn't had to steal a helicopter and fly out of Escana and into a neighboring country to get an international flight out.

Then when he'd gotten to Lord Fothersam's house ... she hadn't fucking been there.

He'd had to track her down using her passport and cell phone. It had taken him longer than he would have liked.

It hadn't taken much for the guy in the office to cough up her room number.

Yeah, this wasn't a place for his girl. And as soon as he put her collar back on, he was going to put her on a leash.

A metaphorical one. Most of the time.

But he was prepared to use a real leash if that became necessary.

He placed his bag down. He always had a go-bag packed. This wasn't the first time he'd had to use it.

There were only a few essentials in there. But the most important thing was in his pocket. He drew it out, fingering her collar.

Knowing she'd taken it off ... it had broken something inside him.

Something that could only be unbroken by placing it back around her neck, by hearing that she would never leave him again, by tying her to him in whatever way was necessary.

Hmm. She'd look good with his baby in her belly.

Yep, he was aware he'd jumped off that cliff and was swimming with the sharks in the sea of insanity.

He didn't fucking care.

She was his.

He stepped toward the bed as she started to whimper. Her distress was clear to see. She looked so fragile. Pale and drawn. Had she eaten at all since she'd been arrested?

Knowing her, he was betting not.

She was terrible at taking care of herself. She put everyone else first and herself last.

She deserved to be put first. And that was what he was determined to do.

He lay on the bed and carefully placed the collar over her neck. She didn't wake, but she rolled toward him. Somehow, he managed to get it around her neck and fasten it without her waking.

Then he settled in to watch her sleep.



CHLOE WOKE UP, staring up at the dirty ceiling. Was it morning? Had she slept? That was surprising. Then again, she'd barely slept over the past seventy-two hours so maybe everything was catching up to her.

That had to be it.

But something didn't feel right. She sat up, trying to figure it out. She reached up to touch her neck. Why did it feel like something was there? Her heart raced.

It couldn't be.

She touched the necklace, one that she hadn't gone to bed wearing.

A necklace that she'd left in Escana.

She looked around, spotting the white roses on the bedside table immediately. There was only one person who it could be. Only one person who would dare sneak into her hotel room and put this damn thing on her neck.

Without. Even. Waking. Her.

"Where are you?" she demanded.

He stepped out of the shadows of the room. She drew herself back against the headboard.

"Owen."

His arms were crossed over his chest, his gaze firm.

"Why are you here?" she finally managed to ask as he stared at her intently.

"You left."

"Of course I left. I was arrested! Did you really expect me to stay? I came home. Only, it's not my home. Because I don't have one of those."

"You have a home," he rasped, stepping forward. His face had grown darker. Oh, was he mad?

Well, so was she. She was so damn mad at her entire life. At Jonathan, for betraying her. At the four of them, for not believing her.

But most of all, she was mad at herself.

Because she'd let her guard down. And they'd promised that she wouldn't regret it.

Liars.

“No. I don’t. I lived in Jonathan’s home. But it was never mine. I was just there as his slave. Someone for him to exploit and use. But you probably don’t believe that. You think I was in on everything he did, don’t you?”

“No.”

OWEN HATED the bitter look on her face. That wasn’t how she should ever look.

“I don’t believe you,” she told him.

“You should believe me. I don’t lie.”

“But apparently I do.” She let out a bitter laugh.

Fuck.

“You need to leave,” she ordered.

“Not happening, baby girl.”

“Stop calling me that! You shouldn’t be here. There is nothing here for you.”

“You are here. That’s all I need.”

She shook her head. “No. I don’t want you.”

“Don’t lie to me.” He had a fierce desire to remind her how much she wanted him.

But he couldn’t give in to that.

“But that’s what I am ... a liar. I lied to you all. So I don’t know why you’re here.”

He was done with this. He stormed toward her, jumping on the bed to straddle her lap, placing his hands beside her head as he held onto the headboard.

“I’m here because you’re mine. And you are not allowed to run from me.”

“Then you’re not allowed to believe terrible things about me.”

“Baby girl, I don’t.”

“Because the truth came out. Not because you believed in me.”

“I believed in you. I sent Caleb with that message and Amy Alpaca for you. You’re the one who didn’t believe in me. I was working to free you, even if I had to break into that place and steal you.”

She put her hands over her face. “You shouldn’t have come, Owen.”

“Look at me. Look. At. Me.”

She lowered her hands.

“I will always come for you. Understand? Always.”

“It won’t work. Even if you did believe in me ... the others didn’t. I saw Judd’s face. Heard it in Beck’s voice. They thought the worst of me.”

“Maybe for a moment they did, but they had their doubts about whether you knew what he was up to.”

She shook her head.

“I promise you.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway, whether you believed me or not. I’m here now and you live there. And I’m not going back there.”

“All right.”

“All right?”

“Yes. So we’ll just move here. But not into this flea-ridden disgusting place. We’ll find a house of our own.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

SOMETHING DARK FILLED Owen’s face. Shit.

“No?” he repeated.

“It’s not going to work. The others didn’t believe me. They don’t want me.”

“And I’m telling you that you’re wrong. They do want you. They do believe you. And even if they didn’t, what makes you think that I let them make my decisions?”

“You’re a family. I’m not going to come between you.”

“You aren’t coming between us. What they decide is up to them. But you are mine. And I choose you.”

She sucked in a breath. When had anyone ever chosen her?

“Not all of it was a lie, though. He did ask me to distract you guys.”

“So you didn’t want us? You didn’t fall for us? It was all fake?” he demanded.

“No! Of course it wasn’t fake!”

A sob threatened to break free.

Calm.

Cool.

“You are my entire fucking world. And no matter what, I will always come for you. Although, you are never to leave me again.”

“It’s not that simple, Owen.”

“It is.”

She stared up at him, a wealth of pain in her eyes. “You know it’s not. They’re not here.”

“Baby girl, if you don’t think that they’re just behind me, then you’re nuts.”

“They’ll come for you.”

Owen made a scoffing noise. “They know I can take care of myself. They’re not coming for me. They are coming for you. I only got here first because I don’t bother with doing things legally.”

“What ... what did you do?”

“Stole the Princes’ helicopter. Used a false passport to book a flight to London, then a different one to get here.”

“Owen! You didn’t!”

She groaned and reached up to lightly touch her necklace. Sadness filled her face. Followed by resolve.

“Take it off.”

“Never.”

“I’m not yours anymore. I don’t know that I ever was.”

He snorted. “You’ll always be mine. Don’t need a collar to know that.”

“Collar?”

“Yep. Collar. That claims you as mine. Theirs too. And it stays.”

She shook her head. “You need my consent.”

“Do I? See ... things like that only matter if you care about following the rules. You leaving without me ... that tells me that the rule book is out the window. And I have to do whatever is necessary to keep you by me. The collar stays.”

“Please, Owen. Don’t make this any harder.”

“It doesn’t need to be hard at all. All you need to do is agree to be mine. I won’t be letting you go because I love you.”

Way to break a bombshell on her.

She stared up at him in shock. “No, you don’t.”

His eyes narrowed angrily. “Do not tell me how I feel. I fucking love you.”

“I ... I need a moment.” She pushed him away and raced into the bathroom, staring at herself in the mirror. She leaned her hands on the counter.

She didn’t know this woman.

All she knew was how to be someone else’s plaything. Their pawn. Their asset.

Did she know how to be loved? To love in return?

Is this what she wanted? Him?

God. Yes.

So badly that it hurt. But it seemed so impossible.

Owen appeared behind her. He pushed her hair to one side so he could kiss up her neck. “My baby girl.”

“I don’t know how to do this, Owen. I don’t know how to love someone. I’ve never been anything other than what someone else told me to be.”

“Then we’ll learn together. Because I don’t know how to love someone either. All I know is that I want to look after you, put you first, to make you smile. Is that a good start?” he asked.

“It ... it seems that way to me.”

He turned her to face him. “Let me take care of you, baby girl.”

He moved them around so she was pressed against the bathroom wall. “Let me show you how much I love you.”

“What about the others? Your job?”

“Fuck it all. I don’t need anything but you.” His gaze held hers. It was mesmerizing. She tried to tear her gaze eyes but she couldn’t.

She was never going to be strong enough to push this man away.

“I’ll die for you, baby girl. Kill for you. Do anything you want. Just tell me what you need, and I’ll do it. As long as you don’t tell me to leave.”

“You’re a wicked man.”

“Pure evil, baby. I’m a monster. But I’m your monster. How does it feel to have tamed the monster?”

“You’re not tame,” she whispered. His hand rested lightly on her throat, increasing her arousal.

What was wrong with her?

“You’re going to come for me, baby girl. You’re going to come screaming my name and you’re going to know who owns you.”

“I thought I owned you,” she whispered as he pressed her to the wall, his hand reaching under her nightgown to play with her clit. She whimpered as he rubbed it through her panties.

“You do. Do you think that I would have chased you halfway around the world if I wasn’t yours? Do you think I would kneel before you if I wasn’t yours?”

He wasn’t kneeling before her ... oh.

Now he was.

But she wasn't an idiot. She knew this didn't give her a position of power. Owen was the one making all the decisions.

Reaching under her nightgown, he drew down her panties. "Step out of them."

She moved her feet, freeing herself of her panties. Grabbing one leg, he lifted it up into the air and pressed it back against the wall.

And she loved it.

She closed her eyes.

There was a part of her that had always known he would come.

Smack!

His hand slapped lightly down on her pussy. She gasped.

"No closing your eyes. You're going to watch me eat your pussy. You're going to know who owns you, little puppy."

"I already do."

"Do you? Then why did you run?" he asked.

"You know why," she replied.

"Because you didn't have faith in me," he said.

"Pretty sure it was the other way around."

He shook his head. "You lied to me, naughty little puppy."

She sucked in a breath. "I didn't lie about my feelings for you."

"Good. But you never told us who he was to you."

"I never really knew. I suspected, but he never said anything."

Fury filled his face. "That fucking bastard. And that's the way he tells you! I'll kill him for you."

She shook her head. "No, I don't want that. Killing him would be too quick."

“You should have told me what he asked you to do. You aren’t allowed to keep things from me, understand? Nothing at all. If you break a fucking nail, I want to know.”

The intense look on his face stole her breath.

“Don’t look so scared, baby girl. I’d never harm you.”

No? She wasn’t so sure that she hadn’t been harmed. Or at least she’d changed.

They’d changed her.

“Shh, baby girl. No one is going to hurt you. I promise.”

“Maybe not physically, Owen. The truth is ... I’m not as upset at all of you as I am with myself. I wish I’d told you. I tried, but then I would talk myself out of it because I just wanted a few days of happiness. But if I’d said something to you, then maybe he never would have pulled a gun on Pippa.”

She felt so awful.

“That wasn’t your fault.” He stood. “Listen to me. That was all on him and it wasn’t up to you to stop him.”

She shook her head.

Her guilt over not saying anything was the main reason she’d run from them.

“Stop it,” Owen said fiercely. “You’re going to stop feeling guilty and tell me it wasn’t your fault. Tell me.” He nipped at her lip. “Do I have to spank it out of you?”

“Beck wouldn’t let you do that.”

“It’s just me here, baby girl. I do what I like.”

“I do feel guilty, though, Owen.”

He spun her around until she faced the wall and spanked her bottom four times in quick succession.

More. She needed more.

She needed so much pain that the guilt left her. But then he spun her back and dropped to his knees again. Grabbing her leg, he pushed it up once more and placed his mouth over her mound.

He laid a kiss over her clit, then flicked it with his tongue.

“Mine.” Another flick of his tongue. “My collar around your neck.” Flick. Flick. “My tongue in your pussy.” Flick. Flick. “My ring around your finger.” Flick. “Mine.”

“Oh shit,” she groaned as he started eating her out in earnest. “That was not a proposal.”

“No, it wasn’t,” he told her, looking up at her. “Because I was never going to ask.”

He was awful. Terrible.

Possessive. Bossy.

And all hers. He played with her clit until she was on the edge of coming. Then he drew back.

“No. No, please.”

Putting her leg down, he rose. His lips glistened with her dew. “You didn’t think you were going to come that easily, did you, naughty girl?”

Oh shit. She might just be in trouble here.

He ripped her nightgown off, staring down at her breasts.

With Owen, you never knew what was coming next.

But she just had to trust that he would always protect her.

And she did.

She trusted him. She loved him.

Was she really going to push him away? He’d come this far for her.

She stared up at him, licking her lips. “I’m yours, Daddy Owen. Do what you want with me.”

“Anything?” He tilted his head to the side.

“Anything.”

“You’re going to be Daddy’s good baby girl? You’re going to do what I say?”

“Yes, Daddy Owen.”

“And if you’re naughty and run away again, then you’ll have to wear my leash.”

“Yes, Daddy Owen.”

“What you’re going to do is come. Nice and hard and loud for me, understand?”

“Yes, Daddy Owen.”

“I like when you’re obedient,” he told her. “Although I like when you’re a little naughty too.”

Then he slid onto his knees once more and she stared down at him. She grasped hold of his head, holding him there as her orgasm hit her.

Hard and fast.

A scream erupted from her. “Owen!”

He lapped at her as she shuddered through her release. Standing, he lifted her into his arms and carried her out to the bedroom.

“On your hands and knees,” he ordered. “Knees at the edge of the bed, ass in the air.”

She crawled into position, then looked over her shoulder to find him stripping.

“Turn your face around,” he ordered.

She faced forward again. His hand slid down her ass. “You need to be punished for running from me.”

Chloe sucked in her breath. “Yes, Daddy Owen.”

“But I also need to be punished for not protecting you properly. For allowing you to be arrested.”

“Daddy, no! It wasn’t your fault.”

“It was. You’re getting a spanking. Ten smacks. I know I still owe you some as well. I let you rack up too many. After these spanks, though, the slate is clean. And anything earned will be given as soon as possible. After I spank you, I’ll allow you to give me whatever punishment you want.”

“Like ... like what?” she asked.

“Hmm. You can order me not to come. That would be a punishment.”

“I don’t think you failed me, though.” Owen had still believed in her. He’d come for her. And he’d sent her Amy Alpaca.

“I did. Punish me.”

“All right, you can’t come while you fuck me.”

“Good girl.”

Smack!

His hand landed without warning.

Smack! Smack! Smack!

“Daddy!” she cried out.

“I know. It’s supposed to hurt. But it’s not more than you can take.”

Smack! Smack! Smack!

“Daddy, please!” Her bottom stung and she could feel something inside her breaking.

“Three more. You can take them, baby girl. You’re doing so well. Your bottom is already nice and pink for me. But I want this to truly sink in. I want you to know that you belong to me. Never.”

Smack!

“Leave.”

Smack!

“Me.”

Smack!

“Again.”

She collapsed forward, a sob breaking free. She’d been so close to tears, but she hadn’t gotten pushed far enough. Maybe she should have asked for more.

“There. There. Now. Now.” He patted her back, lying alongside her.

To her shock, she found herself giggling at his words.

“Why are you laughing? Did I not spank you hard enough?”

“You did! You did!” she cried.

“Are you sure? I can always do it again.”

“Daddy!” she protested. “I’m sure.”

He moved so he was sitting up against the headboard then he patted his lap. “Come here. Sit on my lap, baby girl.”

“Said the spider to the fly.”

He grinned wickedly. She moved up the bed, wincing slightly, then straddled him. She tugged off his shirt with his help, then he drew her against him, rubbing her back. She nuzzled at his chest, sucking lightly on his nipples.

“Does my baby girl need to suck on something?” he whispered. “Want to suck on Daddy’s cock?”

She did. But she felt bad for him.

“Don’t worry about me, baby girl. You just suck away as long as you want. It’s my punishment not to come. Although it’s certainly not a punishment to have your mouth on me.”

He moved onto his back, then rolled to his side. She lay on her side facing him, her face level with his already firm cock.

Was he certain this was all right?

She glanced up at him worriedly. He cupped her cheek gently.

“Suck me, baby girl. Now.”

It was torture.

But at the same time, it felt right.

This was his punishment. Maybe it wasn't enough. And really ... who wouldn't want this girl sucking on their dick?

He brushed his fingers through her hair. He'd wash it for her later. He could tell she hadn't been taking care of herself these past few days. There were dark marks under her eyes and she looked gaunt.

Haunted.

That all had to stop. They had to start taking care of her properly.

Putting her first.

He gritted his teeth as she sucked strongly.

Shit. Fuck.

He was going to be walking funny after this with his giant blue balls.

But it would be worth it. She was worth everything.



“SIT DOWN, and I'll put on your shoes.”

She sat and let Owen put her shoes on, then he tied her shoelaces. He'd insisted on dressing her. So she was wearing a

loose blouse, a tight skirt, and lace-up sneakers.

“I need to check my hair,” she said. “Where’s my make-up?” She’d taken some from Jonathan’s place.

“Why?” he asked. “You don’t need it.”

“Yes, I do. Jonathan—” she cut her words off.

“Jonathan isn’t here, and his opinion doesn’t matter.”

She swallowed heavily. She was just so used to Jonathan dictating her life. It felt bizarre not to have to worry about him.

“Right. Okay. Do I look all right?”

“You look perfect. As always.”

After she’d had her fill of sucking on him, drifting in and out of sleep, he’d put her in the shower with him.

Or tried to. It was too small. He’d grumbled about not being able to wash her hair and finding somewhere better to stay as he washed every inch of her.

It had been sweet.

And just what she needed.

“I’m not hungry.”

“That wasn’t a question, baby girl. When was the last time you ate?”

“Um. I remember having a protein bar while waiting for the plane.”

“And that’s it? Since that dinner at the palace?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’re eating. And you’re drinking water.”

“Coffee?” she asked.

“If you drink your water first. You know the rules. Oh, and you’ve got to hold my hand when you’re out of this apartment. And you will obey me. Understand? I don’t know this area and this isn’t safe like Escana.”

“Because it was so safe there.”

He frowned. "It should have been."

Owen took hold of her hand and made sure the door was locked behind them. He led her down the stairs and outside. Half a block over, they walked into a diner. She followed close behind him. It had been years since she'd eaten in a place like this. Before Jonathan had come and taken her away.

The server led them to a booth.

"Drinks?" she asked.

"Water and coffee for us both," Owen told her.

