



OFFSIDE

By
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Chapter One

Early July

I *can't do this.* Rebecca Bower hunched down, arms crossed tight over her stomach, keeping her voice low so her five-year-old daughter, who sat in the backseat of the car coloring, wouldn't hear her. Her eyes burned as she glanced up at her mother. "Mom, I can't do this."

Lifting her hand from the steering wheel, her mother, Erin Bower, patted her shoulder. "Yes, you can. I know it will be hard, *ma bichette*, but Patrick is Casey's father. He has some rights."

A length of barbed wire seemed to wind around her stomach, around her heart, digging in and tearing her insides apart. The last time Casey had been with her father, she'd ended up in the emergency room. *I almost lost her because of him.*

"Becky, get out of the car for a minute, please." Her mother opened her door and stepped on to the parking lot. A big straw hat sat on her head, shielding her pale face from the glare of the sun until she tipped her head back to stare up at the planes leaving the airport. The fine lines around her mother's eyes deepened with tension and exhaustion. She lived for her children, had dropped everything in her own life to come to Dartmouth, but as strong as she was, the weight of all she'd pulled on to her slender shoulders was beginning to show.

"I'm sorry, Mom," Becky whispered as she came around the car to stand beside her mother. "You'd be on your way home if I'd kept this to myself."

Her mother pursed her lips. "I would have been very disappointed if you'd kept this to yourself. You're

staying with your brother because he needs you, which makes me very happy, but don't be too proud to accept help yourself."

"I'm not, I just—"

"You tried to hide how upset you were about this. You wouldn't have told either me or your father if I hadn't insisted. I understand your not wanting to talk to your brother, he's dealing with enough, but since when can't you talk to me and your father?"

"It's not that I can't talk to you . . . it's just . . ." *Ugh, how the hell am I supposed to make her understand?* "This is my mess. I need to show my daughter I'm strong enough to manage on my own."

"No. Right now, you need to show your daughter she doesn't need to be afraid of her father." Her mom took her hand and squeezed tight. "It's as simple as that. She doesn't remember much—if anything—about what happened last time she saw him. She'll feed off your reactions, so you need to get better at hiding how you really feel from her. I know it's hard. I wish you didn't have to go through this, but you do. His mother will supervise the visits. She might be blind where he's concerned, but she'll keep your daughter safe."

Becky swallowed hard, nodding slowly. She couldn't argue with that. And Patrick *had* gone to a few parenting courses. Enough that her lawyer pointed out he was entitled to visitation, and denying him would put her in contempt of court. *Again.*

The fines, the threats from Patrick's lawyer, she could deal with. But the judge at their last hearing had warned her that she could do jail time if she refused to respect the visitation order. The judge had shown some sympathy when she presented him with reports from the doctor and the social workers who'd been involved when Casey had nearly drowned in the bathtub while in her father's care. Because he'd left her alone. But the fact was that he'd eventually taken steps to become a better parent. The court believed it was in Casey's best interest to get to know her father. The only concession was supervised visits since contact had been limited for so long.

Maybe he's changed. Maybe he can be a good father.

Her instincts all screamed at her, fierce voices like a dozen fists pounding at the inside of her skull, telling her not to believe it.

But she didn't have a choice.

"All right, I got it." Becky leaned into her mother's hug, then planted a broad smile on her face as she caught Casey peering out at them from the back window. She opened the door and unstrapped her daughter from her booster seat. "So, *poupée*, are you excited about going to Marineland with Daddy?"

"I like dolphins." Casey picked up her little purse and her stuffed Shrek. Her tiny white dress shoes clicked on the pavement as Becky set her down. She tucked the purse and the toy under her arm to straighten the skirts of her pink floral sundress. "But I'd rather stay with Uncle Landon. I want to see the baby. And Silver is fun."

Holding in a sigh, Becky crouched down to her daughter's level. "You'll only be gone for three weeks, Casey. The baby won't be here yet."—*I hope*—"Besides, you promised Silver you'd take lots of pictures for her. Since she's stuck in bed, you'll need to tell her all about your trip when you get back so she won't be bored."

"And I can talk to her, and Uncle Landon, and Uncle Dean every night," Casey said, repeating what Silver had told her before they'd left Dean's house. "But what if Daddy doesn't let me use the phone?"

"He will." *He'd better.* "You'll talk to me too though, right?"

"Well, duh." Her daughter giggled, sounding a bit too much like Silver Delgado for Becky's liking. Then she topped it off with a statement that set Becky's teeth on edge. "Silver said you need a break. Can't you come with me?"

"I just started a new job, baby. I can't take time off now." She continued before her daughter could remind her she worked for Silver—well, more specifically, she worked for the Dartmouth Cobras as the Media Relations Coordinator, but her daughter didn't know the difference. "Besides, this is a special trip for you,

Daddy, and Nanny.”

Casey wrinkled her tiny nose, winding her pink beaded necklace around her fingers before sticking the end in her mouth and speaking around it. “I guess . . .”

Way too serious for a five-year-old. Becky laughed and took her daughter’s toy and purse. “Come on. Daddy’s probably waiting.”

Her mother held Casey’s hand as Becky retrieved her suitcase from the trunk, then chatted excitedly with her as they made their way into the airport. All Casey’s reluctance seemed to disappear as she caught sight of her father. Her face lit up. She pulled away from her grandmother and bolted toward him.

“Daddy!”

Becky moved to run after her daughter, but her mother halted her with a hand on her arm, shaking her head. Patrick met Casey halfway, bending down to look her over as she skidded to a stop in front of him. The noise in the crowded airport made it impossible to make out what he said, but Casey ducked her head shyly and moved in for a hug.

As Becky and her mother approached, Patrick straightened, rubbing his thick, brown beard and reaching out for Casey’s suitcase. “Anything I need to know?”

Don’t let her out of your sight? But no, he knew that. His mother had spent hours on the phone with Becky, assuring her he knew he’d messed up when he’d left Casey alone in the bath so he could make a move on his latest girlfriend. That he wanted to be a good father. That he was ready to try again. Undermining his efforts wouldn’t improve the situation.