Chloe picked up the menu, reading through it. What could she eat that was small?

"What would you like?" he asked.

"I'll just have the muesli and yogurt," she said.

He grunted. When the server returned with their drinks, he ordered her muesli as well as a big breakfast for him.

"Owen?" she said once they were alone.

"Yeah, baby girl?"

"What if they don't come? What will we do?" She still wasn't sure they would.

He snorted. "They will. Don't worry about that."

"Easy for you to say," she said. "I always worry."

"And you need to stop."

She had to bite back a sigh. He was crazy. He seemed to think it was that easy.

If only.

She reached for her coffee.

"No." He drew the coffee away. "Water first."

She nearly snarled at him. He really shouldn't get between her and her coffee. Especially when she hadn't been sleeping well in days.

But she slammed down her empty glass, then held her hand out. “Happy?”

“Ecstatic,” he replied dryly. Then he mixed some creamer into her coffee and stirred it.

She took a sip. Ahh, perfect.

He grabbed a napkin and flicked it out, before putting it over her lap.

“I’m not that messy,” she said.

“Better safe than sorry.”

Her muesli came first, but before she could reach for it, Owen drew the bowl toward him. She watched with a frown as he took a bite.

“Tastes all right.” He spooned up some more and held it out to her.

She glanced around. “Owen, you can’t feed me. People will see.”

“Screw people. I hate people. Eat. Now.”

The look on his face told her that he wasn’t going to give in. That she best do what he said.

So, she opened her mouth and let him feed her. The server brought over his meal, and she could practically feel the woman’s stare on her.

“Owen, I can feed myself.”

“But why would you when I can do it for you? And then I can make sure that you actually eat.”

She took two more mouthfuls before shaking her head. He eyed her, then sighed.

“I’m full. Eat your breakfast.”

“All right.” He cut up some of his egg and held out his fork to her. She took the mouthful without thinking. “Maybe you’re not as full as you thought, huh?”

“I am. I was just used to you ...”

“To me feeding you? So perhaps one of us needs to feed you all the time, that way you’ll eat.”

If it was that simple ... then again, sometimes things were just that simple.

Not that they would want to feed her all the time.

When the server brought the bill, she reached for it, intending to pay her share. Owen lightly smacked her hand. “No.”

“Ouchie. Why?”

“When you’re out with me, I pay.”

“Owen.”

“No arguments.”

“Just because you say no arguments doesn’t mean I won’t argue,” she warned.

“Well, it should. What kind of logic is that?”

She shook her head but decided not to reply. After leaving some cash on the table, he slid out of the booth after leaving some cash and took her hand to help her down.

“Stop. Freeze,” he ordered.

She froze and to her shock, he crouched down and started tying her shoelace which had become undone.

“Owen,” she whispered.

“Just making sure you’re safe, baby girl.”

She didn’t look around, not wanting to see the looks on people’s faces.

Stop caring.

He doesn’t. All he wants is to make you safe.

“There. That’s better. That knot isn’t shifting.”

When he stood, she took his hand again and held her head up proud.

“You were a good girl for Daddy,” he told her as they walked back toward the motel. “That deserves a reward.”

“A reward? Like what, Daddy Owen?”

“Like me laying you out on the bed and licking your pussy until you scream.”

Okay. She could be down with that.

“And then I’ll take you to the toy store. Do they have any stores for Littles here?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered.

“I’ll find out. And we’re moving motels. This area isn’t safe.”

“There’s actually somewhere I need to go before we go anywhere. It’s just a few blocks away. Can we walk?”

He turned his head to eye her. “It’s important?”

“Very. It’s the main reason I came back here.”



FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, she stood and stared at the shack she’d once called home.

That was all it could be called now. A run-down shack. The windows had been boarded up. The roof looked like it had seen better days. And the siding had come off in places.

But it really hadn’t changed that much in the last nine years.

Disturbing, really.

“What is this place?” Owen asked. His hand was still around hers.

“My home. Or ... the place I grew up anyway. I don’t own it. Don’t know who does.”

“This is where you grew up?” There was no horror in his voice.

It made her wonder, not for the first time, where Owen had grown up. She knew he was from Harlem, but not much else.

“You never talk about your family,” she said.

“Don’t have one. Dad bailed when I was a baby. Ma overdosed when I was nine. Came home from school to find her dead. Got taken in by my uncle, who was a lieutenant with a local gang. I ran with them for years ... if it wasn’t for Judd pulling me out and getting me into the armed services then I’d still be with them or dead.”

“Owen,” she whispered.

“The gang liked me because I was young and small but unafraid to get my hands dirty. I was being trained as a killer. I was surprisingly good at it.”

“Owen, no.”

He glanced down at her, almost as though he’d forgotten she was there. “Shit. I’m oversharing, aren’t I? Uh, my childhood was bad, then worse, then it got better. That’s what I should have said.”

“No. No, I want the truth from you, always.” Turning to him, she hugged him tight. “I’m so sorry.”

He hugged her back. “It’s all right. I might be dark and dangerous. But never to you. And my skills mean that I can protect you.”

“But you never got a childhood.”

“Did you?” he asked. “Judd was raised in the same neighborhood. He didn’t get pulled into one of the gangs, but only because he was a stubborn fuck. That’s how he managed to save me. He came back for me, dragged me out. We’d been friends since we were little, we even lived nextdoor to each other. Until my mom got kicked out of that apartment for not paying rent.”

“Oh, Owen.”

“We’ve all had bad stuff in our lives, baby girl.”

“I guess we do.” She took in a deep breath, then leaned back to look up at him. “Two days before my eighteenth birthday my mom was found dead in a park. The police think she was robbed and beaten. And less than a day later, I learned that she’d sold me to an MC gang in order to pay her gambling debt.”

“What the fuck? No. Baby girl, no.” This time his face was filled with horror.

“Jonathan saved me. That’s why I felt like I owed him so much. He was both my savior and my nightmare. On the one hand, he saved me. And on the other hand, he belittled and controlled me to the point where I barely knew how to think or act on my own.” She took in a shuddering breath.

“How exactly did Jonathan save you?”

She let out a small scream. Because the question hadn’t come from Owen, but from behind them.

Turning, she saw them.

Judd. Hux. Beck.

They were here.

They all looked wrecked. Hux's eyes were glassy with tears. Beck was pale and ill-looking.

And Judd was frowning. But not angrily. He looked almost ... confused.

"You guys ... you're here."

Remember that you're angry at them.

Her feelings were so confused, though. A mix of anger and guilt.

"About fucking time," Owen snapped. "What took you so long?"

"Some of us couldn't steal the Princes' helicopter and fly out of the country illegally," Judd snarled. "Some of us follow the rules."

"And look where it gets you. Late to the party."

"Not much of a party, though," Hux whispered. "Little darlin', I'm so sorry. I'm sorry for everything. I should have been pounding on the police station door to get to you as soon as I found out you'd been arrested. Are you all right? What can I do? Is there any way you can ever forgive me?"

Okay, so he was diving right in, huh?

"We're so sorry, Freckles," Beck said. "Especially me. I was in that room. You should have been my focus. Instead, I left you on the floor to help take Jonathan down."

“It was your job. I understood.”

“I treated you harshly. I shouldn’t have. I regretted it as soon as everything was all over but I didn’t know what to believe. I should have, though. Ma would whack me with her rolling pin, and she’d be right to. Please, Freckles, forgive us?”

To her shock, Beck went down on his knees. Hux nodded and followed him.

“What are you doing?” she asked frantically. “Get up. The ground is filthy.”

“I’m going to stay on my knees until you forgive me,” Hux said stubbornly.

“Really?” she asked. “How will you get around?”

“Like this.” He shuffled on his knees, holding his arms out.

“Oh my God,” Judd muttered. “Have some dignity.”

All three men turned to glare at Judd. It seemed he wasn’t on board with the begging-for-forgiveness thing.

“Please, get up,” she whispered. “I forgive you.”

“No,” Beck said.

Her eyes widened as she turned to him.

“You shouldn’t forgive us so easily. Especially me and Judd. We don’t accept your forgiveness.”

Judd looked away, a muscle pulsing in his jaw. Did he not want to be here?

Sadness filled her. Because she didn’t want to pull them apart.

“Beck is right,” Hux added. “It doesn’t feel like we’ve earned your forgiveness, even if I do tear up the skin on my knees. We have to earn it. To prove to you that we mean it.”

“Please, get up,” she begged.

They didn’t move, so she dropped onto her knees. All of them reached for her, including Judd. But Hux reached her first.

“What are you doing?” Hux asked. “You don’t get on your knees for us.”

“I’ve been on my knees plenty,” she muttered.

Hux’s eyes widened, then he grinned. “Are you making a joke about blow jobs, little darlin?”

“Well, it’s not a funny joke if you have to explain it.” She leaned forward, pressing her face into Hux’s neck. It was easier with him and Owen. They hadn’t been in that room. Hadn’t looked at her in confusion and anger. But she had still wronged all of them.

“I’m sorry, Hux.”

“Why are you apologizing, little darlin’? We’re the ones who should have run to your defense.”

“And I was the one who kept things from you.”

“Exactly,” Judd said. “You didn’t tell us that he asked you to distract us.”

Judd loomed over her, and she felt the urge to hide behind Hux.

But this is Judd. He won’t hurt you.

However, Owen didn’t seem that impressed, and he stepped between them, shoving Judd back. “Do not speak to her like that.”

“What? She’s not completely innocent in this!”

“You do not get to use that tone on her,” Owen said. “She is delicate. Precious.”

“I have the right to ask her questions!” Judd said, pushing him back. “She’s not just yours.”

Shit. They couldn’t fight. And they definitely shouldn’t draw attention to themselves in this neighborhood.

She jumped up.

“Chloe, no!” Hux yelled.

She threw herself between them just as Judd went to shove Owen again. Because she was smaller, his hand landed on her

face, making her nose sting. She cried out in pain as Owen caught her, steadying her.

“Chloe!” they all yelled. Owen picked her up and Beck and Hux crowded around her.

“I didn’t mean to. Fuck! Fuck!” Judd started pacing back and forth, his hands brushing over his head. “Fuck!”

“It’s okay. I’m fine. It’s not bleeding.”

Beck drew her hand away, inspecting her nose. “It could use some ice.”

“Let me down. I want to speak to Judd.”

All three men frowned down at her.

“Let me down, Owen,” she said firmly.

“No.”

“Owen, please. I have to try to save us all. This is my fault you’re all falling apart and I have to make it right.”

Hux cupped her face between his hands. “Not everything is your fault. It’s okay to be mad at us, to be upset. We deserve it and we’re not going anywhere.”

She took in a deep breath and nodded. “I still need to fix this.”

“And we need to fix this between us,” Beck said. “Each of us need to mend our bond with you. Will you let us?”

This was everything she wanted ... and yet at the same time she was terrified to say yes. What if they couldn’t trust each other again? She felt guilty, yet at the same time abandoned and hurt.

But if she pushed them away now ... she would be miserable. Just look at her these few days without them. It had felt like her heart was being torn from her chest. If they could give her another chance ... then she had to do the same for them.

“Yes,” she whispered. “I’ve been so miserable without you guys, even when I was angry at you all, I wanted you with me.”

But I ... I don't know if I can ever go back there. To Escana."

Beck's gaze softened. "We'll cross that bridge later. Okay?"

"Please, let me down, Owen."

He put her down, and she slowly moved over to Judd. He was staring at the shack she'd grown up in. Her eyes were watering, her nose stinging, but it wasn't as bad as they all seemed to think.

She'd been through worse.

"Judd," she whispered.

"Don't come any closer to me," he said.

"Why not?" she asked. "Because you hate me?"

He swung toward her and she heard Owen growl behind her. Turning, she gave them all a hard look. They couldn't interfere.

Beck nodded, and she knew he'd keep them back.

"I could never hate you. That's the problem." He let out a deep breath. "It would be easier if I could. If I could just move on and forget about you."

"That's what you'd rather do?" she asked, sadness filling her. "I understand."

She turned and took a step toward the others. A firm arm wrapped around her waist, dragging her back. Then he drew her gently against him, his arms around her.

"No," he told her. "I don't want to move on. I don't want to forget about you. I can't get you out of my head. You're all I think about. That horror on your face as you looked at me. It plays over and over in my head. But in my mind, I move to you. I take you in my arms and I tell you that you'll be all right. Only, I didn't do that. How can you ever forgive me? When the smoke bomb went off, I didn't even move to get you."

"You were doing your job."

“I’m always doing my job,” he said bitterly. “It’s become the only focus in my life. And it shouldn’t be. You should be.”

“I’m sorry I never told you what he asked me to do. I thought about it. I even tried to do it. But I was a coward and selfish.”

“Freckles, no,” Beck protested.

“I was. I thought that I was going to have to leave soon and that I wouldn’t see any of you again, so I wanted to take some time that was my own. Where I could be happy for the first time in, well, forever. But I should have told you.”

“What about the fact that he is your father?” Hux asked.

“I didn’t know he was my father. He never said. I never understood why he helped me ... I still don’t really. If he’s my dad why did he never tell me? Why did he leave me to live here like I did? He was one of my mom’s numerous guy friends. He’d visit her whenever he was in town. I always thought of him as the weird man with the funny accent. But he must have known, right? Who I was? And he left me here.”

“Oh, little darlin’,” Hux whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

“I used to dream that my dad would just one day appear, especially when the kids at school were being awful or when one of mom’s guy friends would get a bit rough.”

“A bit rough?” Owen asked in a low, dark voice.

She swallowed heavily. “Mostly with my mom. Not me. I usually hid. But sometimes I wasn’t as quick as I needed to be.”

“Fucking bastards!” Owen glared at the house she’d grown up in as though those men were in there. “I’ll kill them all.”

“Most of them are probably dead now. They didn’t exactly lead healthy lives.”

“I hate that you grew up like that,” Hux said in a tight voice.

“Me too. But it was what it was. I always thought that my mom kind of loved me, though. To learn that she’d basically

sold me to a gang to pay off her debts. That really hurt.”

“Oh, Freckles,” Beck said in a sad voice.

“So how exactly did Jonathan save you?” Judd asked. He was still holding her against him and she was grateful for the support.

“Like I said, my mom sold me to satisfy her debt. I know that sounds insane, but these guys ... they seriously thought they owned me.” She licked her dry lips. “They had a strip club that was a secret brothel out the back. They put me to work in the club. Thankfully, I was only stripping. For a start. But I knew what was coming. That they’d start whoring me out. It was horrible. I always hated having people look at me. At school, the kids used to pick on me, they’d make comments about how dirty I was. How tatty my clothes were. They’d call me trash.”

“Motherfucking bastards,” Owen said. “I’ll fucking kill them all.”

Dear. Lord.

“Jonathan bought me,” she whispered. “I never really knew why. The one time I tried to ask him ... he completely lost it. He had a bit of a temper. And that question really set him off. He grabbed my arms and shook me and told me to never speak of that again or else.”

“What the actual fuck?” Judd snapped.

“I don’t even know why he had a ... a lover halfway around the world. Although, it could have been because of his father. He was a very strict, old-fashioned man. And Jonathan seemed scared of him. He died shortly after Jonathan rescued me.”

She rubbed at her forehead, and Judd reached up to massage the back of her neck. “You don’t have to tell us.”

“I do, though. I owe you this much. And I want to say it.” To get it out. She’d never told anyone, and it had eaten away at her.

“He came into the strip club one day. I was on stage ... I had gotten to the end of the song, so I was naked. I didn’t notice him. I just wanted to get off stage quickly. They had me sleeping in a small room out back and I wanted to go there and hide. That night ... later that night I was meant to start working in the brothel rooms and I was terrified.”

They all started swearing.

“And he came in and bought you?” Beck asked.

“Yeah. Sounds so simple, but that’s what he did. I was dragged out to another room, still naked, and there he was. The strip club manager said I was his now and shoved me at him. Jonathan looked me up and down and kind of sneered. I thought I was in for a life of sexual servitude. But he took me away from there. Gave me a place to live, a job, clothes, jewelry, as much food as I wanted.

“I wasn’t free, though. I was owned by him. Jonathan only ever cared about himself. I was just a piece of property. The only difference was my living conditions. I never starved, and I was never made to take off my clothes. But he has a temper. And when he is close to losing it, his hand will twitch. It’s a warning sign. I didn’t recognise it at first, though, and there were so many times when he’d lose it. He’d throw things. Yell. He never hit me, but it was terrifying. It made me very wary.”

“You should have told us,” Judd said.

“I know. I didn’t want to lie to you all, but Jonathan, he ... I owed him.”

“Is that why you were so jumpy when we first met you?” Beck asked. “Because of him and his temper?”

“Partly. I guess it was all of it. The way I grew up, being sold to a gang, but yeah, living with someone who could just explode like that made me a bit jumpy.”

“Christ, I’m surprised you let us ever touch you,” Hux said.

“I liked you guys touching me, though. I came to crave it. I knew you would never hurt me.”

“Never,” Judd swore.

“Jonathan would humiliate me if he thought I was showing my poor breeding, as he liked to put it. He would constantly put me down, tell me I wasn’t good enough, smart enough. If I did something he didn’t approve of, he’d unleash his sharp tongue on me. So I learned to be what he wanted. Quiet and subservient. To see to his needs. To always look perfect. Behave a certain way. And if he ever asked something of me ... then I did it. It’s no excuse and I’m sorry. So sorry. I’m sorry, Judd.”

She buried her face into his chest. She could feel him trembling.

“Hush. You do not apologize to me. You do not.”

She shook her head. “No, I have to. I know that you can’t trust me now. I don’t want to come between you all.” She drew herself out of his arms. “You’d all be better off without me.”

Turning, she walked away.

She wished she could cry ... could release this pain inside her.

“Chloe,” Judd called out. “Freeze your butt right now.”

Freeze her butt? She shook her head.

“Chloe Reed, we claim you,” Judd said. “We claim you as our intended bride.”

Okay, now she froze. She turned and stared at them. They were standing together, united.

“What?”

“We claim you,” Beck said.

“As our bride.” Hux had a wide smile on his face.

“You’re going nowhere,” Owen told her.