“She’s allergic to strawberries. She has an EpiPen in her suitcase. Check everything she eats.” He knew that too. Her brow furrowed as he nodded distractedly. His phone buzzed, and he slid his hand into the pocket of his black slacks. The buzzing stopped.

“Does she still wet the bed?” he asked.

Casey gave him a horrified look. “*Daddy!*”

“No, but no drinks after six.” Becky smiled at her daughter. “She’s good with that, though. She usually gets herself a glass of milk and some cookies around then.”

“Do you have cookies, Daddy?”

“I can pick some up.” Patrick ruffled his daughter’s hair, then pointed toward the escalator. “Nanny went to get an iced tea and some croissants. You still like croissants, don’t you?”

“Yes! Uncle Dean makes them for me almost every morning!”

“‘Uncle’ Dean?” Patrick arched a brow at Becky. “Exactly how is he her uncle? I didn’t know Landon swung that way.”

“He doesn’t,” her mother said tightly, speaking up for the first time. “But Casey has become very close to him lately and decided to call him ‘Uncle’ out of respect. He’s family.”

“I’m not sure I like you having all kinds of men around my daughter.” Patrick put his hand on Casey’s shoulder. “Especially the kind of men Silver Delgado would be involved with. I’ve heard things about her—”

“She happens to be involved with my brother.” Becky did her best to keep her tone pleasant. “And this is a conversation we can have some other time.”

“Whatever. I’m just telling you now, I plan to take a much more active role in my daughter’s life. I will have a say in who she spends time with. And I’m not comfortable with her being around *that* woman.”

“But Daddy, I love Silver. She’s having a baby, and it’s going to be my cousin and . . .” Casey pulled away from her father, the soft roundness of her cheeks going red as she inched closer to Becky. “Silver promised I could see the baby after it comes out of her belly. She promised, Mommy!”

“You will, *poupée*,” Becky said, wishing she could pick her daughter up and bring her home. Home being Dean’s place, even if only temporarily. But she’d set up their new house while Casey was gone. And Casey had

to go. So Becky had to find a way to get past this little setback. *Damn Patrick for not dropping it.* “Daddy just doesn’t know Silver. He’s looking out for you.”

“That’s right.” Patrick made a face and grabbed Casey’s hand. “Come on, Nanny’s waiting.”

“No!” Casey sobbed, pulling away from her father once again, throwing herself against Becky’s leg. She clung to Becky with one arm and hugged her Shrek toy with the other. “I don’t want to go, Mommy! Daddy and Nanny can visit me here!”

“This is ridiculous. We’re going to miss our flight.” Patrick checked his watch. “Come on, Casey. You’re acting like a baby.”

She is a baby. Becky’s throat locked as she gently pried her daughter off her leg, then bent down to cup her tear-streaked cheeks in her hands. “Go with Daddy, *poupée*. You’ll have so much fun you won’t want to leave.”

“Please don’t make me go.” Casey’s tear-filled eyes broke her heart. “I won’t watch SpongeBob anymore. I know you hate it.”

This isn’t fair. Becky felt her own eyes moisten and blinked fast to keep the tears at bay. She glanced over at her mom, grateful for her presence as she bent down beside them.

“Casey, your daddy misses you.” Erin wiped away her granddaughter’s tears. “Be my big girl and go with him now. You can call us as soon as the plane lands. You love plane rides. And I’m sure Daddy will take you to see the falls. I haven’t been to see them in a long time. Will you take pictures of them for me?”

Casey hiccupped, then nodded shakily. “I’ll take lots of pictures. For you and Silver and Mommy.”

“Good girl.” Erin rose and placed Casey’s hand in Patrick’s. “You know, Daddy needs to learn a lot more about hockey. Maybe you can teach him?”

“You need me to teach you about hockey?” Casey peered up at her father, eyes wide. “I have all the *Rock ‘em Sock ‘em* DVDs. We can watch them together if you want?”

“Great.” Patrick scowled at Becky. “Thanks for making this easier for me.”

Becky ignored his sarcasm as she stood. She hugged and kissed her daughter, determined to make it as easy for Casey as possible. “Chin up. No more tears. Show Daddy how tough the Bower women are.”

“She’s a Dubois,” Patrick said through his teeth.

And you’re an asshole. But thankfully, Casey managed to go with her father without any more protests, though she sucked her thumb and held Shrek tight as she followed him. Becky watched them step onto the escalator. Her whole body trembled as she retreated. Her back hit something solid.

“Hey, Becky.” Firm hands on her shoulders steadied her, and her eyes widened as she glanced up to see Scott Demyan, one of the Dartmouth Cobras. The *last* one she wanted to see right now. Just being around him made her feel like the whole world had tilted beneath her feet. And she didn’t have the strength to haul up the walls she needed to put between them. He seemed to notice, because he wasn’t stripping her with his dreamy blue eyes like he usually did. Actually, he sounded concerned. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” She managed a shaky smile. “My baby’s first trip without me.”

“Ah.” He glanced up toward Casey and frowned. “He should be holding her hand.”

Becky nodded, following his gaze. Her breath caught in her throat as Casey dropped Shrek and bent down to pick him up near the top of the escalator. Patrick was on the phone. He didn’t see Casey’s necklace catch on the steps as they reached the top.

“Patrick!” Becky bolted for the stairs, Scott a breath behind her. She heard her mother scream.

“Zach!” Scott launched up the steps, then threw something to a man about to step onto the descending stairs. The man snatched it out of the air.

The escalator stopped. Casey let out a high-pitched cry, struggling against the necklace cinched around her neck. Patrick shouted.

Beads covered the floor as Becky dropped to her knees and pulled her daughter away from the escalator

and into her arms. A blade flashed before it was tucked away, and her breath lodged in her throat as she gaped up at the man standing over her. Zach Pearce. Another player. He took a knee beside her.

“Becky, look at me.” His bright green eyes were hard. “Calm. Down.”

Casey was still crying. People were gathering around them. Panic clawed at Becky’s chest, but she knew she couldn’t let it take over. The command latched on to her racing pulse, forcing it to slow. Zach was right. She needed to calm down for her daughter.

“Shh. You’re okay, *poupée*. Mommy’s got you.” Becky rocked her daughter in her arms. “You’re okay.”