Judd strode toward her. “You’re our intended bride. We are capturing you. The way you captured us. Today we enter our twenty-one days of Marjarsom where we’ll romance you, and convince you to marry us for real.”

“I ... you can't. We're not even in Escana. It's not legal.”

“Like that's going to stop us,” Owen said.

Well, stop Owen, no. But the others ... she looked to them for backup. But they all looked determined.

Especially Judd.

“You're going to be ours, Baby Blue. Just give us a chance.” He swallowed heavily. “I loved Ester. But she didn't feel the same way. She lied to us, cheated on us, and left us for someone richer who she thought would give her the life she deserved. After that, I became bitter and distrustful. And I wasn't very trusting to begin with. That's part of the reason I reacted the way I did. However, I want to be different. I want to be better with you.”

“I'm so sorry, Judd,” she whispered.

“Shh. No more apologizing. We need to find a way to move forward.” He rubbed his hand up and down her back for a long moment. Cupping her chin, he moved her head from side to side. Firm resolve filled his face and he nodded and pointed at his nose. “Take a shot.”

“What?”

“You need to smack me in the face. I deserve it for ever hurting you like that.”

“It was an accident, Judd.”

“Doesn't matter. We shouldn't have been doing that near you. Hit for a hit.”

“Oh, so when you guys spank me I can spank you back? That's how it works?”

“Nice try. Not happening.” Beck walked over and took her face between his hands carefully. Judd took a few steps away. “We want you as our intended bride. Will you give us a chance? Let us really romance you the way we should have always done.”

“Let us treat you like a princess,” Hux added. “Let us grovel and prove to you that we can be the men you need.”

“Our baby girl,” Owen said.

“But at the end of the twenty-one days ... I mean, I wouldn’t hold you to it—”

“Yes, you would,” Owen said fiercely. “And we’d hold you to it as well.”

“If it’s what you want,” Beck said. “Consent always.”

Owen huffed, looking disgruntled. Hux just grinned.

She couldn’t believe she was agreeing to this. But she couldn’t turn them away. It would be like losing a part of herself.

She already knew what she was going to answer.

“Yes. Let’s do this.”

“**Y**ou stayed here last night?” Judd stared around the hotel room in disgust. It was tiny, especially with all of them in there. The ceiling had water stains on it and there were brown marks on the carpet, which had seen better days. “And you let her?” He glared at Owen.

Owen scowled back.

Okay. Rein it in. Be the leader you need to be.

“This isn’t acceptable,” Judd said. “We’re moving. Hux, find us a hotel for the next three weeks. Beck, pack her stuff. Owen, find some ice for her nose and look after our baby. I’m going outside to call Caleb to let him know what’s going on.”

And to take a breather.

He stood outside and called Caleb so they could take the next month off. He knew it wasn’t great timing. But the other man understood.

After he ended the call, he looked down at his shaking hands.

Fuck. He’d hit her.

Accidentally. But he could have really harmed her.

Unacceptable.

He had to do better than this. Be better. He was meant to be the leader, yet he was failing everyone.

That had to stop.



CHLOE LOOKED around the large hotel suite in surprise and a little dismay.

This is where they were going to spend the next three weeks? Not that she didn't think it was beautiful.

She did.

It was just ... a very upmarket hotel room where she was too scared to even sit. This was the same feeling she'd had when she'd first moved in with Jonathan. On edge. Worried.

That had never really changed. Not until the guys. Who were all staring at her like they were too scared to talk to her in case she broke.

Did she look that fragile?

Or maybe they're like you ... worried they'll misstep and ruin everything.

This was obviously the sort of place they thought she wanted to stay in. Or maybe it's where they wanted to stay. So she should just suck it up.

"This is nice."

Judd's shoulders relaxed, and Beck gave her a tentative smile.

"There's a concierge, three restaurants on site, daily housekeeping and a huge swimming pool," Hux said.

"Sounds awesome."

If you were on holiday she was certain it would be perfect. But it didn't feel like somewhere any of them could relax and get their issues sorted. They'd packed her up so quick and driven her over here before she really knew what was happening.

She was exhausted and yet couldn't relax.

“Do you want to go for a swim?” Hux asked, bouncing around on his feet.

“I don’t really swim,” she admitted.

“We need to change that,” Judd said.

Huh? How would they change that?

“We’ll have time,” Beck said. “You look tired, Freckles. Do you want a nap?”

Sure. A nap.

“Okay.” She pressed her fingernails into her palms to stop herself from saying anything more, from losing it.

What were they doing here? How did she fix this distance between them?

“Come. Come.” Hux waved a hand at her and opened a door at the far end. “This is the main bedroom. There’s another two bedrooms we’ll share, but this is all for you.”

All for her? So she had to stay in here on her own?

“Want me to run you a bath? Or rub your feet? Help you get undressed?” Hux asked eagerly.

She couldn’t help but smile at him. He was like an adorable golden retriever, trying his best to make her happy.

“No. Thank you.”

Was that a flash of disappointment in his face? He really wanted to do those things? Regret filled her.

But a big smile crossed his face again as he nodded. “All right. I’ll just leave you to have a nap. I’ll get dinner sent up later. Okay?”

He quickly shut the door behind him. Leaving her all alone.

The last thing she wanted to be.



AS HUX CLOSED THE DOOR, he let the ridiculous smile drop from his face. “Fuck.”

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Beck took a step toward the room. “Is she all right?”

“No.”

“What?” Owen started striding toward the door.

Hux stayed in front of the door, holding his hands out. “No, she’s fine. Physically. I just mean ... how do we fix this?” He ran his hand over his face with a sigh.

Judd’s face turned pensive. Beck stared down at his feet.

“What do you mean, how do we fix this? We beg her forgiveness, make her trust us, and marry her before she changes her mind,” Owen said matter-of-factly.

“It’s not that simple.” Hux moved away from the door, not wanting her to overhear them.

“Course it is,” Owen said.

“How do we help her trust us again?” Judd asked. “How do we get her to open up to us? Let us in?”

“We just have to work at it,” Beck said. “Show her how much she means to us. And open up to her so she does the same.”

“She opened up today,” Hux pointed out. “We learned a lot about her past.”

And none of it had been good.

It had all made him feel ill. His childhood had been shitty, but at least he’d been safe physically. He’d been well fed, had everything he needed except a parent who loved him.

But who had Chloe had?

A narcissistic asshole who thought she was his property.

“We show her everything we can give her and then she’ll want to stay with us,” Judd said.

Hux shared a look at Beck. “Uh, man, I don’t think she cares about any of this.”

“She needs to know we can provide for her,” Judd said.

“No,” Beck said quietly. “Chloe isn’t Ester. What Chloe needs is to feel safe in our relationship. To know we’re on her side.”

“I let her punish me. You should do the same.”

The statement from Owen had them all gaping at him.

“What?” Hux asked. “You let her spank you? Damn, I would have paid good money to see that. Do you think she’ll do it again? And let me video?”

“She didn’t spank me, you idiot,” Owen told him. “I gave her an orgasm, and she didn’t let me come. I now have a serious case of blue balls.”

“Are you serious?” Hux asked, cupping himself. “Ouch.”

“All right, so we’re all in agreement,” Judd said. “We each spend time with her. Make her feel safe. Prove to her that we can take care of her. And let her punish us.”

Hux pouted. “I don’t want blue balls, though. I’d rather take the spanking.”



DINNER HAD BEEN A DISASTER.

They’d ordered all this food, and she hadn’t been able to eat any of it. Her stomach was tied in knots.

She felt like she was disappointing them.

So she’d retreated to her bedroom again like a coward. And now she was lying here wide-awake.

This won’t work if you’re going to hide all the time.

The door to her suite opened and the covers shifted as he climbed in behind her, curling his body around hers possessively.

Owen nuzzled her neck. “You’re pulling away from us. I’m not the most aware person and even I see that.”

She sucked in a breath. “I just ... I don’t know what you all want from me. I don’t know how to make this better. I feel mad and guilty all at the same time.”

“You need to tell them what you want.”

“Them? Not you?”

He rolled her, moving over her and caging her under his body. His legs were between hers and she felt her breath hitch.

“Not me. I know what you want. Me.”

She rolled her eyes at him. He didn’t lack for self-confidence, that was sure.

“Now, let’s see how loud I can make you scream my name. We’ll make them aware of what they’re missing out on.”

Dear Lord.

Help her.

Chloe tiptoed through the hotel room, feeling silly. She was actually shocked that she'd managed to sneak out of bed without waking Owen. But he hadn't stirred.

And she desperately needed to run. Ants were racing across her skin, making it impossible to sleep. Her brain was overloaded and there was only one way she knew to clear it.

"Going somewhere?"

She let out a small cry and turned to where Judd was sitting on the sofa. How the heck had she not seen him?

"I ... um ..." Guilt filled her. "I wasn't leaving or anything."

He rose. "You need to go for a run."

"Yes."

She waited for him to scold her, tell her that there was no way she was going running. That it was dark, that it wasn't safe.

But all he did was nod.

Was he going to just let her leave?

"You're not going on your own."

"I ... I'm not?"

"No. Wait for me here."

Relief flooded her as he moved toward the bedroom he shared with the guys. When he came out a few minutes later,

he was in his workout gear. He sat on the sofa and did up his shoes.

“I’m sorry to make you go running so early,” she said as he got up. Guilt filled her. “I can wait.”

“I’m ready now.”

“Right. Sure.” She turned to the door.

He sighed. “Chloe.”

“Yes?”

“I could use the run too. And I wasn’t sleeping. Okay?”

“Okay.” Her tension eased.

They stepped out of the room. “Stay close to me.”

She nodded, not put off by his terse tone. This was Judd. Warm and fuzzy wasn’t his thing. As they got into the elevator, he pressed the button for the basement level.

“Can we get out that way?”

“No. This level has the gym. We’re not running outside. It’s dark and dangerous.” He eyed her. “You shouldn’t have been going out alone.”

“I just need to run.”

He grunted. “Next time, you wake one of us.”

There was her cheerful Grumpzilla.

“Yes, Sir.”

Oops. She hadn’t meant to let that slip out. But as she glanced up at him, she thought she saw relief on his face.

Maybe she wasn’t the only one feeling super awkward and worried.

“Were you having trouble sleeping?” she asked him.

“Yes.” That was all he said, but she understood. They all had their own demons.

They reached the gym, which was unsurprisingly empty.

“Stretch first,” he barked.

She rolled her eyes, but started stretching without a word. As she got on the treadmill relief filled her. She started at a slow jog, then ran faster. She preferred running outside, but she knew he was right.

It wouldn't have been safe outside.

Sweat coated her skin. Her breathing grew faster and her muscles burned.

More. She needed more. She was so close to reaching that point of exhaustion.

“Slow down now.”

She ignored the order.

“Chloe. Slow. Down.”

Like he was going to do anything if she kept going.

Suddenly, he slammed his hand down on the emergency stop and grabbed her around the waist so she didn't fall backward off the treadmill.

“Hey! What the heck!”

Gathering her up in his arms, he drew her off the treadmill and walked with her over to the bench.

“What are you doing?” She started fighting against him. “I wasn't finished.”

“You are.”

“Judd! Put me down.”

He set her down on her feet, and she slapped the palms of her hands against his chest. Then she stared down at her stinging hands in shock. Why had she done that?

He gently grasped hold of her hands, pulling them away.

Shoot. Had she hurt him?

“Judd, I ... I'm sorry.”

“You will not hurt yourself. I won't allow it.”

“I didn't hurt myself. Did I hurt you? I ... I didn't mean to hit you like that.”

“You didn’t hurt me. I barely felt it. But you could have harmed yourself. So you won’t do that again, understand?” He gave her a stern look.

“Of course not. I would never ... I’m so sorry.”

“Look at me.” He placed a finger under her chin. “You owed me that and worse for when I hit you.”

“That was an accident! You didn’t mean to. What I just did ...” She felt herself growing ill. “Maybe I’m like him. Perhaps I have his temper.”

“No!”

His answer was so loud that she jumped.

“You are not like him.”

“I’m his daughter,” she whispered.

“You are not like him. You say that again and I will spank you.”

She huffed out a breath. “I don’t think that’s a rule.”

“You’re speaking badly of yourself. And if you’re like him just because you’re his daughter, then I guess we’re all doomed to become our fathers.”

“What? No! Of course you aren’t. I just ... I can’t believe I did that.”

“You were upset,” he told her. He moved to a small fridge and pulled out two bottles of water.

“Yes, but I’ve never done that before. I’m so ashamed.”

“You’re bottling everything up. It’s bound to come out, eventually. You’re holding yourself back.”

It was what Owen had been saying to her. She swallowed heavily and reached out for the bottle he handed her. She gulped some down.

“You need to tell us what you want, Blue. We’re dumb bastards, we can’t read your mind. And keeping a lid on everything ... it’s not helping anyone.”

Damn. When did he get so insightful? She sat on a bench. He wasn't wrong, though. She was like a shaken can of soda, about to explode.

Closing her eyes, she leaned her forearms on her thighs and dropped her head down.

He was quiet for a long moment before grasping her chin and raising her head. She opened her eyes, looking into his as he crouched in front of her.

"We can do this, Baby Blue. But it's going to be hard. You know I find it difficult to open up. To let people see my vulnerable side. I've told you about Ester, but I also had this girlfriend in high school. Mary. We were both young, so I should have known it wouldn't work out. But I foolishly thought we had a future together. It wasn't until we were about to graduate that she told me that she was going off to college and I wasn't invited. That I'd been fun to mess around with, but she needed to grow up and find someone acceptable."

"Oh, Judd," she whispered. "I'm so sorry." A surge of anger filled her. "What a bitch! Have you told Owen about her?"

"Oh yeah, he's known for a long time. Don't worry, she's living a miserable life with a man who has a good family name and money, but doesn't give a shit about her. I actually feel sorry for her."

"I don't," she said fiercely. "She deserves a miserable life."

"And you deserve the world. You deserve better than me."

"That is not true. Do I have to spank you?"

"That's never happening. The only person getting spanked around here is you. Baby Blue, I don't like that you push yourself so hard."

"What do you mean?"

"You run like there are monsters chasing you."

She swallowed heavily. If he could open up a bit with her, then she could do the same, right?

“Because it feels like there are,” she whispered. “The only way to free my mind of everything is to run until I’m exhausted. The pain of my muscles burning ... it makes me feel alive.”

“And is that why you sometimes hurt yourself as well? To feel alive?”

“I don’t hurt myself.”

“I’ve seen you bite your lip or press your nails into the palm of your hand,” he pointed out.

“That’s not really hurting myself.”

He gave her a knowing look. “Any pain is unacceptable.”

“Oh, so no more spankings? Good to know.”

“That’s different and you know it, brat. At any time, you can say your safeword and stop a spanking or punishment. If you feel that they in any way relate to you hurting yourself, then they stop now.”

His fierceness took her by surprise, but it shouldn’t have.

“No, of course not. I don’t see them that way at all.” Her shoulders slumped. “I run to try and escape my problems. But pressing my nails into my palms ... that’s more to do with keeping myself under control. The pain can clear my head if I’m panicking or about to do something stupid in front of ...”

“Jonathan,” he said grimly. “He’s not here now, and I won’t allow him to hurt you anymore. I don’t want you doing that anymore, Baby Blue.”

“I don’t know if it’s that easy.”

“From now on, if you try to hurt yourself, we’ll be watching. You can come to any of us and tell us if you need a distraction or help or to talk. And you won’t be running again without one of us.”

“I ... I’ll try,” she whispered.

He placed his hands gently on her thighs, stirring her insides. He was so beautiful and damaged. Without thinking, she reached up to cup the side of his face.

He turned to her, kissing the palm of her hand. “I hope you can forgive me with time. That I can show you the man I want to be. For you.”



CHLOE STOOD IN HER BEDROOM.

Nerves flooded her. This was ridiculous. She shouldn't feel this anxious about being around them. After her run and talk with Judd, she'd come back for a shower. Owen had been up and working on his laptop when they'd walked in.

Turns out, he'd been playing possum earlier when he'd pretended to be asleep while she snuck out. Once he knew she was safe with Judd, he'd gone back to sleep for a while.

She took a deep breath.

You're holding back.

You need to tell them what you want.

They were all tip-toeing around each other. It had to stop.

She wanted the old guys back. The ones that were overprotective, bossy, and funny. She wanted her Daddies. She was tired of this distance between them.

Moving to the mirror, she checked her appearance several times. Sometimes she really hated being this way.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped out of the room.

“There she is!” Hux yelled, jumping to his feet and making her jump.

“Idiot!” Judd walked by and slapped his head.

“Ow! That hurt.”

“Don't see how when your head is made of concrete,” Judd muttered.

She had to smile. Okay, things might be better. They were acting more normal. Owen was on his laptop. Beck wasn't there, but he was likely in the gym.

“Come sit down!” Hux called out. “I’ve got some things planned for us today.”

Uh-oh.

Hux seemed to think he needed to keep them all busy and that would fix everything.

“Whatever it is, I can’t do it,” Owen said. “I have lives to ruin.”

She gaped at Owen. Um, what?

Before she could ask him what he was talking about, Beck walked in, holding a large bunch of white roses. “Hey, a guy was dropping these off, so I signed for them. They’re for Chloe.”

“Uh ... you got a secret admirer we don’t know about Chloe?” Hux asked.

“What?” Judd barked. “Who?”

“They’re from me,” Owen said. “And they’re for Amy Alpaca, not Chloe.”

She smiled at him, happiness filling her.

“Forgot you owed Amy some flowers. Is she happy with these, little darlin’?” Hux asked.

Something relaxed inside her. This felt more like the old them. She nodded. “Yes, she approves. They’re not the first bunch she’s received.”

“Sit down. I’ll order breakfast,” Judd said.

“Do you want a bath? I think they have a service here with rose petals and champagne and stuff like that. Sounds nice, right?” Hux asked. “Have you got plenty of bath stuff? We’ll get you more. Maybe we should go shopping?”

“I, um, well ... I don’t know.”

Jesus. Way to tell them what you really want.

She sat on the sofa as Beck mumbled something about having a shower. Hux sat next to her, going through everything the hotel offered. Judd just stared at her.

That wasn't off-putting or anything.

Beck returned just as room service delivered breakfast.

"What would you like to eat?" Judd asked.

"Oh, I'm not hungry."

They all stiffened. Even Owen shot her a look over his computer.

"You have to eat!" Judd barked.

Something eased inside her. This was more normal.

"Judd!" Beck growled.

"I'm going to book us a massage!" Hux said hastily.
"There's a couple's massage package. We could do that."

And have a stranger touch her?

You can do that. If it makes Hux happy.

"Sure."

"All right! I'll go organise that." He jumped to his feet and raced off.

Shoot.

You should tell him you don't want that.

Judd looked over the food with a frown, looking unhappy.

"You're hurting yourself," Beck said.

"What?"

He reached out suddenly for her hand. She jumped.

Fuck.

Idiot.

It was only because she was exhausted, and everything felt so weird. But Beck shied away from her like she'd hit him.

"I'm so sorry. I apologize. You don't want me to touch you. I get it." He moved away.

Oh, no! What had she done?

Jumping to her feet, she tried to run after him, but her toe slammed into the coffee table leg and she let out a cry of pain.

She grabbed her foot, hopping around.

Fuck, that hurt.

Shit!

They all came running, surrounding her but not touching her. Owen reached for her, but she shook her head at him.

“No! Don’t!”

She was aware of the silence. The way they all stared at her, stricken.

Damn it. She was fucking this up. She slid onto her ass, and a scream unlike any sort of sound she’d ever made erupted from her.

“Fuck! Call an ambulance!” Judd barked.

“No! No ambulance!” She glared at him. “I’m not hurt.”

“You sound like you’re hurt,” Hux said hesitantly.

“She might have broken her toe. Show me,” Owen said, crouching next to her.

“My toe isn’t broken. I don’t need an ambulance. I need ... I need ...”

“What do you need?” Hux asked, crouched in front of her.

She stared around at them all, just so damn frustrated with everything.

“I need you to cancel that damn couple’s massage.” The words just burst out of her.

Hux gave her a surprised look that turned to hurt. “All right.”

“No, you don’t understand. Because I am so fucking bad at this!”

“Bad at what?” Judd asked, looking bewildered. “How can you be bad at getting a massage?”

“Not the massage! At all of this! I don’t know how to be in a relationship. I don’t know when I’m saying the right thing or the wrong thing. I don’t know what you want or what to do to make everything all right! I’m so damn lost and angry and frustrated and sad. But I don’t know how to tell any of you that.”

“Seems like you’re telling us now,” Beck said quietly.

What? Well. She guessed she was.

“Keep going,” Owen urged.

She heaved for breath. Well, what did she have to lose? If they wanted to walk away, then this was never meant to be.

Please don’t let them walk away.

Because she couldn’t live without them.

She turned to Judd. “I miss bossy Judd. I miss my Grumpzilla.”

His eyebrows rose. “Your what?”

“Um, well, oops. Forgot you didn’t know about that. My nickname for you was Grumpzilla.”

“Grumpzilla? Jesus.”

“You’re ridiculously overprotective and bossy, but I like that. It means you care. And I don’t need all of this.” She ran her hand through the air, indicating the hotel. “It feels scary to me. People coming in every day. It doesn’t feel stable and I think I need stable.”

They all shot looks at each other.

“You don’t like it here?” Judd asked.

Shoot. Was she hurting his feelings?

“Tell us the truth,” Beck urged, leaning forward. “Don’t stop now.”

“You’re not really talking to me, though,” she pointed out. “You barely even look at me. I didn’t jump before because I thought you would hurt me. It’s because since everything happened with Jonathan, you’ve barely touched me.”

“I ... I ... shoot,” he said.

“I didn’t mean to react like that. I want you to touch me. It was just ... a surprise.”

“I understand.”

Then she turned to Hux. “And you.”

He pointed to himself. “Me? You don’t want a massage. Understood.”

“I want the massage. I just want you to do it, not some stranger!”

Hux’s eyes widened. “Me?”

She groaned. “I can’t believe I just said that.”

“You want me to massage you? I can do that. I can totally do that. I’ll do it every day.”

She smiled. “I won’t say no. But I just want you to be yourself. All of you. I don’t need fancy hotels and lots of clothes and all the other stuff. I just want us all to be like it was before all of this. I know that’s not fair of me. I know there’s stuff to work through. But I can’t relax. I feel like I’m constantly messing up and it’s stressing me out.”

“You all need to work this out and stop stressing her,” Owen barked.

“Thanks, Owen,” she said dryly. “Can we all just relax a bit? I miss Judd trying to feed me vegetables and bossing me around. Hux cuddling me and making me laugh. Beck seeming to read my mind and knowing what I need before I do. I’m so tired. My Little wants her Daddies and I want my guys. Do you think it’s possible that we could get past all of this and just go back to how things were?”

“No,” Beck said gently. “I think we should move forward and make things even better.”

She gave him a grateful smile.

Beck moved over to her. To her shock, he slowly and carefully lifted her up and then settled on the sofa with her on

his lap. He hugged her tight, and she felt some of the tension she'd been carrying ease.

Hux moved next to him, picking up her feet. He carefully examined her toe.

“Wiggle it for me.”

She wiggled it back and forth. He sighed dramatically. “It’s the worst case I’ve ever seen.”

“What?” She was aware of Judd rising and moving to where the food was.

“Of littlepiggyitis,” he said. “There’s only one thing for it.”

“Littlepiggyitis? What are you talking about?”

“Here we go.” He grabbed her big toe. “This little piggy went to market. This little piggy stayed at home. This little piggy ate roast beef and this little piggy had none, and this little piggy went wee-wee-wee all the way home.” He tickled along her foot and up her leg to the back of her knee, making her laugh hysterically and lean back into Beck.

“Stop! Stop!”

“Does it feel better?” Hux asked seriously.

“Much! Much better! Please stop!”

“Whew. That was a close one. We almost lost at least one of the piggies.”

“My toes are not piggies.”

“They sure are.”

“Beck, turn her around. She needs to eat.” Judd sat on the coffee table as Beck slid her around on his lap.

“Oh, I’m not sure I need anything.”

Judd just sent her a look. “Tough luck. You’re eating.”

“You’re in trouble now,” Hux sang as he jumped up to get himself a plate of food.

“Why?” she asked. For being honest?

“You basically just told Judd that you like his demanding ways. He’s going to be bossing you around all the time.”

Shoot.

She looked at Judd, who gave her a slow nod back.

Uh-oh.

“Now, open.”

She was too shocked to protest. Instead, she parted her lips and let him feed her some muesli. Beck tightened his arms around her, kissing her cheek gently.

“Good girl for telling us what you need.”



JUDD STEPPED out onto the balcony of the expensive hotel suite.

Chloe was in watching a movie with the others.

Hux stepped out about five minutes later. “Got it sorted.”

“Good.”

He’d pulled the other man aside before the movie started and asked him to find somewhere for them to stay. Somewhere they’d all be comfortable.

“We have a place rented for three weeks. And there’s a service for Littles here, you tell them what they like and they’ll set up a playroom for you.”

“You’ve ordered everything?”

“Yep. But they need a few hours to set it all up.”

Beck and Owen walked out.

“Baby Blue?” he asked.

“She fell asleep,” Owen told him. “She’s exhausted.”

Judd nodded. “Good. She needs to start eating better. I’d rather cook for her myself than keep ordering room service. Then I can be sure of what she’s eating.”

“I’ve ordered plenty of food,” Hux said. “Even the nasty green stuff you like to feed us all the time.”

“They’re called vegetables,” Judd said dryly. “I’m the reason you’re able to go to the bathroom regularly.”

“I’m going to get that on a T-shirt. *Judd: The man who makes me poop.*”

Dear Lord, help him.

He stared around at them. “You’re all amazing men. Have I told you that recently? I’m glad to have you as my brothers.”

Hux gaped at him. “Uh, no.”

Beck gave him a small smile, while Owen wasn’t giving his thoughts away.

“Well, it’s true. I know I haven’t been much of a brother or leader since Ester left us. I’m ashamed of how I’ve been behaving. I should have done better by all of us.”

“It’s not your fault, Judd,” Beck told him. “You’re a good man too. And I think we’re going to all be okay.”

“All of you just need to learn how to understand women,” Owen said.

They all gaped at him.

The thing is ... he was serious.

“Right,” Beck said. “Like you do.”

“Yep. I’m the one sleeping in her bed each night.”

Well. They couldn’t argue with that.

They had to be the men she needed. The Daddies she needed.

Simple, right?

When Judd parked the car outside the house they'd rented, Beck jumped out and opened the door to where Chloe sat. She was resting against Hux, the lucky bastard.

Her eyes were closed as she was cuddled into his chest.

Beck undid her belt and drew her out, resting her against his chest with an arm under her butt. She nestled into him with her mouth pressed to his neck.

He was determined to show her that he could be the man she needed.

"We're here, Freckles."

"Tired." She'd fallen asleep again on the way here. He was slightly worried by how tired she was. But he guessed she had a lot of sleep to catch up on.

"I know, but we need to get you some dinner before you can sleep." That was the other problem. She needed more fuel.

Hux unlocked the door using a code, and they all walked in.

"I'll get started on dinner," Judd said. He ran his hand over her hair. "Any requests, Baby Blue?"

"I don't want anything." Her voice sounded higher. Her Little was peeking out and relief filled him. She was starting to feel more comfortable with them again.

"Do you want to be in Little headspace tonight?" he asked.

She hesitated.

“Tell us the truth.” They would have to constantly check in with her. To make sure that she was really telling them what she wanted and not what she thought they wanted to hear.

“Is it weird to do that?”

“Of course not,” Beck reassured her. “I think being in Little headspace will help you relax and we love taking care of you and your Little.”

She sighed, slumping against him.

“But you need to eat, Freckles,” Beck said firmly. “If you don’t think you can eat, then the alternative is a protein drink in a baby bottle.”

She nodded.

“That’s what you want?” he asked to clarify.

“Yes.”

“All right, Baby Blue,” Judd said. “But tomorrow, you start eating some real food. Even if it’s just little meals, okay?”

“Okie-dokie.”

Beck carried her down the hallway.

“Nursery is along here,” Hux said, coming toward them. “Does she want to sleep there?”

“No!” she cried, reaching backward to grab Hux and haul him close.

She had her arm around Hux’s neck so tight that it looked like she was strangling him. But Beck was certain that the other man wasn’t going to complain.

“Okay, little darlin’. You don’t have to sleep anywhere you don’t want to. What would you like to wear to bed? A onesie? Pajamas? There are some cute ones with alpacas on them.”

“Amy Alpaca!” she said with a gasp. “And Tickles!”

“We’ll get them for you,” Beck told her. “Don’t worry. What do you want to wear?”

“I dunno,” she said, sounding tired.

“All right, Freckles. We’ll make all the decisions.” Beck shifted her to his other arm, grateful that he was strong enough to carry her. In fact, he felt like he could carry her for hours and never grow tired. Of course, she was pretty light.

“She might be happier wearing one of our T-shirts,” Hux said.

“Yeah. Beck T-shirt,” she said.

Her Little side made him so happy. But he wished she would call him Daddy again.

“It’ll swim on you. I’m a big guy.” Something that had haunted him since he was a kid.

“Nope. You’re perfect.”

“Okay, Freckles,” he replied softly. “What my girl wants, she gets.”

“The main bedroom is down here,” Hux said. “She can take that bed.”

“I don’t want to be alone.”

He shot a gaze to Hux. “We can sleep on the floor.”

“With me.”

Her Little didn’t seem to have the same hang-ups about demanding what she wanted.

“Let’s get you dressed and on the potty,” Beck said. “Judd will have your bottle ready by now.”

He followed Hux to the bedroom. It was a huge room with an outlook over the ocean. Hux had chosen well.

“Should we give her a bath first?” Hux asked in concern.

She made a muffled noise, and he looked down to see she had her thumb in her mouth.

“Not tonight, I think. Maybe tomorrow.” He laid her on her back on the bed and she let out a cry, reaching for him.

“Hush, Freckles. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Beck! Please!” She reached up for him.

“Put her on your lap, and I’ll strip her,” Hux told him.

Not a bad idea.

“Grab one of my T-shirts from my bag,” he directed. “And then, go get one of the pacifiers. She might like it tonight.”

“No! Want this one.” She pulled at his T-shirt.

Fuck.

He stiffened. Hux shot him a knowing look.

“Please, Beck. Please.”

He closed his eyes. He really had to get over this. It was ridiculous. He worked out every day. He ate healthy.

You’re no longer that boy. Bullied. Ridiculed.

“Little darlin’, Beck doesn’t like to take off his T-shirt.”

“No,” he said. “It’s okay. She can wear it.”

Hux gave him a surprised look, but then nodded in respect. Beck settled her on his lap and Hux worked on her shoes first. Then he drew off her skirt before taking off her blouse and bra.

“Come here, little darlin’.” Hux picked her up while Beck stood, removing his T-shirt, and then pulling it over her head.

She stared up at him and he braced himself.

“Yummy. Up.” She held her arms up.

He breathed out a sigh, relief filling him. Then he picked her up and settled her on his hip. She rubbed his chest lovingly. “Sexy. Don’t put a shirt back on? Please?”

“Umm. Okay. For you.” He walked with her into the bathroom and set her down in front of the toilet.

She made a murmuring noise of dissent.

“You’ve got to go potty before bed,” he told her, reaching under the T-shirt, which was enormous on her, and drawing down her panties.

Then he sat her on the toilet.

She started humming. “Beck, sing to me.”

“What?” He gave her a startled look.

“Don’t want you to hear me pee.”

“It doesn’t matter if I hear you pee.” He crouched down. “I’m your Daddy.” At least he hoped she still saw him that way.

“Please.” She gave him the sweetest, pouting look.

“All right, Freckles.” He started singing a song.

She smiled sleepily. “I like that song.”

“It’s one my Ma used to sing to me.”

“I’d like to meet her one day.”

“I’m sure she’d like that too.”

When she was finished, he helped her clean up before setting her on the bathroom counter. He grabbed the toothbrush that Hux had laid out for her and put toothpaste on it.

“Open.”

She parted her lips, and he brushed her teeth before picking her up again.

Unsurprisingly, Hux and Owen were on the bed. Judd was standing awkwardly by, holding the bottle.

“Got the pacifier,” Hux said, rolling out of bed. “Need to brush my teeth.”

“Me too,” Owen said.

“I’ve made some food if you want it,” Judd offered him.

Beck shook his head. What he really wanted was to cuddle up with his girl and make sure she got some sleep.

“You want to give her the bottle, man?” he asked Judd.

“Nah. You do it this time. She looks happy in your arms. But here, I’ll help you.” Judd took hold of her as Beck climbed

into bed. Then he laid her on Beck's lap and handed him the bottle.

It had alpacas on it.

Hux had done well.

"Open, Freckles," he murmured.

"Always open your mouth and suck," she mumbled. "Oh, I owes Daddy Owen a blow job. He's got blue balls."

Beck snorted as Owen walked out of the bathroom. "You sure do. Thought about jacking off in the bathroom, but I'd rather have your mouth on me. Tomorrow."

"Ew," Hux said. "You were going to do it while I was in there with you?"

"Nothing you haven't seen before, I'm sure," Owen replied. "You might have learned some tips."

Hux rolled his eyes at that. "Little darlin', do you want us to sleep in your room?"

"Yes. In the bed."

"All of us?" Beck asked.

"Please. Sleep better with all of you."

"Then that's what you get," Judd said firmly. "All of us."

Beck nodded.

Chloe started sucking on the bottle as she lay against Beck's arm. Her eyes closed, a look of bliss coming over her face.

"Good girl. That's it. Drink it down," he murmured to her. "Then you can go to sleep."

She fell asleep when the bottle was three-quarters done, but he figured that was pretty good. He laid down on the bed with her on his chest. Then he took the pacifier and fed it into her mouth.

He didn't think he'd ever felt this content.

Chloe woke up feeling more rested than she ever had in her life.

She was lying on top of something warm and wide. And there was something in her mouth. She drew it out of her mouth, looking down at it.

A pacifier. With an alpaca on the front.

How on earth had they gotten that? And so fast?

“Good morning, Freckles. How are you?” Beck asked.

She sat up quickly, her right leg digging in between his legs. He let out a pained groan.

Oh my God!

Had she just hit him in the balls? Shit. Crap.

“I’m so sorry! Oh no! Are you all right? Beck?” She scrambled off him, then leaned over him, unsure what to do. “What do I do? What do you need? Ice! I’ll get ice.”

“No! Wait! Chloe!”

She ignored him, running out of the bedroom. Where was she? Confusion filled her. This wasn’t their house in Escana. Wait. They were in a house they’d rented. It seemed nice. But where was the kitchen? Where was everyone?

“Help! Emergency! Balls emergency!”

“Freckles, wait for me. Hey!”

She twirled as Beck grabbed her arm.

“I’m trying to find the kitchen or the others. Where is everyone? Oh, your poor nuts.”

“My balls are just fine,” he said. “They’re maybe feeling some sympathy for Owen and his blue balls. But they’ll survive. Come here.” He drew her into his chest, and that’s when she realized he wasn’t wearing a T-shirt.

“You’re half-naked.”

An awkward look crossed his face. He looked almost ... ashamed or shy? She wasn’t sure. But she had the urge to rub her hand all over his pecs. Which is exactly what she did. He was wide. His abs were so defined. She gave in to her desire and leaned down to her lick her way up from his belly button to between his pecs.

“Jesus, baby.”

“You’re so freaking gorgeous.”

“I’m not. But thank you.”

She frowned, not liking that answer.

He picked her up, holding her against his chest. A small grimace crossed his face. Had that caused him pain?

“You should put me down.”

“Not happening.” He moved her to one hip and walked with her down the hallway.

“But it’s hurting you.”

“Pfft. I could be half dead and I’d still want to carry you around. Not sure I’m going to let you walk again.”

She rolled her eyes at his theatrics.

They entered the kitchen, and he put her on the counter. Grabbing her chin, he studied her. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.”

He gave her a stern look. “Really? And remember, you need to tell me the truth when I ask you a question.”

“Sorry,” she whispered. “I’m used to ignoring my needs. I’m pretty good. Nervous. I don’t want to do the wrong thing.”