“My necklace is broke, mommy.” Casey sobbed and picked up a handful of pink beads. “It got stuck.”

“I’ll get you a new one.” *Damn it, why did I let her wear it? She could have—*

“She’s too young to be wearing something like that.” Patrick snarled as he raked his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know why you let her get all dolled up like that. Are you determined to make me look like a bad father? If she hadn’t grabbed for that stupid toy—”

“Mister, there’s a sign reminding you to hold your kid’s hand.” An old man who had come off the escalator behind Patrick glared at him. “You weren’t. If you ask me—”

Patrick’s face went crimson. “Nobody asked you.”

“Is the little girl all right?”

“Some people shouldn’t have kids.”

All around them people were talking, looking at her, at Patrick, condemning them both. Becky rose shakily, cradling Casey in her arms, using one hand to cover her daughter’s ear, not wanting her to hear all the things she wished she could say. A solid grip on her shoulder led her away. She found herself sitting in a small room, aware of nothing but her daughter’s tiny hand in hers. Then she heard Casey laugh and the world snapped into place.

“Don’t let Mommy see. She hates SpongeBob.”

“You better eat it quick then,” Scott said.

A crunch. Becky frowned and focused on her daughter. She had a huge SpongeBob lollipop in her hand, staining her lips yellow. A few blinks and Becky made out Scott and Zach, standing on either side of them. A woman in a crisp white uniform stood a few feet away, holding a bottle of water. She was staring at the men with pure worship in her eyes.

“May I?” Zach took the bottle and uncapped it. Then he knelt in front of Becky while Scott distracted Casey with a bag of gummy bears. “Take a few sips, then pull yourself together. Your mother looks like she wants to kill your husband.”

My husband? Becky glanced over at her mother, who had Patrick backed into the corner. Mrs. Dubois, Patrick’s mother, lingered close behind, wringing her hands. Becky took a few gulps of water, then shook her head and laughed. “We’re divorced.”

“I got the impression you were a smart woman.” Zach grinned. “But that’s beside the point. He’s the little girl’s father. She had a bad scare, and she needs to know it was an accident.”

It’s always “an accident” with him. Becky gritted her teeth, then cleared her throat. “Mom, remember what you said?”

“I was wrong.” Her mother huffed and took a step back. “What was so important that you had to take that call not even five minutes after you were with your daughter?”

“That’s none of your business.” Patrick squared his shoulders. “Not that it matters. She’s not going to want to come with me now.”

“I’m okay, Daddy.” Casey wiggled out of Becky’s arms and smiled at her father. “We didn’t miss our plane, did we?”

“Not yet.” Checking his watch again, Patrick sighed. “If you still want to go, we better make it quick. And

for fuck's sake, hold your grandmother's hand. We've had enough drama."

"Patrick—" Mrs. Dubois pressed her hands to her pale cheeks "—please don't be like that."

All the muscles in Becky's body turned to steel as she stood. Casey was staring at her, looking for guidance. And damn it, as much as it killed her to hand her daughter off to a man she hated more than she'd ever thought herself capable of hating anyone, she would be strong for her daughter.

"Patrick, things happen. Casey's been looking forward to spending time with you. Right, *poupée?*"

Casey gave a hesitant nod.

"There you go. Give me a call when you land." Becky stepped past Zach, somehow feeling stronger with him behind her. She hardly knew the man, but he'd saved her daughter. Said exactly what she'd needed to hear to pull herself together. She gave her daughter more hugs and kisses. Managed a big smile for her brave little girl as Casey approached her father. "Do what Daddy said. Hold on to Nanny's hand."

"I will." Casey hiked up her chin, her loose curls slipping over her shoulder as she glanced back at Zach. "Thank you for saving me from the escalator, Mr. Pearce."

He grinned and reached out to tap her nose with his finger. "You don't need to call me 'Mr.', angel-face. And I'm just happy I got there in time. Take care of yourself, okay?"

Patrick made a rough sound in his throat, gesturing impatiently as he headed toward the door. "Come on, Casey."

Mrs. Dubois followed him, holding tight to Casey's hand while awkwardly fumbling in her purse. She pulled out a flattened croissant and passed it to Casey, bending down to whisper something before breaking into a mock run to catch up to Patrick's long strides.

"Fucking douche bag," Scott mumbled under his breath. He stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jeans, then ducked his head at Zach's dirty look. He turned to Becky's mother. "Sorry, Mrs. Bower."

Her mother winked at him. "That's quite all right. He *is* a douche bag." She latched on to his arm. "We haven't been properly introduced—which doesn't surprise me. You're Scott Demyan. My daughter's told me *so* much about you."

Scott arched a brow at Becky. "Really? Anything good?"

"Not if she can help it."

"*Mother!*" Becky dropped her head back, whispering a prayer as her mother cajoled Scott and Zach into walking them out to the car. Erin Bower was loyal to her husband, but she'd always been a bit of a flirt. Becky didn't know how her father put up with it.

I wouldn't.

Past the doors exiting the airport, the summer sun glared down and the morning air became humid and sticky. Zach walked beside her, not saying a word, but somehow seeming completely aware of her. He slipped on a pair of aviator Ray-Bans, hiding eyes that were a startling pale green, the inner iris like leaves in the fall before they faded to yellow, circled by the darker shade of evergreens. She'd seen him in pictures and on TV often enough to avoid staring the first time she'd interviewed him, but the sunglasses were a welcome relief now that she wasn't distracted by her daughter.

Sunglasses! Damn it! Becky stopped and dug into her purse. She pulled out Casey's pink-framed glasses. "I'll be right back."

"Rebecca." Zach caught her wrist before she could rush back inside. His firm tone made her knees quiver, and she had to fight the urge to kneel gracefully before him, to offer surrender in a way she hadn't in far too long. "*Yes, Sir*" was on the tip of her tongue. His grip on her wrist was as secure as a shackle, slightly roughened with callouses which reminded her of supple leather. "You've said your goodbyes. Going back will make it harder."

"I know, but . . ." Becky hauled in a rough breath and took a big step back to get away from the effect he

had on her. His grip slipped from her wrist to her hand, giving her the choice to retreat even farther. A choice she didn't want. But she never submitted outside of a club—well, *almost* never. And she certainly didn't blindly obey when it came to her daughter.

Not that he expects me to.

“Casey gets very whiny when the sun hurts her eyes. Patrick can't stand it when she whines and—”

Zach nodded slowly. “Well, you're her mother. You know what's best. But I think it's a bad idea.”

It *was* a bad idea. Casey had seemed okay when she left, but would she be if she saw Becky again? “You're right, damn it. Sorry, I'm just not used to this.”

“Believe me, I understand. My sister, Tracy, was like that the first few times she had to let my nephew visit his father, and he's a decent guy. Just really young. After he graduated high school, he got a good job—gave her more than he had to because he wanted to prove he could be a good father. But Tracy had a hard time leaving her baby with anyone and it took a court order for her to finally let him see his son.”

“I can't blame her. If a full-grown man can't be responsible with a child, how can a teenage boy manage?”

“The same way a teenage girl can, I imagine.” The edges of his lips twitched as her face heated. “Kev has two amazing parents. And he's a great kid. My sister is fine leaving him with his dad now. They've learned how to get along, even though they can't be together.”

If only it were that simple. “Tracy trusts Kev's father?”

“After ten years? I certainly hope so.”

“Then it's not the same.” Becky's gaze followed a plane rising into the sky. Not Casey's plane. Not yet. *But soon.* She hugged herself. “I can't trust Patrick.”

Zach slid his hand to the nape of her neck, massaging the tense muscles, speaking quietly. “But the courts granted him visitation rights?”

“Only supervised.” Becky found herself leaning against Zach's side, his touch alone bringing her to a peaceful place. There was something about him that had her letting down the guards she erected with most men. Probably had something to do with the fact that he was gay. She let out a deep sigh. “His mother has to be with them for the whole visit.”

“Do you trust *her*?”

She nodded without hesitation. Mrs. Dubois has always been great with Casey.

“Then try to focus on that. Take some time for yourself while she's away.”

For a split second, she considered going to the club Dean Richter owned. Maybe she could find a Dom who could give her the release she craved, who could give her the illusion of freedom. Freedom from all the pressure closing in on her from all sides every single day. Not from her family; they were wonderful. But quitting her job, moving, starting over . . . the list of things she had to take care of was endless.

Zach could do that. He goes to the club.

Looking for men. But there were other Doms.

“Maybe I will.” She took a deep, bracing breath as they met her mom and Scott by the car. Scott was chatting away with her mother, slouched with his back against the driver's side door. In a tight white T-shirt and ripped jeans, he played the part of any woman's perfect wet dream.

My perfect wet dream. Ten years ago, when I was young and stupid.

His lips slanted into a half-smile as she stepped up to her mother's side. “Your mom says you haven't been out in a while, so I was thinking you and me could catch a movie or something.” The subtle drop in his tone implied the “or something” was more likely. “What do you say?”

Finally, a chance for my very own notch on your belt! Every time she was around Scott, she found the smartass she'd been as a teen coming out. But he was cutting back on the sleaze. So she'd be polite. “Dean's going to the club tonight, so I need to stay with Silver and my brother. Maybe some other time?”

“Bower’s a little too old to have his big sister babysitting him.” Scott hooked his thumbs in his pockets. “One night won’t hurt.”

Becky frowned. “He just had surgery. And Silver’s on bed rest.”

Her mother nudged her. “I’ll be there, *ma bichette*. It will do you some good to get out.”

Not with him. Becky chewed at the inside of her cheek. Her mother had her trapped. “I guess—”

“Naw, I get it.” Scott shook his head, rolling his shoulders as he backed away. “If you change your mind, I’m sure my cell number’s in that big portfolio you’ve got on me.”

“Scott.” Zach’s eyes narrowed. Caution edged his tone.

Scott rolled his eyes. “I’ll wait for you by the car, Zach. Mrs. Bower, it was a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Her mother smiled sweetly at Scott. “You should come by for dinner some time. I’m sure Landon would like to see you.”

“Ah . . . I’m not so sure about that, but I’ll keep it in mind.”

After Scott walked away, Zach opened his mouth, his eyes widening slightly as her mother threw her arms around him. Becky’s cheeks blazed as she struggled to find a way to explain her mother’s odd behavior.

“I will never forget what you did for my granddaughter. Whether or not Scott comes, you must promise you will before I head back to Gaspé.”

“I would love to, ma’am.” He let her mother pull him down to kiss each of his cheeks, then gently hugged her. “Enjoy the rest of your day, ladies.”

Once the men were gone, Becky climbed into the car, inhaling deeply before she glanced over at her mother, who looked much too pleased with herself. Becky thought she’d gotten past being embarrassed by her mother’s matchmaking hobby, but apparently not.

“Mom, you’ve got to stop—”

“You know, I really don’t understand why you and your brother have a problem with Scott. He’s such a nice boy.” Mom shook her head and clucked her tongue. “But if you aren’t interested in him—which I find hard to believe—you should definitely go out with Zach. You were quite friendly with him.”

Becky smirked. “You know what? You’re right. I think Zach would be perfect for me.”

“I’m glad you agree.”

“He’s easy to talk to, and I won’t ever have to worry about him pushing for more than friendship.”

Her mother’s brow shot up. “And why is that?”

“He doesn’t play for my team.”

“He certainly does! And even if he didn’t, that’s a silly reason not to . . .” A blush rose high on her mother’s cheeks. “Oh.”

“You still want him to come over?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because Dad . . .” She hated to say that her father was a little homophobic, but with the stiff way he’d been acting toward Dean ever since he’d found him in bed with Landon, there was no denying it. Her father was a wonderful man, but some of his beliefs were very old-fashioned. “I don’t want things to be uncomfortable.”

“They won’t be.” The determination in her mother’s tone convinced her. Becky grinned. Mom knew how to handle Dad. But that being settled left her mother free to latch on to the original topic. “So, about Scott . . .”

* * * *

Zach stood in the doorway of the bedroom turned gym of his condo, watching Scott on the weight bench, muscles straining as he lowered 120kg worth of weights to his chest. He lifted them slowly, fit enough to handle

several reps with good form, but doing it without a spotter was still stupid. Moving quietly across the room, Zach observed the way Scott's jaw tensed with the next rep. His cock stirred as his gaze ran over the man's sweat-slicked chest. They'd only fucked once, but he could still recall exactly how it felt to have Scott's solid body under him, taste the salty, slick moisture of his flesh, smell the musk of sex and the spice of his cologne.