“You can’t do anything wrong as long as you’re honest and talk to us. And we need to learn to do the same.”

She gave him a small smile and he kissed her lightly.

Moving away, he opened the fridge and drew out a plate of cut-up fruit and some small bowls of yogurt.

“Wow. Those look amazing.”

“Judd made them for us before he left.”

“Left?” she asked. “Where did he go? Is he coming back?” Fear filled her.

“Whoa.” He turned away from where he’d been putting some muesli into small bowls. “He’s coming back. They all are. They’re just giving us some time together alone. And then you’ll have some alone time with each of them.”

“And all of us will spend time together?”

“Of course.” He ran his finger over her freckles. “Okay with you? Do you want to spend time alone with me?”

“Yes. More than anything.”

“Yeah? You sure you can forgive me for not treating you better?”

“It was my fault,” she whispered.

“Nope. Not all on you. And we all agreed that you should punish us how you see fit.”

Her eyes widened. Actually, she had something to ask of them ... and maybe Beck was the one to do it.

“Um, well, I think I just did punish you.” She winced. “Even if it was an accident.”

“You should ask for more than that.” He laid the food out on the island. Then he shifted her to a stool. “I’ve forgotten a few things from the playroom.” He eyed her. “Stay there.”

“Okay.”

As he walked away, though, she slid off the stool. She was busting. She raced through the house to where she’d seen a powder room, and she popped in to pee, sighing with relief.

After cleaning up, she made her way back to the kitchen to find Beck standing there, with his arms crossed over his chest. He'd put on a T-shirt which was a shame.

Seriously. The man should walk around shirtless all the time. It was a crime against humanity that he didn't. Well, a crime against her eyes, anyway.

"What part of 'stay there' didn't you understand, Freckles?" he asked sternly.

"Umm. Sorry?"

"You don't sound very sorry. When I say stay put, I mean that you should stay put. I'm starting to see that Owen's idea of a leash isn't a terrible one."

"Yes, it is! It's a horrible idea."

He crooked a finger at her, and she dragged her feet. "I needed to pee."

"Then you should have told me. I would have taken you. After breakfast, that's five minutes in the corner and then you're going to write fifty lines stating that you will stay put when I tell you to."

"Beck!" she grumbled.

"No moaning about it, either."

He lifted her onto the stool and then put a bib around her. Was that what he'd gone to get? Yikes. She didn't think she was a messy eater.

Then he mixed yogurt into the muesli and spooned some up. "Open."

She knew better than to argue. And she was already on thin ice. She let him feed her several spoonfuls before shaking her head. Then he fed her a few slices of melon and a couple of grapes.

"No more."

He gave her a worried look. "All right. I'll make you a bottle after your bath. You can do your five minutes in the

corner while I finish eating.” He lifted her down off the stool and pointed to an empty corner of the room.

“Off you go.”

She sighed and stomped her way into the corner.

“And because you stomped, you can also pull down your panties and poke out your bare bottom. Lift the shirt.”

Well. This sucked.



BECK MASSAGED the shampoo into her hair, loving the sighs of pleasure she made.

Damn. His dick was getting hard. But he ignored that asshole. Now wasn't the time. He'd finished getting dressed while she wrote her lines. Poor baby had needed a bit of motivation to write them in the form of a couple of smacks to her ass.

“Head back,” he ordered as he filled up a cup of warm water from the sink and poured it over her hair.

“You're very good at this,” she informed him as he worked conditioner into her hair.

“Washing hair?”

“Yeah. And taking care of me.”

“I enjoy taking care of you in all ways,” he told her. “Whatever you need, I'm here for you, Freckles.”

“Thank you.”

He washed out the conditioner before turning off the shower and carrying her from the shower to dry her off.

“Beck?”

“Yes, Freckles?”

“Will you punish me?”

“I already did. Or don't you remember the lines?”

“Ew. No way I could forget them. No, I don’t mean lines. I mean, will you spank me until I cry?”

He finished drying her off and carried her into the bedroom. He laid her down on the bed, taking her in. God, she was gorgeous.

“Explain.”

“I just ... I haven’t cried since Jonathan rescued me.”

He stared at her in shock. “What?”

“I can’t ... I don’t know why.”

“And you think a spanking would change that? I don’t know, Freckles. That doesn’t sound very healthy to me.”

“I just ... I feel so guilty about not telling you what Jonathan asked me to do. It’s like a lead ball sitting in my tummy. It hurts.”

Fuck. He didn’t want her to hurt.

He drew her panties up her legs and then grabbed the outfit that she’d picked out from the playroom closet. She’d been so excited when she’d seen everything that the service Hux hired had put in there. A bed that converted to a crib. Change table and rocking chair. So many toys and outfits. Hux had gone a bit nuts.

But it was worth whatever they had to pay.

The outfit was a tulle skirt with silver stars on it and a bright pink T-shirt with *Princess* across it. He’d found a tiara and some cute hair ties to do her hair.

“Really?” he asked.

“Yes. Please. I really think it would help.”

He helped her sit so he could put her T-shirt on. It had a built-in bra, so he didn’t bother with one.

“I’ll talk to the others, okay? And I want you to really think about it.”

Her face dropped.

“Hey, it’s not a no.” He gripped her chin, tilting her head back. “All right?”

“All right.”

“Now, let’s go see what we can find to play with. And I’ll do your hair.”

They ended up back in the playroom with her doing her doll’s hair while he brushed hers and put it up into two cute ponytails. She only complained that he was too rough a few times.

Then he sat on the floor, and she handed him over another doll. “Do her hair, Daddy.”

He stared at her in shock.

“What is it?” she whispered.

“Um, you called me Daddy.”

“Was I not meant to?”

“No, you are. I mean, I ... I was hoping you would. You hadn’t called me Daddy since we left Escana.”

Her eyes widened, and she winced. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, no. Don’t be sorry. It’s nothing to be sorry about, understand?”

“Yes. I understand.”

“Now where were we?”

“You have to do Maggie-Mae’s hair, Daddy.”

“Please,” he said. “Someone is forgetting their manners.”

She cringed. “I’m so sorry.”

“Hey, it’s not a big deal. Sometimes Little girls need reminders about their manners. Us Daddies understand that. Okay?”

She smiled. “All right, Daddy. Now, please do Maggie-Mae’s hair. It’s very messy, and she doesn’t like it.”

“We can’t have that. Is she hungry? Does she need some food?”

“No, she doesn’t get hungry much.”

“Hmm, you don’t get hungry much either, do you?” he said carefully, not wanting to push too hard. “Is that something to do with Jonathan?”

She bit her lip, and he reached up to free it.

“Hey, don’t hurt yourself.”

She sighed and rubbed her face against his chest. “I guess it is. Jonathan controlled everything about my life. What I ate was one thing I could control. So I started eating less and less. And now ... I just don’t get that hungry.”

“Do you need to talk to someone about that?” He wanted her to have whatever she needed but he didn’t want to pressure her.

“Maybe,” she agreed. “But not now?”

“All right. I’ll remember to talk to you about that later.”

“You’re a really good Daddy.” She patted his face.

“I’ve had a love-hate relationship with food for years, so I kind of understand.”

“You have?” She straightened and slid around on his lap so she faced him. “Does it have something to do with why you don’t like to take off your top?”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat. “Thing is ... I was a really chubby kid. My Ma is a great cook, and I liked to eat. She used to say that good food was like a hug. And it was. I didn’t think anything of it until I got older and had to go to a bigger school. The kids there weren’t nice about my size.”

SADNESS AND SYMPATHY filled her at his words.

“I’m so sorry. What assholes. I’d tell you that you’re sexy and gorgeous. But I know that sometimes it doesn’t matter when the voices start getting to you. But you are. You’re so freaking delicious that I want to constantly touch you, be near you, lick you all over so everyone knows you’re mine.”

He huffed out a laugh.

“I’m sorry those kids were little assholes. I know what it’s like to be bullied and it’s awful. It starts to get to you. Eats away at your self-esteem and confidence. And it leaves lingering tendrils in your brain that follow you throughout your life.”

“You said the kids at school picked on you too,” he said.

“Yeah. I was always the kid that had clothes that didn’t fit right with holes in them.” She shrugged. “It wasn’t my fault, I get that. But I now worry a lot about what others think of me.”

“You’re the most beautiful person I’ve ever met. Inside and out. People can be nasty. But you and I ... we’re survivors. And we’re strong. Understand?”

“Sometimes I don’t feel strong,” she whispered. “I have nightmares and doubts and everything piles on top of me.”

“That’s when you find me or one of the others. Lean on us. Understand? And I don’t think that you’re going to be sleeping alone anytime soon.”

“This is really what you want, Beck? Me?”

“More than anything. I want you with us. We’re going to show you how serious we are about you.”

“I’m serious about all of you, too. I really am.”

“I know you are.” He held out his arms, and she climbed into his lap.

Where she belonged.

A sense of safety and home filled her. Maybe she might have survived without them in her life. But it wouldn’t have been living.

“Hold me, Daddy Beck.”

“Always. You and me, Freckles,” he whispered. “We’re going to fight those voices. We’re going to conquer them. Because we’re warriors.”

“We are.”

Do it.

Be brave.

“I love you, Beck.” She tensed, waiting for what he might say in reply.

“Love you more than life, Chloe. My precious girl.”

For the first time, she thought she might just be strong enough to conquer the past.

With them helping her.

Hux woke up to find his girl staring at him.

What day of their Marjarsom was it? Like day eight or something. And she was slowly starting to trust in them. Just like they were doing the same with her.

“Hello, little darlin’. Aren’t you beautiful in the morning.”

“Hardly,” she snorted.

Oh no, he wasn’t having that. Leaning in, he kissed her. It was his day with her. Beck had his day, and she was definitely more at ease with him now. But today it was his turn. And he was determined to show her how much she meant to him. He wanted to show her that he could be the man she needed. And a Daddy to her Little.

She suddenly drew back. “I probably have morning breath!” She slammed her hand over her mouth.

“Don’t want me to kiss your mouth ... that’s okay. I can kiss you elsewhere.” He moved slowly, so she could object if she wanted. Reaching under the T-shirt she was wearing, he cupped her breast. He kissed down her neck.

“Oh. Ohhh,” she murmured.

God, she was gorgeous. He loved the sounds she made when he touched her. He drew the T-shirt up over her head, staring down at her.

Delicious.

Dropping his head, he lapped at her nipple before scraping his teeth over it. She arched up with a cry.

She liked that, did she?

He sucked the nipple into his mouth to soothe it. Then he moved to her other nipple, doing the same.

“Such a good girl for me. If I touch you, will I find that you’re wet for me? Do you want me?”

“Yes. Yes!”

He moved down and stripped off her panties before parting her legs so he could settle between them. He drew the lips of her pussy apart. God, yes, she was wet.

“This is all for me.” Satisfaction filled him. This right here was something he was good at.

Making his girl scream in pleasure.

He leaned in to lick her pussy.

Suddenly, she froze.

“Oh God! Wait, Hux! Stop!”

Shit. Fuck! Too quick, asshole.

He was reading everything all wrong. He sat up, worry flooding him. What was he thinking? Of course, she didn’t want sex with him yet.

“Little darlin’, I’m so sorry. I—”

“I need a shower first.” She bit her lip worriedly.

“Hey, stop that.” He ran his finger over her lip. “There’s nothing to stress about.” Was that really the problem? Or was she using it as an excuse? “And I really don’t care that you haven’t had a shower.”

“I do.” She wouldn’t meet his gaze.

He knew that His Lordass had always wanted her to look and be perfect. But he wanted her to know she didn’t have to be that way with them.

Baby steps.

“That’s your only objection? That you haven’t showered? I wasn’t moving too fast? You can tell me if I was.”

She squirmed on the bed. “No, you weren’t moving too fast. I wanted you. A lot.”

“Well, if your only objection is not having showered, then I can help with that.”

Getting out of bed, he picked her up and carried her into the bathroom. Setting her down on the counter, he turned the shower on.

“Let’s get clean, little darlin’, so I can mess you all up again.”



OH, Lord.

He was driving her insane. He’d washed every inch of her and now she felt like her nerve endings were on fire. Her need for him had taken over her.

Hux pushed her legs apart as he kneeled on the shower floor. He stared up at her.

“Sure, little darlin’?” he asked.

She was panting heavily, barely able to stand. “If you stop, I’ll kill you.”

He grinned up at her. “There’s that mean streak.”

Before she could object, his tongue lashed at her pussy, flicking her clit.

Holy. Heck.

She moaned as she could feel her orgasm rush through her. She was so close.

“Hux. Hux!” she cried out as she shuddered her way through her release. He kept lapping at her as though he wanted to send her flying again. But she was on the edge. She couldn’t take anymore. “Please. No more.”

He stood and licked his lips, staring down at her with a charming grin. “Fuck, you taste good. Going to need a fix of that every morning.”

She could feel herself blushing. He was insane.

“I don’t taste that good,” she muttered.

He placed his hands on the shower wall, caging her in. “Careful, I might be the easygoing one, but that doesn’t mean I’ll let you get away with breaking the rules. And saying that you don’t taste that good ... well, that sounds very close to putting yourself down to me.”

She eyed him, wondering how serious he really was. “Sorry.”

“Make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Yes, Sir.”

His eyes lit up. “Good girl. Because you are beautiful and delicious and everything I could ever want.”

Turning her so she faced the shower wall, he kissed along the back of her shoulders. “I’m going to fuck you now.”

“God, yes.” She wanted him inside her so badly.

He bent down slightly and entered her from behind. She gasped at the feel of him fucking her. He didn’t build up to it. He just took her hard and fast.

“Fuck yes, my darlin’. You are amazing. Sexy. Courageous. Sweet. Delicious. Fuck. I cannot last!” He thrust inside her several more times before he found his own release, his breathing coming heavily.

Boneless, she turned after he slid from her and wrapped her arms around him.

After a few moments, he started washing her again. “Let’s get a move on, little darlin’. Lots to do. Not much time to do it.”

“What are we doing today?”

“Why today, little darlin’, we’re going to take over the world!”

“What?” She gaped at him.

“Joking. But we’re going to have a lot of fun.”



“RIGHT, you are all ready. Let’s go!”

“Go where?” She glanced down at herself. Hux had dressed her in a light jumpsuit with a T-shirt underneath and sneakers that he’d tied up for her in double knots.

It still blew her mind that they’d bought her all this stuff. That they’d rented this gorgeous house and filled a playroom full of things just for her.

Still ... he couldn’t mean that they were going out, right?

Except he now held a sippy cup with a protein drink in his other hand and over his arm was a large blue bag with yellow ducks on it that he was calling his baby bag. In it, he’d packed a second outfit.

He’d also packed a fluffy blanket, Amy Alpaca, Tickles the bear, a pacifier and a bottle and bib. Oh, and snacks.

Like she was a real baby.

The only thing missing was actual diapers. He had taken a second look at the training pants in the playroom, though.

Good Lord.

“We’re going to have fun. Let’s go.” He held out his free hand to her.

“But I can’t go out like this.” She was trying hard not to obsess about looking perfect. And it was pretty easy when they were home. But not out there ... where people might judge her.

“Hey, look at me. Shoot, you’re panicking. Little darlin’, look at me.” He put down the protein drink and cupped her

face between his hands. “Breathe nice and slow. Follow my breathing. That’s it.”

Her breathing started to calm.

“Now, do you really think I would do anything to embarrass you? To hurt you?”

“No, of course not. It’s just, I ...”

“I know that His Lordass used to put you down, the way you dressed and acted, but I’m not him. And I would never do that. I wouldn’t let anyone else do that, either.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I don’t think you’re him. I just ... it’s hard to break a habit, you know? It’s like a nervous tic or something. Like the way some people have to check the oven is turned off three times before they leave the house.”

“I know. As long as you know that we think you’re amazing and beautiful no matter how you look. But do you trust me not to let anyone hurt you?”

She let out a breath. She knew he wouldn’t let anyone make fun of her or make her feel less.

She also had to build some confidence in herself.

“Yes.”

He bent down and kissed her. “That means so much to me, little darlin’. Come on, let’s go have some fun.”

He led her downstairs to where the car was parked in the garage and opened the backseat of the car. She peered in at the booster seat. “What is that?”

“Looks like Mr. Safety has been at work. It’s a booster seat to keep you safe.” He put the baby bag in the backseat.

“I don’t need that

“Judd obviously disagrees since I’m sure he put it in here. And I’m not going against Judd. Especially when it comes to safety.”

She huffed out a breath. “I have to sit in the back?”

“Yep,” he said cheerfully. He picked her up. “Watch your head.” He settled her in the seat, then drew the seatbelt over her before kissing her nose. Then he handed her the sippy cup. “That needs to be all gone by the time we get to our destination.”

She wrinkled her nose but nodded.

As they drove, he put some children’s songs on and sang along to them, uncaring that he had a terrible voice. She spent so much time giggling that she barely even noticed the drive.

When he drove underneath the small gray building, she looked around curiously. He parked, then turned to her.

“I thought I said that sippy cup had to be empty by the time we got here,” he said sternly.

Crap!

She’d forgotten. She hastily drunk it down, but it was hard to drink it fast.

Hux got out and grabbed the diaper bag before coming around to collect her. “Don’t drink too fast. You’ll give yourself a tummy ache. You can bring it with you.”

He undid her belt, then lifted her out.

“I can’t carry it,” she said. “Someone might see.”

“Nobody here cares. I promise. Just give me a little trust.”

She let out a deep breath. “I trust you.”

Relief and happiness filled his face. “Good girl.” He took hold of her and led her to an elevator. She drank down some more of her drink. Nerves filled her.

She trusted him.

He wouldn’t humiliate her.

They stepped out into a vast room, and she glanced around in amazement. It was like a huge indoor playground. But all of the equipment was oversized.

For Little boys and girls. She turned to see him smiling. “Like it?”

“Uh-huh. I can play?”

He kissed her. “You can play.”

She tried to take off, but he tugged her back. “Wait. There’re a few rules first.”

“Rules schmules.”

“Chloe,” he said sternly.

She stared at him wide-eyed.

“That’s usually my line.” His grin was back, and he winked at her.

“Mr. Coalsen?”

She jumped in surprise, then turned to see a smiling man standing there.