Scott never turned down sex, so Zach could have had him any time before leaving to visit his parents. He could have him now. But joining the long list of Scott's lovers didn't appeal to him. And Scott wasn't ready to offer more. Yet.

Not to me in any case. Zach moved swiftly to straddle Scott's waist, curving his hands under the weight bar for extra support as Scott jerked with surprise.

"What the fuck, man?" Scott gritted his teeth, pushing against the bar as Zach forced it down. His eyes narrowed. "Let me up."

"No." The corner of Zach's lips edged up as Scott panted. He could already feel Scott's dick hardening against his ass. Gaining the upper hand with Scott wasn't easy, the man wasn't submissive—still, he reacted to being overpowered. But it wasn't his physical response that Zach wanted. "We need to talk."

Beads of sweat formed on Scott's temples. "You sure about that? Feels like you want something else. Get off me so I can get you off."

"What did you do while I was gone?"

Scott let out a rough laugh. "You mean *who* did I do. Was I supposed to keep track of names and report back? Guess I forgot. Can't even give you a number. Too many to count."

"Jesus, Scott." Zach's throat tightened. He knew Scott wasn't bluffing. Not that he'd really expected Scott to wait for him to come back; they weren't in any kind of relationship, but it made him feel a little sick to know Scott still let men and women use him as if he was good for nothing but a quick fuck. "You can't keep doing this. One day—"

"What? I'm gonna catch something?" Scott's whole body shook as he tried again to lift the bar. "You know I'm careful."

"It fucks with your head." Zach eased the weight bar onto the stand over Scott's head. "Don't forget, you were in my bed when you woke up screaming."

"Give it a break. I had a fucking nightmare." Scott groaned as he tried to sit up, and Zach shoved him back down. "Look, I appreciate you letting me stay here since my place has been taken over by Vanek's woman, but tone it down, okay? I didn't get away from a Domme just to deal with a Dom. You need to play that way, go to the club. You want uncomplicated sex? I'm all over that."

Clearly. Zach wrapped his hands around Scott's wrists, jerking them over his head to pin him down. "Is that what you want with Becky?"

Baring his teeth, Scott thrust his hips up to grind his dick against Zach's ass. "Yes."

Not fucking happening. The way Becky had reacted when Zach had slipped into command mode had all his protective instincts on overdrive. In her vulnerable state, Scott could do a lot of damage if he wasn't careful. And in his current mind-set, he wouldn't be. "She needs more."

"Then give it to her." Scott rolled his eyes. "You're fucking jealous, aren't you? It's obvious she wants me, but I'm no good for her."

"No, you're not. Not like this." Zach pushed away from Scott, threw his leg over the bench, then straightened. "Why would I be jealous? You've got absolutely nothing to offer."

"Nothing?" Scott sat up, grabbing his erection through his shorts. "I've got plenty to offer, pal."

"You keep telling yourself that."

As Zach reached the doorway, he heard rapid steps behind him and turned just as Scott's body slammed into his. His eyes drifted shut as Scott pressed against him, lips hovering close as he whispered, "You want

me.”

Curving his hand around the back of Scott’s neck, Zach hissed through his teeth. “Yes.”

“Then what’s the problem?” Scott undid the top button of Zach’s jeans, tugged down his zipper, then reached down to grab his dick. His lips were feverishly hot as he kissed Zach. “I’m right here.”

“No. You’re not.” Zach latched on to Scott’s wrist, even though his dick was throbbing with need, and roughly jerked his hand away. “We’ll talk again when you are.”

* * * *

Sitting in the spare room of Zach’s condo, Scott stared at his suitcase, all packed up and ready to go. His black T-shirt clung to him, already soaked through with sweat. Every inch of him felt disgusting. Tainted. Somehow, Zach had a way of reminding him of all the things he fought so hard to forget. Ever since that one fucking hot night. Sebastian Ramos, the massive defenseman the Cobras had acquired not long after signing Scott, had thrown a party and let them play with his sub. But Zach’s end goal hadn’t been the young woman.

It had been Scott.

“I want you.” Zach shoved him against the wall in Ramos’ basement, tearing at his clothes, the same hot mouth that had been on his dick moments before now on his neck, teeth closing on corded muscle, pain mingling with lust. Scott fisted his hands in Zach’s shirt, jerking him closer, groaning as the man kissed him. Zach’s lips tasted of the woman they’d pleased together, of the cigar he’d smoked which had Scott growing harder every time the tip touched his lips.

Zach always seemed so cool. So aloof. But his control seemed to have snapped as he jerked Scott’s jeans down to his knees and shoved him over the back of a sofa. There were supplies left for them by Ramos on a small table nearby. Zach found a packet of lube and used it to slick his dick before pressing the head into Scott, filling him with a smooth thrust.

“Fuck.” Scott tore himself away from the erotic memory, then stumbled to the bathroom to jerk off. He came hard and fast, but it was shallow compared to the satisfaction he’d felt with Zach. He slumped against the bathroom sink and pressed his eyes shut. The sex had been great, but going home with Zach after had been . . . different. Scary different. He’d gotten way too comfortable. They’d lazed around in bed for hours, talking about the game, about all kinds of shit Scott didn’t usually share with anyone. Somehow his brother, Jimmy, had come up. Scott caught himself right after he admitted he was worried about his brother’s gambling addiction. He’d tried to laugh it off, but Zach was fucking perceptive. He hadn’t pushed, but he’d made it clear Scott could talk to him if he wanted to.

Fuck that. Bile rose in his throat as he considered other things Zach would probably expect him to share. Like details from the nightmare. The echo of long, manicured nails scratching his flesh made his dick twitch. He shuddered and slammed his fist into the sink.

“People want me. They always have.” He lifted his head and sneered at his reflection in the mirror. “I’m a man. I have needs. It’s all good.”

It hadn’t always felt good, no matter how his body reacted. But he’d learned to deal with it in his own way. His life was made up of the game and sex. The sex didn’t mean much. The game meant everything.

No one had ever asked more from him. Except Zach. The man saw something in him that wasn’t there. Maybe because he’d been there when Scott had woken, gasping for air as he dreamed of hands and breasts all over him, of the scent of a woman’s cunt smothering him, dreams that hadn’t plagued him in years, but for some reason came as he slept with his head on Zach’s chest.

I wish I could give you more, man. Scott drew in a shuddery breath, turning on the faucet to splash cold water on his face. *But I’ve given you all I’ve got.*

Chapter Two

“**F**uck!” Becky winced as she stepped into the living room, just barely evading the remote which smashed into the wall near her head. Batteries rolled across the floor, coming to a stop by her sensible black kitten-heel pumps. Her brother slumped on the sofa and buried his face in his hands. She crossed the room to shut off the replay of the playoff game where the Dartmouth Cobras had been eliminated. Landon had torn muscles in his thigh, which had kept him out of nets in the second round. His replacement had been good, but not good enough. The team would have gone farther with Landon between the pipes. All the sports analysts said so. And Landon couldn’t seem to let that go.

His injury had happened the same night his fiancée, Silver, had gone into early labor. For the longest time, he’d been focused on Silver and his baby, but now that both were doing well, he couldn’t seem to get past failing to bring his team to the final stretch. To the Cup.

It wasn’t his fault. He’d given everything he had to the team. But everything was never enough. Not for any player who loved the game. And her brother loved it more than anyone she’d ever known.

“Landon . . .” Becky inched into the room, holding her breath as her brother stiffened and stared out the window, past the crutches propped on the couch cushion beside him. “Don’t do this to yourself.”

“Do what? Face the fact that I failed my team?”

Becky felt a presence behind her and stepped aside as Tim, Dean’s brother and the head coach of the Dartmouth Cobras, stepped into the room.

“Get over yourself, Bower. Making it as far as we did was a long shot.” Tim braced his hands on the side of the sofa, his gaze fixed on her brother until he finally looked up. “We wouldn’t have gotten there without you.”

Landon fisted his hand over the brace on his leg. “I’ll be useless for months. I can’t do anything for the team.”

“Bullshit.” Tim rested one knee on the sofa and grabbed Landon’s shoulder. He spoke through his teeth. “You can work on getting better.”

Becky backed out of the room, smiling at Dean as he rubbed her back before joining Landon and Tim on the sofa. He leaned close to Landon, speaking low. She didn’t know if the two were lovers. She didn’t want to know. All that mattered was Dean was there for her brother. And so was Tim.

There wasn’t much more she could add, but there was someone else that might need her now. Someone who would never ask for anyone’s help.

Pretty messed up that we’ve got something in common.

Becky made her way up the stairs, quietly, in case Silver was sleeping. She poked her head into the bedroom, grinning as Silver gasped and hid her laptop under the comforter.

“You’re supposed to be relaxing.” Becky slipped into the room and perched on the end of the bed. Not many would feel sorry for Silver, not with her opulent surroundings. A 50-inch TV on the wall. Egyptian sheets, and a thick quilt in pastels made by Dean’s mother to keep her warm. Magazines and books pre-release for her to read. The whole world at her fingertips.

But she was trapped in that bed. Doing her best to care for a baby who meant more than a brand new life. This baby was everything Landon had lost when his first child had been stillborn. Everything Silver did was monitored. Judged.

Must be exhausting.

“Please don’t tell Landon.” Silver pulled the quilt up to her chin, eyes already tearing. “I’m trying not to

stress, but I'm going insane in here. The doctor said I can keep working, but neither Landon or Dean are willing to take any chances. I feel useless. I never thought being pregnant would be like this."

"It isn't usually." Becky reached out and took Silver's hand. It was hard to put Landon's feelings aside, but Silver was carrying a little niece or nephew Becky would love no matter what. Which made it easier to come to Silver as a mother. "Men can be impossible when you're pregnant. I didn't have to deal with it when I was pregnant with Casey—Patrick was always pretty detached. But I saw how Landon was when *she* was pregnant. With what happened, I'm not surprised that he'd be overprotective now."

"He needs to focus on himself." Silver hugged the comforter to her chest. "I'm okay."

"I know you are, sweetie." Becky smiled and arched a brow at the laptop. "But you're being sneaky."

Silver slumped back onto the pile of pillows behind her. "I know. But my dad keeps calling me. He's cryptic—Dean wouldn't even let me speak to him until he swore not to discuss the team—but I know something's up. Do you know what's going on?"

Aside from the new owner? But if Landon or Dean had wanted Silver to know, they would have told her. The only thing was, keeping her away from her family wouldn't make things easier. Becky couldn't have gone through her own pregnancy without her parents. It wasn't fair that Landon and Dean were restricting Silver's contact with her family.

"My father isn't well. He needs me. And Oriana . . ." Silver frowned at her white-knuckled fists. "She's all over 'accepting' Ford as our brother. I'm . . . I'm scared that he's going to use her. And I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"You're supposed to focus on this baby." Saying so was easy. But Becky knew very well it wasn't that simple.

Silver frowned at her. "You have a kid. Tell me you don't still look out for Landon. Hell, you've made it obvious you don't think I'm good enough for him."

Becky winced. *Have I?* She'd tried really hard to accept her brother's choices, but Silver seemed so self-centered. Becky was accustomed to reading portfolios and making her own judgments, but going by Silver's had proved her wrong again and again. Silver was nothing like how she came off in public. And it was hard to believe Landon would love a woman who was nothing but a Hollywood whore.

Which left her with nothing but what she'd seen of Silver firsthand. Silver was young. She expected more from herself than anyone would ever ask of her. She was desperate to prove she could manage the team, but also desperate to give Landon a healthy baby. The stress of feeling so completely helpless couldn't be good for her. And if the doctor said she was fit to work, then maybe Landon and Dean should give her something to do.

But until then . . .

"Would it make you feel better to go see your father?"

A hesitant smile grazed Silver's lips. "Maybe. I mean, he hasn't seen me in months. The baby isn't real to him yet. It might give him something to . . ."