“Sorry, little one, didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Hi, yep, that’s me,” Hux said.

“Good. I’m glad you’re here. You have full use of the facility for the next two hours. There are refreshments at the café, or you’re welcome to eat your own. Please, no shoes on the trampolines. If you need to use the bathrooms, we have several family rooms. There are spare diapers if needed. Also, there are two discipline rooms at the back. Help yourself to any implements in there. Have a good time.” He turned away and left.

“Discipline rooms? Implements?” she asked.

“I guess some Littles act up when they’re here,” he said with a grin. “Better behave yourself.”

Yikes.

He set the diaper bag down on one of the seats lining the outside of the room. “Want your shoes off or on?”

“Off! Off!”

“Sit down then, so Daddy can take them off.”

She sat impatiently, and he took them off as well as her cute alpaca socks.

“Now, rules.”

“I just heard them.”

“No, those were their rules. These are mine. If you want to go up on any of the slides or the climbing apparatus, then Daddy has to go with you.”

“I’ll be fine on the smaller slides,” she grumbled. Sure, she didn’t like heights, but those shorter slides were barely off the ground.

“Do I need to go test out that discipline room already,” he said in a warning voice.

“Why? Do you need a spankin’? You are a bit naughty.”

“Not me, brat. Behave. Also, you’re not to be out of my eyesight.”

“But we have the place to ourselves.” She hated how much that likely cost and knew he’d done it for her comfort.

“Still a rule. Also, you’re not allowed to eat anything at the café.”

“What?” That was a weird one. They were always trying to get her to eat.

“Judd made me swear I’d only feed you what he made. But if you’re a good girl, I’ll get you a coffee for the drive home.”

“You’re on! Now, can I go play?”

“Yep. Let’s play!”



CHLOE WASN’T sure she’d ever smiled this much. Her cheeks were actually hurting as she climbed the ladder for the slide. Whoa. This was further up than she’d thought.

Hux had just gotten a phone call and was facing away from her.

Too late, she remembered that there was a reason she wasn’t to go up the slide. But now she was stuck. She couldn’t

go up or down. She needed her Daddy!

“Daddy Hux!”

Hux turned, a look of horror filling his face. “I’m coming, little darlin’.”

He chucked his phone to one side and raced over to her. He climbed the ladder and was soon behind her, his body attempting to warm hers.

“Little darlin’, what were you thinking? It’s too high for you. You’re trembling.”

“I’s sorry, Daddy Hux. I wanna get down.”

“All right. You want to go down the slide? Daddy will go with you. I’ll take care of you.”

“Okay.”

“Right, move your hands up one at a time. No, it’s all right. I’m not going to let you fall. That’s it. Good girl. I have you.”

And he did. One arm was wrapped around her waist, the other holding onto the rail as he guided her up. Then he had her sit, and he sat behind her, his legs bracketing her.

“Ready. One. Two. Three.”

She felt a little sick from how high it was, but then there was a rush of excitement as they slid down.

“Wooo!” she cried out as they rushed down the slide.

At the bottom, he turned her on his lap, holding her tight. “Are you okay? Are you still feeling scared?”

“Daddy, I wanna go again! Again!”

“What?”

“That was fun. Can we, Daddy?”

The worried look on his face changed to a stern one.

Uh-oh.

“While I’m ecstatic that you’re calling me Daddy again, it’s not going to distract me from what just happened. What

was the rule about the slides, little darlin'?"

"That I wasn't to go up without you."

"Right. I think that someone needs a bit of time in the discipline room."

"No, Daddy! I don't."

He lifted her off his lap, ignoring her protests as he stood and grabbed her hand, leading her to the back of the large building. There were two doors with 'discipline room' written on them. He led her in and locked the door behind him. She glanced around. There was a wooden bench with a padded top and handcuffs attached to the front legs in one corner.

Yikes.

There was also a wooden chair and a soft-looking sofa. A cupboard was against the wall and one corner of the room had a chair with *Time-Out* painted along the back.

Hux reached for the buckles of her jumpsuit, undoing them and pulling it off fully before taking off her panties. She was left standing in just her T-shirt and bra.

"Time-Out for five minutes and I expect you to think about what you just did."

She sat in the corner. She hated corner time. As far as she was concerned, she already did enough thinking. What was the big deal, anyway? She was the one scared of heights ... if she wanted to do it, then she should be able to.

Only she recalled the panicked look on his face, and guilt filled her.

"Right, come here."

She turned so fast she knocked the chair over, leaving it as she ran toward where he sat on the sofa.

"Whoa, hey, little darlin', what is it?" he asked as he drew her onto his lap.

"I'm so sorry, Daddy. I didn't mean to scare you."

“I know you didn’t. But the fact is that you did. And you broke the rules I gave you.”

“I know, Daddy. So you need to punish me?”

“I do. You’re getting five with my hand and then three with this paddle.” He reached down to pick up a small heart-shaped paddle.

That seemed extra awful. To make an instrument of torture into a heart shape.

Some mean old mind thought that one up.

“Over you go.” He lifted her off, then patted his lap.

She got into place. Maybe this would make her cry. Beck hadn’t mentioned anything more about giving her a bigger spanking to relieve the guilt. And she was too nervous to ask.

When she was in position, Hux spanked her steadily with hard, even spans on her poor bottom. By the time he’d given her five, she was kicking her feet.

“Ouch, Daddy! Hurts!”

“Good. It’s meant to. I want you to think twice before you break the rules again. You scared me half to death!”

“I’m sorry, Daddy!”

“The last three are with the paddle. And they will hurt,” he warned.

Awesome. She didn’t know whether it was better or worse to know that.

Smack!

A small screech erupted from her.

Holy. Crap.

That seriously hurt.

Smack!

“Daddy, noooo!”

Smack!

The last one landed and took her breath away. She was still trying to take a decent breath as he turned her over and held her tight against his chest, singing to her in a quietly.

She pressed her face to his chest, managing to calm down.

Holy. Crap.

That had nearly done it, nearly cracked her. And her ass was throbbing.

“Daddy, that hurt!”

“I know, I’m sorry, little darlin’. Are you upset with me?”

Upset with him? She drew back to look up at him in confusion. “Of course not, Daddy. I understand why you had to do it. I was naughty.”

“I just want you to be safe. If you’d panicked and fallen, you could have hurt yourself.”

She nodded, leaning into him. “It’s okay, Daddy. I understand.” She sucked in a deep breath. “I love you, Daddy Hux.”

“Oh, thank God,” he muttered. He drew her head back so he could kiss her lightly. “I love you too, little darlin’.”

She smiled up at him happily.

“You want to go play some more, little darlin’?”

“I’m a bit tired. Maybe after a rest.”

“All right. How about we go have something to eat?” He stood with her in his arms.

“Where’d that paddle come from? It’s nasty,” she said as he dressed her. Ouch. Having panties on only made the heat in her ass worse.

“I borrowed it from the cupboard.” After he finished dressing her, he opened the cupboard doors and put the paddle back. Her mouth dropped open as she took in the number of paddles, straps, and bondage equipment in the cupboard.

Holy. Heck.

“Come on. Let’s find some food.”

She let him lead her back out to the main room. “It’s nice that we’re here all alone, but you shouldn’t spend so much money on me.”

He grabbed the baby bag, then he took her hand again and led her to the cafeteria.

“I like spending money on you.”

“Yes, but, I just ... I don’t want you to think I need or expect it. I don’t. I didn’t grow up with money. And everything in Jonathan’s house was his. Never mine. He never even paid me for the work I did.”

“Asshole. I hope he rots in prison. He deserves much, much worse for the way he treated you. He should have treasured you.” He led her to a table. It had one chair and a large, oversized highchair. After setting the bag down, he lifted her into the highchair.

“Ouch,” she complained as her bottom hit the chair. “Can I have a cushion?”

“Nope,” he said cheerfully. “Sitting on a hot bottom is part of the punishment.”

So. Mean.

He fastened the straps, then moved the tray into place before pulling containers out.

There was cut-up fruit, sandwiches, crackers, and cheese. Judd had gone all out.

“Did Judd not know there was a café here?” she asked.

“He did. He just likes you to eat what he prepares.” He put on her bib before sitting and picking up a grape. “Open.”

She let him feed her the grape and then half a sandwich.

“Daddy, can I have a drink?”

“I’ll get your water bottle.”

“Coffee?”

“Not yet. Not until you’ve eaten more.” He fed her a piece of melon. “I have plenty, you know.”

“Plenty what?” she asked, trying to redistribute her weight.

Her poor bottom.

“Money. I have plenty.”

“Oh. Okay.”

He handed her a water bottle with a dancing alpaca on it.

“Most people think that my father is wealthy. His family once was, but they lost it all in some bad business deals. My mom had a large inheritance. That’s probably why my dad married her. What he never expected was that she’d leave most of it to me. I didn’t find that out until I turned eighteen. I think that’s part of the reason he hated me so much.”

“Oh, Hux.” She wished she could hug him.

He fed her a piece of cheese, then offered a cracker.

“No thanks, I’m full. I’m so sorry. No father should ever treat their son like he treated you.”

“I know. If I ever have children, they’ll only ever know love. But it does mean that I can provide you with whatever you need and before you tell me again that you don’t need it, I know that. But it makes me feel good to take care of you. So please let me.”

“All right,” she whispered. “I’ve never had that before. Just as long as you know that all I really need is you and the other guys.”

“I know.” Leaning forward, he kissed her. Then he frowned. “There’s something else that I did. Something I shouldn’t have.”

“What is it?”

“I told Ester that I didn’t have any money. That I was estranged from my father, and he’d cut me off.”

HUX BRACED himself for her horror. For her to look at him like he was a terrible person.

Because he felt like an awful person.

“Why did you do that?”

“Because I was pretty sure that was the only reason she was with us. For my name and my money. It was ... a test.”

“And she failed.”

“Yeah. She failed. Only ... I didn’t think it through. I didn’t think about how the others would feel once she was gone.”

“They didn’t know?” she asked.

“No. I’ve never told them.”

“Hux, you did them a favor.”

“Well, yeah, obviously. Because otherwise we wouldn’t have you. And we’d be stuck with a gold-digging bitch. But I still feel bad ... I should have done it differently.”

“You need to tell them. It ... you can’t live with a secret like this.”

“And if they tell me to hit the road. If they hate me?”

“They won’t. How could anyone hate you?” She pushed at the tray in front of her. “Out. I want out. I want hugs.”

He smiled. “You’re adorable.” He undid the tray and straps, then lifted her out before sitting again with her straddling him, her arms around his neck. “You’re the best thing that ever happened to us. Our girl.”

“Yours.”

“Go get your workout clothes on,” Judd ordered, walking into the bedroom two days after she’d gone on her date alone with Hux.

“I ... what?”

“Workout clothes. I want to show you something.”

Were they going for a run? She could really use one. She scrambled to put her workout clothes on, then she followed him as he led her downstairs.

Instead of taking her outside, they went through the garage to another room that she was surprised to see was a small gym.

“I didn’t know this was here,” she said as she started to stretch.

“Yeah. I thought we could do some training.”

“Training?” she asked.

“Self-defense training.”

“Oh. Really?”

“Yes, I ...” He cleared his throat. “I want to protect you, so do the others. But if we’re ever not around, I also want to know you can protect yourself so that if anything ever happens ...” he trailed off.

But she understood.

This was another way he wanted to take care of her. Judd might not always have the right words. In fact, he often had

the wrong words. But he showed he cared with gestures. Like his cooking and the way he fussed over keeping them healthy. The other day Owen sneezed, and he'd nearly had him bundled up in bed with a honey lemon tea.

It had been pretty funny to watch.

“That would be great. Thank you.”

Forty minutes later, she wasn't thinking that it was great.

He was torturing her. She lay back on the mat, panting heavily.

“No more. I can't do any more.”

“We'll practice again tomorrow.” He stood over her, looking down. She knew she must look a fright. And smell worse. But she couldn't bring herself to care.

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes. We have to practice every day. So you can fight off anyone who wishes you harm.”

“All right,” she agreed. “But I think you might have to carry me to the shower.”

“I can do that,” he said seriously. “But first I want you to punch me.”

“I've already tried doing that,” she told him. “You keep blocking me. It's quite frustrating.”

“This time I'm not going to. I'm giving you a free shot to punch me. To make up for me hurting you the other day.”

“Judd, it was an accident.” She tried to stand, but he reached out and grasped her around her waist, lifting her onto her feet. He held onto her for a long moment before letting go and stepping back.

“One free hit.”

“It was my own fault. I shouldn't have gotten between you both.”

“No, you should have. Hit me.”

“Judd! No!”

“If not for the other day, then consider it my punishment for believing Jonathan over you. For doubting you. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“All right. Okay. A punishment. I can do that.”

He braced himself.

And she stepped forward to hug him. “I have a different idea, though. Let’s shower and meet in the playroom.”



JUDD THOUGHT he’d have been better off taking the hit.

“Just a bit more, Princess Judd,” she told him as she moved around in front of him.

Today, she’d picked out a bright pink tutu, long striped socks and a T-shirt with an alpaca on the front lying on a sun lounger drinking a cocktail.

Odd.

“Pucker up your lips, Princess!” she bossed.

Oh, she was such a brat. But this was his punishment. He eyed the bright pink lipstick that she picked up.

Who the hell had bought her all this make-up? Had to be Hux. He was going to kill him.

“Princess Daddy Judd, pucker up!”

“That’s a mouthful,” he muttered, even as his heart lightened as she called him Daddy.

“You’re right. I could shorten it to Princess DJ. That could be what I always call you. It has a nice ring to it.”

“Don’t even think about it, brat.”

“Then you better pucker up,” she sang.

“You need to be spanked more,” he told her, but he puckered his lips, closing his eyes as she applied the lipstick.

His face felt itchy from the make-up.

“Okay, Princess DJ, it’s time for your fashion parade!” she cried, clapping her hands.

His only saving grace was that the others weren’t here to see this.

“Get up. Let’s see you. Come to the mirror.”

He stood up and shuffled to the mirror. He couldn’t move his legs very far apart since he was also wearing a tutu. One that didn’t fit him. A bit like the T-shirt she’d forced on him that only came to part way down his stomach.

He looked awful. His make-up was sparkly and pink, his outfit tight and ridiculous.

Dear. Lord.

“Don’t you look beautiful, Daddy Judd!”

He bit off what he wanted to say. Because she looked genuinely happy. Her eyes sparkled, and there was red in her cheeks.

Lord, she was gorgeous.

And he knew he’d dress up like this every day if it would make her happy.

“You’re beautiful.”

She blushed. “Thanks, Daddy. Time for a tea party. Let me get all the guests. You wait there, Princess DJ. You’re the special guest.”

She put her alpaca and the teddy bear Hux got her on two of the chairs, then ushered him over to one.

“Come on, Daddy. Don’t be shy. It’s your tea party!”

“Is it?”

“Yes, but the mean old cook wouldn’t let us have any cupcakes.” She glared at him.

Because he was the mean old cook who had only let her have fruit and muffins.

“There’s nothing wrong with a cupcake, Daddy.”

“You need healthy, nutritious food, not sugar.”

She sighed sadly, but waited until he sat before she started pouring the tea. “Here you are Princess DJ, and Tickles, oh no!” she cried as she knocked a cup under the table. She climbed down to get it, then shuffled out.

He put his hand on the edge of the table as she got up. “Watch your head,” he barked.

She startled but moved back further before rising. “Thanks, Daddy.”

“Sorry for, uh, yelling.”

“It’s okay, Daddy. I know you just do it because you care sooo much. Right?”

He sighed. “Right.”

They ate their snack and drank their tea. Too late, he realized that the door to the playroom had opened. Turning, he saw Hux standing there. Hux burst into laughter, making Chloe jump in surprise.

“Oh my God! Where is my phone? I have to take a photo.”

Judd groaned. Fucking fantastic.

“You stop that, Daddy Hux! That’s not nice!” His avenging angel stood and stomped over to Hux, pointing her finger at him. “Don’t be mean to Daddy Judd. He’s being a princess for the afternoon and its very hard work. Goodbye!”

She slammed the door on him while Judd stared at her in shock.

“Now, where were we, Princess DJ?” she asked.

“I think that you had to come give this Princess a kiss.”

“Well, that sounds inappropriate, but okay.”

He drew her onto his lap and, with a finger under her chin, tilted her head back to kiss her. “Thank you for defending me.”

“That’s okay. I don’t want him making you feel uncomfortable. And besides, I think you make a very pretty princess.”

“Not as pretty as you. I want to treat you like a princess. Like you’re the most special person in the world to me. But I don’t quite know how to do that. I’m not as good as the others with my words, but I want to take care of you. To make sure nothing ever hurts you again.”

HE WAS FIERCELY PROTECTIVE. That gruff outer Grumpzilla layer hid an inner teddy bear, at least for those he cared about.

“I always had a burning need to be better. My mom was a good person. She used to clean rich people’s houses. Worked for hours, slaving away, only for my old man to spend all our money on booze and horses. I hated him. He used to hit her. She did her best to shield me. But he used to hurt me a lot, too.”

“Oh, Judd.”

“I saw the way people looked at us. Especially the people she worked for when she took me with her. With pity. I never wanted to be pitied again. My old man took off when I was fourteen. I thought it was a good thing, but my mom got sick a year later. Pneumonia. I couldn’t make her better.”

She wrapped her arms around him.

“If we’d lived in a better place, had access to decent healthcare and food, she might have survived. It was survivable.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. My poor Daddy Judd. I’m so sorry.”

He took in a deep breath. “I got fostered by a decent family, but I was so angry that I didn’t appreciate them. After Mary dumped me, I took off, even though they wanted me to stay with them. I was eighteen by then, so I went back home and found Owen. He was in a bad place. Nearly lost to the darkness. I got him out and got us both into the armed services. I never wanted to go back to that life, you know?”

“I know. I’m so sorry.”

She just held him for a long time until he stirred.

“I’m going to do better by you, my Princess. My Baby Blue. I promise you.”

“You are a good man, Judd Stark.” She cupped his face between her hands.

He shook his head.

“Would I love you if you weren’t?”

He froze, gazing at her. “You love me?”

“I love you.”

“Thank fuck,” he muttered, making her giggle. Then he suddenly stood, carrying her out of the room.