Something to live for. Becky couldn't argue with that. What parent wouldn't be excited about their first grandchild? And after his family losing controlling interest in the team, Anthony Delgado needed to be reminded that there was more to life than the game.

"Tell Dean and Landon you want to see him. One of them could go with you and—"

"And make things very uncomfortable." Silver rolled her eyes and shook her head. "But you're right. I've just been so worried about upsetting Landon that I . . . anyway, time to pull on my big girl panties and let them know what's what. Not like they'll spank me if they don't approve."

Becky laughed with Silver, but just the mention of that kind of discipline drew an ache deep within, the kind of ache she had before she ditched the latest fad diet which restricted her to boring food. Even having a

Dom give her *that* look before pulling her over his knee would be like that first slice of cheesecake after a calorie-restrictive diet. Damn it, she really wished she could go to the club.

No. Not while her baby was with her father. What if he called? What if something happened? She'd never be able to forgive herself if she was out having fun while Casey . . .

"Becky?" Silver took her hand, brow furrowed. "You look awful."

Blinking, Becky laughed. "*Thanks.*"

Silver groaned. "I didn't mean it like that. You came in here to check on me, and I didn't even think to ask how you were doing. I know letting Casey go with Patrick was hard. You need a distraction."

So everyone keeps saying. They just didn't get it. She'd had plenty of distractions after leaving Patrick. Being active at the local club kept her busy on the weekends when Patrick had taken Casey before. Fine, she'd only been on a lunch date with a fellow reporter when Patrick had called from the hospital, but . . . she shivered. What if she'd been at the club? With her cell phone off. She wouldn't have a leg to stand on in court if she couldn't be reached. Casey needed at least one responsible parent.

There was no way she was getting into that with Silver. So she simply shrugged. "With all you've got planned for the Ice Girls, I have plenty to do. The press is going to be all over the cruise in a few weeks. Keeping the Cobra players involved was brilliant."

"Why, thank you!" Silver beamed and the pink glow of her cheeks made her even more beautiful, despite the fact that she was no longer the perfect Hollywood size 0. "I'm glad I spent so much time setting this up during the season. The mansion thing didn't do all that well—hard to compete with Big Brother—but I have three cable companies airing the cruise. People in Canada are starved for hockey during the summer. Having the guys making appearances will bring up ratings, and you know the male fans will love seeing all those girls in bikinis."

Yeah. Sex on a deck. They'll eat it up. It had been years since Becky had worn a bikini, but she didn't miss it. Much. Fine, sometimes she wished the stretch marks would fade away, and the softness she'd gained with age could be toned down, but she was too busy being a mother and a career woman to obsess.

It would be nice if men looked at me like they'll look at those girls, though.

Patrick had at first. But he'd lost interest. The Doms at the clubs were more attracted to her submissiveness than her body, which had suited her after her divorce, but still . . .

Being lusted after as a woman would be nice. To have a man want her whether or not she was willing to kneel for him.

What about Scott?

Becky fingered the quilt covering Silver's legs, glancing up once to see Silver distracted by something on her laptop. Scott's teasing smile flickered behind her eyelids every time she blinked. The heat of his lips on hers returned, drifting down her flesh like a featherlight caress. She'd kissed Scott in defiance of Landon's overprotective attitude, but all she'd managed to do was make herself want the man her brother warned her away from even more.

Wanting him wasn't enough. She knew very well she couldn't have sex with a man who wouldn't commit to her unless it was during a scene. Because, during a scene, at least she knew the Dom was focused on her. She'd been with a man for six years who'd never given her that kind of attention. Who hadn't cared about her needs. No. Worse. Had mocked them when she'd finally opened up to him.

Scott wouldn't do that, but she couldn't get past feeling she'd be nothing but an interchangeable body with him. They'd have hot sex, and the next day she'd see him all over another woman. And she knew she couldn't deal with that.

Dean tapped softly on the door and stepped in holding a tray with two bowls. He set the tray on a swiveling, hospital-style table which could be positioned over Silver's lap. The rich scent of stewed beef rose from the

bowls, and Becky's mouth watered as she took in the thick, beef bourguignon.

"Eat up." Dean folded his arms over his chest, his black silk shirt clearly outlining his biceps, nicely sized even though they weren't as big as Landon's. Then again, very few men on the team had her brother's build. And as the Cobras General Manager, Dean Richter didn't really need it. But he kept as fit as his men, and between his physical strength, and the sheer power of his presence, he was quite intimidating. Even more so since his command had been directed to Becky. Along with his next words. "We're going out."

Becky stared at him. Her face heated, and she looked over at Silver. "But—"

Silver licked gravy off her spoon, letting out an appreciative moan. "This is delicious, Dean! Oh, and I think that's a great idea. What did Landon say?"

Dean chuckled, bending over to kiss Silver's forehead. "He obviously didn't want details, but he vaguely implied Becky should spend some time at the club."

"*Landon* suggested this?" Hell, if Dean wasn't with Silver and her brother, Becky would be flattered. More than a little tempted. But he was and this could get unbearably awkward. "Sir, I appreciate the offer, but—"

"You won't play with *me*, pet." Smoothing his hand over her hair, Dean gave her a level look. "But I will find someone to take you out of your head for a little bit. All your focus has been on your daughter, on your new position with the team. You need some time to let someone take care of you."

"Dean, I can't—"

"You can and you will." Amusement sparked in his eyes. "I trust you don't need help getting dressed?"

All she could do was shake her head and stop herself from smacking Silver when the younger woman giggled.

* * * *

Not in the mood for leather and props, Zach slid onto a bench at the bar in Blades & Ice, dressed in worn jeans and a faded grey Cobra T-shirt. The BDSM club was ringing with excitement, with life, but none of the energy reached him. A heaviness settled on his chest, as though he'd lifted too much weight and didn't even have the strength left for the roll of shame. All he could do was let it crush him.

You knew Scott wouldn't stay.

Resting a hand on the motorcycle helmet he'd dropped on the seat beside him when he'd come in, Zach waved to the Domme manning the bar. Chicklet came over but paused with the whiskey bottle in her hand.

"You sure?"

Zach arched a brow. "Did I give you the impression I was here to play?"