“Where are we going?”

“I need you. And I don’t want to take you where those toys will look at me with judgmental eyes.”

She rolled her eyes at his silliness.

A wolf whistle had her turning to see her other guys in the living room. She waved to them as they walked past.

“See? You owe me twenty,” Hux said, holding out his hands.

“Can’t believe he’s wearing a tutu,” Owen muttered.

“I can! You go, Princess!” Beck called out.

“Assholes,” Judd muttered without heat. Then he carried her into the main bedroom, and threw her on the bed.

He stripped his T-shirt and tutu off. She winced as she heard the T-shirt ripping at the seams. Then he stood there in just a pair of boxers.

He quickly took off her clothes.

“I love you,” he murmured as he kissed down her stomach. “Love you so fucking much. More than you could know.”

The look on his face was so reverent and she could tell he meant every word.

“I love you too, Judd.”

He kissed her. She pressed her legs together, feeling her clit throb. Then he drew back and rolled her over onto her hands and knees. "Spread your legs."

He kissed down her butt cheeks.

Slap!

"Ouch." She glared at him over her shoulder. "That was mean, Daddy."

"I'm going to plug this ass and then wash this crap off my face. You're going to stay there like a good girl, understand?"

"Yes, Daddy." Excitement filled her. They'd been plugging her for a while each night to get her stretched for them and it turned her on.

A lot.

When he returned, she glanced back to see his face was make-up free.

Too bad.

He picked up the bottle of lube and squirted out some onto his fingers.

She turned her head away as his finger entered her bottom, making her sigh and tremble.

More. She needed more.

Another finger. Stretching her. He drove it in and out of her ass and she leaned down, poking her ass out more.

"That's it. Good girl. You feel so damn good. So tight. Here's the plug." He drew his fingers out, and replaced them with the plug, pushing it slowly inside her as she let out a deep breath.

She felt so full.

It was delicious. Hot.

"You look so sexy wearing that plug. I'll be back. Just stay where you are."

She stayed where she was.

Because she was his good girl.

“Such a good girl for your Daddy. Well done. I’m so proud of you.”

She glanced over to find him naked and walking toward her. He grasped her ass cheeks, pulling them apart so that he could stare down at the plug in her ass.

“So damn hot. Do you know what you do to me?” He ran a hand down to her pussy, cupping her before running his finger up and down her slit. “You’re so wet. Are you wet for me? Do you need me, Baby Blue?”

“Yes! Please! I need you so much.”

“Let me just have a little taste.” He drove two fingers into her. In and out. Then he moved them to her clit, circling it, flicking it, teasing her before pushing his fingers back inside her.

In and out until she was moaning, needing to come so badly.

Then he drew his fingers out and she heard him sucking them into his mouth.

“Delicious,” he told her. “I’m going to fuck your pussy, baby. And then I’m going to fuck your ass. You ready for me?”

“Yes, please, Daddy!” she cried out.

He drove into her with one quick thrust. It was enough to make her scream with pleasure. There was nothing hesitant or gentle about Judd.

He gave everything his all. He moved faster. Harder.

She could feel herself getting closer to the peak. She clenched down around the plug in her ass, her arousal growing.

Then he pulled his cock from her pussy, and she cried out.

“Shh, just need some more lube and then I’m going to take that ass.”

She turned to watch him coating his dick in lube before he grasped hold of the plug, slowly pulling it out of her ass.

“Good girl. Now, get ready to take Daddy. I’ve dreamed of fucking this ass. That’s it. Very good. Breathe in, nice and deep, then out.”

As she breathed out, he slowly entered her. It was heaven. And hell. Because she wanted him to move. But she knew he wouldn’t until he was ready.

“Judd! I need more!” she demanded as he settled himself in her ass.

He slapped the side of her ass. “When I’m ready.”

“No, now!”

“Someone needs to learn she’s not in charge.” He pulled back out and she growled in protest.

Then his hand landed on her ass several times in quick succession, calming her down almost instantly.

“Are you going to behave, Baby Blue?” Judd growled.

“Yes, Daddy. I’m sorry.”

“Good girl.”

He slid his dick back into her ass, holding still, almost to test her. But she was feeling more settled now. As though she’d needed him to remind her who was in charge. Maybe it was odd to like that. She wasn’t sure. But she liked the way she felt now.

Like she was safe with him.

He started moving. He grasped hold of her hips, holding her still as he fucked her ass.

“If it starts to hurt or gets too much, then say your safeword,” he told her.

“I know, Daddy!”

Smack! Smack!

Oops.

“Watch the attitude, Baby Blue, or I take my pleasure and forbid you to orgasm.”

Okay, nope.

That didn't sound very fun. At all.

“I'm sorry, Daddy!”

“That's better.” He started moving again, before drawing her up so her back was pressed to his front where he stood behind her. Then his hand went down to her pussy, and he rubbed her clit with his finger.

“Oh. Oh! Judd!”

“That's it! I want you to come for me. Scream my name. Let me feel you.”

It was too much! She couldn't cope with much more.

And then her release rushed through her. The room spun around her as she gasped for breath. He set her down again and fucked her hard and fast before groaning as he found his own release.

Slowly, he slid out of her ass, and she collapsed on her side, with him curled around behind her.

“My precious girl. I'll always take good care of you. I promise.”

“**W**here are we going?” she asked Owen as they all piled into the car. She was sitting in the backseat in her booster seat.

“You tell me, baby girl,” Owen replied as he backed out of the garage. Hux was sitting next to her and Judd was on the other side of him, looking pensive.

“What do you mean?”

“We want you to tell us where that strip club is,” Beck told her, turning to look at her.

“What?”

“Where is it, baby girl?” Owen demanded. “Who was it that held you captive?”

Two weeks had passed since they’d entered their Marjarsom and so much had changed. She felt more connected to all of them. But this had caught her by surprise.

“No, we can’t.”

“We can,” Judd said. “We’re going to make those assholes pay for what they did.”

“We can’t get to Jonathan. MI6 has him locked up tight to prevent Pinky from offing him. But we can deal with these bastards,” Hux said in a grim voice.

“No, I mean, we can’t go there as it no longer exists.”

“What?” Owen snapped, pulling the car to the side of the road. “What do you mean?”

“About a week after Jonathan bought me, the police raided the place. Someone opened fire. It was terrible. A number of people died or were arrested. It ... the gang was mostly torn apart. And the place was torn down by the city.”

“Holy crap.” Hux stared at her in shock.

“So there’s no one to kill?” Owen asked.

“No.”

“That’s a shame. I was in the mood to off some assholes,” Owen said, sounding put-out.

She wasn’t sure whether to take him seriously or not.

“We probably should have talked to you about this before we all hopped into the car like a group of avenging superheroes,” Hux said dryly. “I wanted to wear my cape, but Owen wouldn’t let me. And Judd wouldn’t wear the tight leotard I got for him. I don’t know why. It would go great with his tutu.”

“You asshole.” Judd got Hux into a headlock while Beck tried to calm them down and Owen snapped at them to be careful of her.

She giggled.

Hux certainly had a way of easing the tension.

Instead of getting revenge on those that had hurt her, they went and got ice cream.

It was a much better way to spend the night. Even if she would have liked to have seen Judd in that leotard.

Maybe another night.



WORRY FILLED her as she stared at her outfit choices.

What the heck should she wear? There were so many choices. Clothes just kept appearing in her closet.

It was overwhelming.

Chill. Don't panic. It's just a dinner out.

There were three more days before their Marjarsom ended. Not that there was any chance of her ever walking away from them. But there was still some guilt lingering inside her that she needed to get rid of.

“What’s wrong, little darlin’?” Hux walked in wearing a navy blue pinstripe suit and white shirt.

Dear Lord.

He looked incredible.

“Whoa, baby.” She fanned herself.

He grinned at her and spun around. “Like what you see?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Come here.” He drew her in for a heart-stopping kiss. When he moved back, she felt slightly light-headed. “Now, why aren’t you getting ready?”

“I can’t decide what to wear.”

He studied her closely. “Because you’re worried you’ll choose the wrong thing? Or because there’s so much to choose from?”

“Um, both?”

He cupped her face between his hands. “You know that you could wear a sack and we’d still think you were the sexiest woman on the planet.”

“Only the planet?” she teased.

“The universe. And every other universe. Sassy brat.” Turning her back to her closet, he smacked her ass. She jumped with a cry.

“Now, show me your top five favorites and I’ll help you choose.”

Half an hour later, she was checking her appearance in the mirror. Her hair was twisted back, her make-up done perfectly. The dress was a beautiful blue color that brought out the color in her eyes. Her only jewelry was her necklace.

“Let’s go before the others decide they don’t have to wear suits and we end up taking them out wearing jeans and T-shirts.” Hux shook his head as he took hold of her hand.

The others were all in the living room, waiting. Judd was pacing back and forth while Beck leaned against a wall, looking uncomfortable. Owen was sprawled on the sofa, and his gaze went to her immediately as she walked in. He jumped up and prowled toward her, like a jungle cat approaching his prey. As soon as he reached her, he drew her close, then tilted her over, his hand at the back of her neck as he kissed her hungrily.

When he stood her back up and drew back, there was red lipstick on his lips.

“Owen! You’ll ruin my make-up. And you’ve got lipstick on you.” She reached up to wipe it off, but he pulled away.

“Leave it. It’s a badge of honor.”

God, he was nuts.

Then Beck approached her. His gaze took her in as he reached for her hand, kissing the back of it. “Gorgeous.”

She smiled up at him before Judd knocked him to one side. Well, he tried to. He ended up just stepping in front of him so he could stare down at her.

“Darn it, Judd!” Beck moaned.

“You weren’t moving. Fuck. Can’t we just stay at home?” There was such heat in his gaze that it made her shiver.

“No!” Hux barked. “We’re going out for dinner. All of you, get in the car.”

Thirty minutes later, they were sitting in a really swanky restaurant. And garnering a fair amount of attention.

From women and men.

“If any other asshole looks at our girl, I’m going to kill them,” Judd snapped.

“Be my pleasure to help,” Owen drawled, glaring over at one table.

“Hey, you’re getting just as many looks,” Chloe told them.

And no one was more blatant than their server. She smiled hungrily, checking out the guys as she stood far too close to Judd.

He glared up at her, then shoved his chair over. She nearly stumbled in shock.

“Oh! Sorry.” She leaned her hand on Owen’s shoulder.

“You want to remove that. Now,” Owen growled.

Okay, now she felt kind of sorry for the girl.

“My apologies.” She gave Owen a frightened look and moved around to stand between Hux and Beck. “What can I get you all?”

Why was there so much innuendo in those words?

Chloe stared down at her menu. What to order? She had no idea what to get, and there were no prices.

Maybe a salad.

She didn’t really want a salad, but it was likely to be cheaper.

“Order what you really want,” Judd whispered to her. “If you don’t, I won’t hesitate to take you out to the bathroom and spank your ass.”

Yikes.

“And for you?” the server asked her. “The salmon salad is nice and light.”

“Actually, I’ll have the pasta. Thanks.”

The other woman nodded stiffly and left after running her hand along Hux’s arm.

“Gross.” Hux shivered. “I’m never wearing this suit again.”

Everyone was giving them strange looks. This wouldn’t have happened in Escana. No one would have blinked twice about a woman being out with four men.

She let out a deep breath. She didn’t know how she felt about living there again. But it did have its advantages.

Hux flagged down a waiter. “Can we speak to the manager, thanks?”

What was he doing?

An older man appeared, giving them all a charming smile. “How can I help?”

“The server we currently have is making us really uncomfortable,” Hux said. “She’s making us feel like we’re dinner. If you get what I’m saying.”

The smile on the other man’s face dropped. “I’m so sorry, Sir. I’ll find someone else right away.” The manager walked off, his face thunderous.

Maybe she should feel sorry for the other woman.

But she didn’t.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “I’m sorry to be such a bother.”

“Why are you a bother?” Hux asked. “I’m the one she made uncomfortable.”

The food arrived, carried over by a different server. Judd immediately pulled her plate over toward him.

“Did you want some?” The plate was piled high so she could use his help eating it.

“No, I want to make sure it tastes all right and that it’s not too hot for you,” he replied, taking a bite. “Hmm, it’s all right. I could do better. We should have stayed at home.” He glared at Hux.

“No, we shouldn’t have. We need a night out to show our girl off.”

“I think we’re showing her off too much,” Owen said, staring around the room. “I’m going to have more people to add to my list.”

“What list?” she asked.

“The list of people I’m getting revenge on for treating you badly.”

She gaped at him. “What? Wait. Is that what you’ve been doing on your laptop all this time?”

“Yep. I’ve worked my way through everyone I could identify in that mob that surrounded you and Hux. Then I moved on to your old classmates. I tried looking into that gang but all the members are either dead or in jail.”

“Owen, you can’t do that!”

“Why not?” He just stared calmly at her.

“You all knew?”

Judd shrugged. “I’m with Owen. All those people should pay for hurting you. Now, eat. I want to see a third of this plate gone.”

A third? Was he nuts? No, wait. That didn’t matter. What Owen was doing did. Except why did it? He was only taking care of her, Owen style.

She breathed out, shaking her head. “Just don’t get caught.”

His smile was wicked. “Never.”

She ate some pasta, a drop of sauce landing on her dress. “Oh, shoot. Oh, no.”

“Nothing to stress over,” Beck soothed, wetting his cloth napkin and dabbing at the spot. “See? All good.”

She took a deep breath. She was worrying about nothing. None of them cared about what she looked like or did. They just wanted to be here with her.

Her men.

Her family.

Hux held up his glass of wine. “To family. To our girl.”

They all clinked their glasses. Should she tell them now? Or wait? Somehow, she didn’t want to do it here in front of all these people. So she clinked her glass.

Later.



AFTER DINNER, they headed out to their car, the four of them arguing over who got to sit in the back with her. Rolling her eyes, she climbed in the back seat. Judd hadn’t insisted on the booster seat tonight and it was sitting in the trunk.

Beck got in on her right, while Owen got in on the other side.

“Finally,” Owen said after doing up her belt. “It’s our turn.”

Their turn for what? But then Beck had her sit forward so he could unzip the back of her dress. Hux turned around to look at them while Judd pulled out of the parking lot.

“Fuck, I hate you all right now,” Judd moaned as Beck drew down her dress, revealing her breasts.

“No bra,” Owen said. “I love this dress.”

“You’re going to love it even more when you see what else I’m wearing under it,” she whispered.

“Please tell me you’re not wearing panties,” Beck begged.

“I’m not wearing panties.”

“Fuck, yes.” Owen drew her toward him, making her lean on him as he cupped a breast, then toyed with her nipple. Beck drew her dress off, tugging it completely off her. Then he positioned her so she was leaning on one hip. Owen grabbed

her top leg, pulling it over his own so her pussy and ass were exposed to Beck.

He immediately started playing with her pussy, pushing one finger deep inside her. Then another.

She moaned, trying to move. But they held her tightly.

“Give me a taste of her,” Hux demanded.

Oh hell.

She turned to watch as Beck drew his fingers out of her wet pussy, holding them to Hux, who sucked on them, making a murmured noise of pleasure.

“Shit,” Judd groaned. “That was so hot.”

Beck’s fingers returned to her pussy. He drove them in and out, while he used his thumb on his other hand to toy with her clit. Owen tilted her head back, taking her mouth in a kiss that made her head spin.

She drew back, panting heavily. “I need ... I need ...”

“What do you need?” Owen asked.

“To come! Please, Daddy Beck! Please!”

“You can come whenever you like, Freckles. But tell me first, are you going to let us take you here tonight? Can we take you at the same time?” He moved his fingers from her pussy and pressed them to her asshole, slipping one inside.

That was all it took for her to explode. She loved having her ass played with. As she came back down from the high, she was aware that they were already home and that they were all waiting for her.

“Yes. Please.”



BECK CARRIED her into the house, trying not to break into a run.

The others moved ahead of him and by the time he reached the bedroom they were all naked. Owen was lying on the bed, his hand around his cock, stroking it. He set their girl down. She reached up and tugged him down so she could kiss him.

“Love you, Beck.”

“Love you too.” He turned her with a slap on her ass. “Go fuck Owen.”

There was a spring in her step as she moved toward the bed. Owen hooked his finger through the O of her collar and drew her closer before lightly grasping the front of her throat. Then he rolled her onto her back and entered her with one sharp thrust.

Fuck. That was hot.

Beck stripped off. He didn't even care about being naked in front of them all. His girl was slowly changing his perception of his body.

He threw the lube to Hux, who snatched it up and immediately started coating his cock in it as Owen moved onto his back with their girl on top of him.

Hux placed his hand on her back. “Lie down. Owen, hold her while I get her ready for me.”

Beck stepped forward to help, while Judd kneeled on the bed and fed their girl his dick.

Beck held open her ass cheeks, loving the way she moaned around Judd's dick. Hux slid two slippery fingers into her ass and groaned. “Christ, she's sucking me in. She's so perfect for us, isn't she?”

She was.

And they weren't ever going to let her go. He watched as Hux drove his fingers in and out of her ass before he slid them free.

“Big breath in, Freckles,” he urged as Hux lined his dick up with her asshole. “And out.”

Beck let go of her ass as Hux moved slowly inside her. He lay next to her, rubbing her back and whispering words of praise as the three of them took her.

Judd slid free of her mouth, holding the base of his dick. No doubt he'd come close to coming in that delicious mouth and wanted to wait for her sweet pussy.

“Good girl,” Beck told her. “You’re doing so well.”

“I’m going to come,” Hux warned. “Fuck, she feels too good.” He gave a final thrust before groaning. She let out a low whimper as Owen took her hard and fast, before he came with his own shout of pleasure.

“Ready for more?” Beck asked her. “Or do you need a break?”

“If the two of you don’t fuck me right now, I’m going to cut your balls off,” she threatened.

Judd slapped her ass. “Naughty girl.”

“So vicious,” Hux said as he moved away to sit on the armchair in the corner. “I’m dead.”

Owen kissed her before helping her off him. Then Judd took his place, reaching out to take hold of her. “Come here, Baby Blue.”

FUCK.

Judd couldn’t believe how good her pussy felt around his dick as he slid slowly inside her. He didn’t care that Owen had just been inside her. That was all part of being in a relationship like this.

He thrust gently up and down, knowing that she might be sore.

“No,” she moaned, and he froze.

So did Beck, who had been moving in behind her.

“You okay, Freckles?” Beck ran his hand down her back.

“More. I want more. Fuck me.”

Relief flooded Judd as he took hold of her hips to stop her from moving too much. “Uh-uh, who makes the decisions around here?”

“You guys do.”

“That’s right. So you’ll stay nice and still like a good girl while Beck takes your ass. If you’re naughty, you’ll have to be punished.”

“How?” she asked.

“You won’t get to come again.”

“Nooo,” she moaned. But she stayed still as Beck filled her ass.

Fuck. Judd could feel him back there. Neither of them was small men. He hoped like fuck they weren’t hurting her.

“Baby Blue? You okay?”

“I ... I ...”

“What?” Beck asked.

“I need to come. I need you to move! Please!”

Beck met his gaze and gave him a nod. He started to move. They worked in tandem. Slow at first, building up. Then faster. Harder.

God! He wasn’t going to last. He could feel himself reaching the edge.

“Please! Please!” she sobbed.

“Come, Freckles!” Beck yelled. “Come for us, right now!”

She let out a low wail that had his balls tightening as he found his relief. He was vaguely aware of Beck’s own shout of pleasure as the world around him spun.

It had never been like this before. Ester and Mary ... his feelings for them didn’t touch on the way he felt about her.

She was his everything.

His Baby Blue.



CHLOE WALKED into the living room where her men sat. She'd just been in the bath. When she'd woken up this morning, she'd been a bit stiff and sore. Her guys had been treating her like a princess all day, but she'd asked to take a bath alone. She'd needed to gather her courage for this next part.

She was wearing one of Hux's T-shirts and nothing else. Hux was on the floor in front of the television. Owen was in one armchair with his laptop while Beck sat in the other armchair, using hand weights to do bicep curls.

"Hey, Baby Blue," Judd said, holding out a hand. "Come here."

She dropped a kiss on Beck's head, then smiled down at Hux as she made her way to Judd. He sat up and drew her onto his lap, hugging her tight.

"I want to talk to you all about something," she said.

"What is it?" Beck put down his hand weights.

"It's what I talked to you about a while ago. You asked me to think on it and I have, and I still want it."

"Are you talking about the spanking you asked Beck for?" Hux asked. "But you've been spanked by all of us."

"Yes, I know, but not for ... not for keeping something from you. For going along with what Jonathan wanted. And I still feel so guilty. I need to be punished for it."

"You really think being spanked will help?" Beck asked.

Judd ran his hand up and down her back.

"But we know why you did it, little darlin'," Hux said. "You shouldn't feel guilty. We're all good, right?"

Owen nodded.

"We are," Beck said.

“But our girl isn’t,” Judd added. “And that’s the most important thing. So if you really need this, we’ll do it.”

“But we won’t cause more harm than good, understand?” Beck said. “We won’t push you beyond what you can handle, and we don’t want you to think that this is something we need in order to forgive you.”

“I know. This is something I need. Something I’m asking for me.”

“Good girl for asking for what you need,” Judd told her. “I know that’s hard for you.”

She smiled up at him. It was difficult for her. But they made it easier by always listening to her. By helping her, supporting her, being there in case she failed to pick herself back up.

“I love you guys.”

“We love you too, little darlin’,” Hux told her. “And there’s something I need to tell you all. If my little darlin’ can be brave, then so can I.”

She gave him an encouraging look.

“What is it?” Beck asked.

“I told Ester that I didn’t have any of my father’s money because I was estranged from him.”

“You did what?” Judd asked.

“Technically, that was true,” Owen said, looking unconcerned. “You don’t have any of his money because he has none.”

“Yes, but I didn’t tell her that I had inherited money from my mom. And I think that’s the reason she truly left. She found someone she thought was better than us. I should have told you, but I felt guilty.”

“For what?” Judd asked. “For doing us all a favor?”

They all gaped at him.

“What? She never loved us. If she was with us for Hux’s money ... then it was better we knew before we married her. And it worked out for the best, right?”

Owen nodded.

Beck looked at her lovingly. “Definitely.”

“Really? None of you are mad?” Hux asked.

“No, none of us are mad,” Beck told him. “You should have told us earlier.”

Hux nodded, looking relieved. “I should have.”

“Chloe, are you sure you want to do this now?” Beck asked, turning to her.

“Yes, I do.”

“All right. I want you to put yourself over Owen’s lap. He’s going to give you five smacks.”

Owen gave Beck a surprised look, then nodded.

“Then it will be Judd’s turn, then Hux’s, then me. You will say your safeword if you need us to stop. Remember, this is something you asked for. You are in charge.”

She nodded. With Judd’s help she stood and moved over to Owen who took her hand and helped her over his lap.

“Sure, baby girl?”

“Yes, Daddy Owen. I’m sure.”

“Good baby.”

His spanks were hard and fast. No hesitation and no pausing to let her catch her breath. When he helped her stand, she was breathing heavily, her bottom warm. He drew her between his legs, holding her tight for a long moment. Then turning her, he sent her to Judd.

Judd eyed her thoughtfully. “Yes?”

“Yes, Daddy Judd.”

With a determined nod, he drew her over his lap. His spanks were slower, but deliberate, hard. She could feel her

bottom burning and she was kicking her legs by the time he was finished. A sob broke free. But it wasn't enough.

There was still a tight feeling in her gut.

After a quick cuddle, he sent her to Hux who had moved to sit next to Judd on the sofa.

His spanking was lighter. As though he was worried about pushing her too far. And while she understood, she also knew that she needed to be pushed over that edge. She kissed Hux lightly, then moved to Beck.

“You're okay to continue?” Beck asked.

“Yes, Daddy Beck.”

“I'm not going to stop until I think you feel better or you say your safeword. Understand?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

He drew her over his lap, holding her steady before his hand started to slap her ass.

Shit! That hurt!

She could feel her safeword on the tip of her tongue as she kicked her feet, wriggling on his lap. Well, she tried to move. He held her steady, though.

Her bottom burned.

It was too much.

She needed it to stop.

And then something snapped. A sob broke free. Tears welled in her eyes. They dripped down her cheeks. He didn't stop though. Several more smacks landed and she lay on his lap as she cried, completely done in.

Boneless.

Free.

Beck moved her so she was straddling him, he held her tight, and she felt the others surround her as she sobbed into his chest.

“Is she all right?” Hux asked. “Was it too much?”

“Baby girl?” Owen asked.

“Talk to us,” Judd demanded. “Right now.”

“She’s okay, aren’t you, Freckles? She’s just processing.”

She leaned back, wiping at her cheeks and looking around at them all, at the love on their faces. “I want to marry you all.”

Shocked looks filled their faces. Then Owen gave her a smug grin. “I knew it.” He kissed her. Hard. Dirty and possessive.

“Of course you do,” Hux said. “We’re awesome. Especially me.” His kiss was light and gentle. Loving.

She huffed out a laugh.

“You’re sure?” Judd asked. “We’re not easy.”

“I know. I’ll just keep a supply of tutus and make-up close by.”

Judd rolled his eyes before kissing her with so much protective intensity it stole her breath.

Then there was Beck. Steady. Loving. Hers.

“You’re ours. Always.” His kiss was perfection.

They all were.

“What do you want to do once our Marjarsom is over?” Judd asked.

“If you don’t want to go back to Escana, you don’t have to,” Hux told her. “But you should know that no one thinks you had anything to do with Jonathan’s plans.”

“No one blames you,” Beck added.

“And if anyone does say anything, you tell me,” Owen said. “I’ll take care of them.”

“I’ll ... I’ll think on it. The truth is that anywhere I am with the four of you is home. And that you’re all I’ll ever need.”

They all hugged her tight, holding her.
This was perfection.

EPILOGUE

Chloe sat nervously in front of the computer screen.
She didn't want to do this.

At the same time, she knew she had to. She glanced over at Beck and he sent her a reassuring look. All of her guys wanted to be here, but she knew that Owen and Judd wouldn't handle it well.

And someone needed to make sure that they stayed out of this room. So Hux was with them, and Beck was with her.

"Right, he'll show up in about a minute," Salem said. He was an MI6 agent who was also Alina's brother. He'd been trying to capture Pinky for a long time and was eager to get any information he could out of Jonathan.

Which is where she came in.

He was hoping Jonathan would let something spill. Her guys had refused to let her see him in person, so they were doing this by video conference.

The screen flickered to life. And there he sat. He looked ... terrible.

Exhausted and gaunt.

"Jonathan?"

"Ahh, there she is. My darling daughter. How are you? Fornicating wildly with those men of yours? Or are you whoring yourself off to someone else? Like mother like daughter, huh? She was a whore too."

Instead of feeling angry, a rush of sadness filled her. Things could have been different for them. They could have had some sort of relationship. Instead, he seemed to have all this bitterness toward her.

“My mother?”

“Yes, your mother. I loved her once. I wanted to marry her. But my father wouldn’t hear of it. Marry a commoner? And an American at that? We met while I was on business in Florida. She was a waitress in the bar of the hotel I was staying in. I got her details and every time I came back to that hotel we’d meet up. Then you came along. I thought about taking you from her. But really ... an illegitimate bastard and a girl at that? No, my father would have cut me off. So I left you with her.”

Did he expect her to thank him? She wasn’t sure.

“Do not look at me like that. I gave her money for your upkeep.”

“You did? But we lived in poverty. You know that! You still visited her! I remember you.”

“Yes, well, she stopped working and started taking drugs.” He shrugged. “What was I supposed to do? I wasn’t giving her more money to throw away on drugs and gambling.”

But he hadn’t thought to try and help her?

“You were okay with me living like that?”

“Okay? Not exactly. But there was nothing I could have done.”

There was plenty he could have done, but she decided not to get into that.

“Why did you rescue me from the gang?” It had never made sense to her why he would buy her like that. And that one time she’d asked him had gone disastrously bad.

“You’d rather I left you there?”

“No.” She wouldn’t have survived. She knew that. It was part of the reason she felt so indebted to him. Christ, her

relationship with him was a mess. “But I never understood why you’d spend all that money to free me.”

“My father’s fault. Old bastard always hated me. Always going on about how I wasn’t good enough, powerful or smart enough. On his freaking deathbed, he tells me he’s changed his fucking will. Told me that my inheritance wouldn’t be released until I produce an heir. Well ... it was the one time I was ahead of him.”

“Oh my God. That’s why you saved me? To get your inheritance?”

“Yes,” he bit out. “I showed him.”

“But I never even met your father.”

“Of course not. I would never introduce you to him. He died a few days after we returned to London. Besides, all I had to do was produce documentation to the lawyer. Don’t you remember the tests that doctor did when we got to London?”

“One of those tests was for DNA?”

“Of course. And I had my father’s lawyer come to the house to meet you. I made certain he didn’t mention who you were to me.”

“Why didn’t you want me to know?”

“I didn’t want anyone to know. Jesus. That would have been an embarrassment. People knowing you were my daughter? No, that couldn’t happen.”

Ouch.

She glanced over to the corner of the room to find Beck standing, looking furious. She gave him a sharp look. He couldn’t interfere. No matter how upset he was.

“I paid the doctor off. I sent through a tip-off to the cops that underaged girls were being raped in that strip club, couldn’t have those dumb ass bikers talking about me.”

Holy crap.

He was the reason the strip club was raided?

“And the lawyer was bound by confidentiality. That old bastard didn’t care anyway. He secretly hated my father.”

“All of that for money?”

“A lot of money. Millions of pounds.”

“Which is now gone?” How had he lost it all?

His face reddened in anger. She glanced down at his hand instinctively to see just how mad it he was.

It doesn’t matter now.

He’s not near you. He can’t ever make your life miserable again.

“I made several bad business investments. It wasn’t my fault! Over a year ago, the devil approached me, offering me a deal I couldn’t refuse.”

She glanced over at Beck who looked furious still, but nodded to her encouragingly.

She licked her lips. She needed to find out as much information from him as she could.

“The devil?”

“Oh, I am not saying his name. They might be doing their best to break me here, but I know that my life is forfeit if I say his name.”

“What deal did he offer?”

“He paid all my debts. Gave me money to live on. And all I had to do was sell him my soul.” He let out a bark of laughter. “I voted the way he told me to in the House of Lords, met with who he wanted me to meet, basically I became his lap dog. Then he told me he wanted me to go to Escana and made a trade agreement that he could use to get a foothold into the country. And if that failed ... I was to do what I could to ruin the Princes and their cousins’ lives. Mr. Fical was my contact so maybe you should be asking him who the devil is. Oh, wait. But he’s dead.”

Mr. Fical had died in his cell of a suspected heart attack before they could get any more information out of him.

Although Wolfe did think he'd found proof that he'd started the Purity Party.

“The thing is ... I would happily have helped destroy the Princes and their fathers after everything my father used to tell me about them. How wonderful they were. How much better than me.”

Part of her almost felt sorry for him.

Just a small part, though.

“So you bought me from the gang, then used me to get your inheritance ... why keep me around?”

“I paid a lot of money for you. I thought I could get my money's worth.”

Jesus. She felt ill.

“Yes, you liked to constantly remind me how much I owed you,” she said.

“I spent so much time on you! I had to remake you. Before I came along, you were nothing. You belong to me! Until you met them and your whorish ways came out again,” he spat out.

She stared at him in shock.

“You're mad at me for being with the guys? You told me to distract them!”

“But not to fuck them! A whore just like your mother!”

“What? What do you mean ... how did you know about us?”

“I saw you wrapped around one at the fair, remember?”

Shit. They'd been so careful, but he had found her in Judd's arms at the fair.

“And for that reason you decided to punish me? By implicating me in what you were doing?”

“Why should I go down alone? Misery loves company.” Again, he stared at her like he hated her.

Dear. Lord.

“It wasn’t supposed to end like this! I let my anger got the best of me.”

As it often did.

He really hated her, didn’t he? All this time, she’d just thought he was a cold man. That he didn’t like anyone. But he hated her.

“You are mine. You don’t get to go on living your life ... being happy whoring yourself out to them. No!”

Her breath came in sharper pants.

She stared over at Beck, needing his calming presence. He stared back at her, lending his strength.

“Well, guess what? I am happy. And I’ll fuck whoever I damn well please.”

He lost control, screaming at her through the screen. “You are mine! Mine!”

Shit.

“Turn it off! Please!” she begged.

The screen died on his screams. Beck jumped up and raced over to her, gathering her up in his arms. She clung to him, shaking.

She looked over at Salem. “I’m sorry I couldn’t get anything for you.”

Salem sent her a sympathetic look. “It’s all right. You tried for us. He’s going to be hard to crack and we’ve got to protect him from Pinky trying to take him out.”

“You did amazing, Freckles. My clever girl. I know that had to be so hard. But you’re safe from him. He won’t hurt you again.”

She clung to him. Her big, gorgeous guy. They had plans to go visit his Ma in a few months and she couldn’t wait to meet to the woman who’d raised him.

“I’ll leave you guys to it. See you at the party,” Salem said.

Beck sat with her on his lap, holding her tight. “You okay, Freckles? That was a lot.”

“I just ... how can he hate me so much? I never did anything to him.” Tears welled in her eyes, dripping down her cheeks.

Sometimes it was still hard to let go and cry and she’d find herself hiding her true emotions. But her guys never let her get away with that for long.

Beck wiped away her tears. “Of course you didn’t. I suppose it all started with his father. He obviously belittled him. To the point that he wanted his approval but also hated him. I’m not defending him at all, but I think it probably twisted him.”

“Yeah. And he had some sort of love-hate relationship with my mother. I just ... I still never thought he’d deliberately try to drag me down with him. But I guess all I ever was to him was a possession.”

The door slammed open, making her jump.

“What happened?” Judd demanded, striding in.

“What did he say? Are you okay?” Hux asked.

“Do I get to kill him now?” Owen added. “If he hurt you, I will.”

They crowded around her and Beck. Hux placed his hand on her back while Judd grasped hold of her chin, studying her.

“You’ve been crying. Owen, she’s been crying. Kill the bastard.”

Owen straightened. “On it.”

“Wait, Owen, no,” she called out. “Stop. Please.”

“Owen!” Beck said. “Chloe needs you here.”

“Chloe needs me?” He turned back. “I’m here, baby girl.”

“We all are,” Hux added. “Whatever you need, little darlin’.”

“What did that bastard say?” Judd demanded.

She went over it all, Beck adding in bits and pieces.

“That fucking asshole,” Hux snapped. “We should let Owen kill him.”

“No,” she said. “Trust me, killing would be too easy. Being in jail, with no one kissing his ass, no power or nice things. That’s a far better punishment. I just ... I want to forget about this for a while. Can we go to the party now?”

“You sure, Baby Blue?” Judd asked. “We don’t have to go.”

“Not go?” she gasped dramatically. “To a birthday party? We can’t not go, Daddy Judd!”

“Sorry. Of course not. What was I thinking?”

“Clearly, you weren’t. Parties are sacred, Daddy.”

Beck lifted her off his lap and took her hand, leading her out of the room and outside into the Escanaian sunshine.

She breathed in deep. “We need to get the gift first. We can’t go without a present.”

“Of course not,” Judd said with a huff. “That’s party etiquette 101.”

They all stared at him.

“What? I’m not a monster. Even I know that.”

She grinned at him and let them lead her into their house. She started to put her stamp on it. There was now a soft blanket over the sofa, and some photos of them hanging on the wall. And white roses on the coffee table that were delivered weekly.

This had become her home.

She picked up the gift she’d wrapped herself for Pippa. It was her birthday today and the Princes had gone all out with a special party.

In the three weeks since they’d returned to Escana, she’d gotten really close with Pippa, Alina, and Vivi. Everyone had

apologized to her for being arrested. Aric had even told her that Pippa had cried when she'd learned she'd left the country.

Hux took hold of her free hand. "Let's go and have some fun. We have a birthday party to get to and the birthday girl will be waiting impatiently."

They all walked toward where a huge bouncy castle had been sent up on the palace grounds. There were screams of laughter and excitement. Several people called out to them.

A feeling of rightness filled her.

This was her place. With these men. These people.

She finally had a home.