"With the right sub? I don't see why not." Chicklet propped her elbows on the bar, her black, partially shredded metal studded T-shirt stretching around her broad shoulders. Not big enough to make her butch, but close. Between her beer league and practicing with the whip, the woman was in excellent shape. She intimidated most—even the Doms—but not Zach. He simply respected her as the equal she was. And had come to value her opinion. "I could have told you getting mixed up with Demyan was a bad idea. Find yourself a nice, passive twink that will appreciate you. Wayne's got the flu. His sub would love some attention."

Swiveling on his chair, Zach searched the room for the big bouncer's lithe sub, Mickey. The young man was serving drinks. Keeping him busy was the only way to prevent him from approaching every Dom and Domme in the club with pleading, puppy-dog eyes. Without his Dom around to rein him in, he practically reeked of desperation.

Taking Mickey on would be worse than accepting the little Scott was willing to offer. Easy. Shallow. Zach needed substance when he played, a connection even if it wasn't long-term. Mickey couldn't give him that.

He was a little surprised Chicklet had suggested it. She usually seemed more perceptive. But he'd play along.

“Someone should take care of the boy. He looks lost.”

Chicklet straightened. “Yep.”

“And he’d be easy to deal with.”

“Very true.”

Zach nodded and pushed his shot glass aside. “All right. This should be interesting. I’ll see you—”

“Fuck off!” Chicklet threw her head back, laughing as though he’d said something hysterical. “Nothing fazes you, does it? I was just testing the water, sport. You need to get back in the game, but doing it with him would be stupid. There aren’t many male subs available here. You object to a woman?”

His whole body went stiff, but he kept his expression neutral. Ever since he’d confessed to the press that he preferred men, people treated him differently. No one would have questioned him taking on a female sub before—it was considered “natural.” Now everyone acted as though doing so would be going against his . . . inclinations.

He gave Chicklet a level look. “Do you prefer men or women, Chicklet?”

“Women.” Chicklet frowned. “Why?”

“I guess Tyler’s shit out of luck then.” Zach lifted his glass, tipping it slightly toward her before taking a blazing sip. “Such a shame. I would consider him if he was available.”

“He’s not.” Chicklet gnashed her teeth, eyes narrowing as she studied him. “And that’s not fucking funny.”

Leaning back in his chair, Zach regarded her steadily. “It wasn’t meant to be. I was making a point.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “Which is?”

“My preferences don’t restrict me anymore than they do you. I need a sub who needs me. And not just for one night.”

Chicklet’s lips slanted slightly as she glanced toward the door. “Good. You’re in luck.” She jerked her chin. “I’m sure you’ve met Rebecca Bower.”

He frowned at her, then followed her gaze to where Becky stood, close behind Richter, wearing a provocative slave dress. The white cotton was threadbare at the hem, so thin it was almost see-through, but unlike many women with the curves Becky had, she didn’t seem uncomfortable in her own skin. Not that she should be. Her curves made her luscious and soft. Unlike his teammates, he didn’t find himself attracted to the puck bunnies that made themselves available after every game. In his thirty-two years, he’d only had a relationship with one woman. Sue. The woman he’d seen himself spending the rest of his life with, whom he’d given his heart to. But they’d both been young. Ambitious. She’d moved to Washington to pursue a political career, and the long-distance relationship had been hard on her.

Hard on us both.

Their breakup had been amicable, and he still considered her a friend. But he’d never found another woman like her, one he could confide in, one he could share everything with. She’d been the first person he’d experimented with in the lifestyle. The first person he’d come out to. He smiled as he recalled her reaction. Sue had rushed to her bedroom and brought him all the gay romance novels she’d read. Breathlessly admitted she’d love to see him with another man.

But he hadn’t wanted anyone but her. To him, it didn’t matter if he was with a man or a woman. He was faithful.

Still, he’d been tempted.

After seeing so many on his team find happiness in ménage relationships, he wondered if things would have been different if he’d considered the idea. What if they’d found a man they could both love? A man who could have been with her while he was on the road.

But Sue was happily married, so there was no point in looking back.

Looking forward, all he could think of was Becky. She stirred something inside him that no one had in a

long time. He reflected for a moment, realizing it wasn't simply a sexual allure. As she looked to Richter before signing in, as she followed him with her head down and her gaze lowered, Zach felt the pull of her submissive nature. A need that went beyond sex. A need he was desperate to fulfill.

"I have met Becky." He handed his helmet to Chicklet so she could stash it behind the bar. "Please excuse me."

Across the room, Becky trailed Richter as he checked in with each of the DMs, both Dommes. Richter overlooked a piercing scene, then moved to a sitting area, motioning for Becky to kneel as he gestured toward the bar for a drink. He idly stroked Becky's hair, reclining on a leather sofa, speaking softly to her as she relaxed at his feet, resting her head against his thigh. Just being in that position seemed to bring her to a peaceful state.

But Zach knew he could give her more.

"Your pet is lovely, Sir." Zach clasped his hands at the small of his back, resisting the urge to touch the woman he knew was under Richter's protection for the night. "May I speak to her?"

"You may." Richter rubbed his hands on his leather pants, his tone light, but hesitant. "But first, I have to admit I'm a little confused. You've made your preferences clear."

"I'm not sure I have." Zach forced his tone to remain neutral. "I appreciate a precious gift, and it doesn't much matter who gives it."

Lifting her head, soft brown hair drifting over her shoulders, Becky looked up at him, lips parting slightly, blinking as though she couldn't quite believe the word "precious" could possibly be aimed at her. She drew in a soft inhale as he regarded her steadily to make it clear this was exactly how he saw her. Precious and beautiful. He caught uncertainty in her gaze. Something vulnerable.

You didn't come of your own accord, did you, little doe? He tightened his grip on his wrist behind his back. He needed to touch her, more than he'd ever needed to touch anyone. Her eyes were a soft grey, like the fur of the kitten his sister had as a child. But something about her eyes reminded him more of a doe, something he hadn't noticed when they'd first met. Out in the world, she came across bold. Fearless—except when it came to her daughter. Here she was timid, exploring the darkness with wide eyes, ready to dart away at any careless approach. The part of her that would brave out a scene just to satisfy her baser urges would shield the tender side which would run for cover.

But he didn't want her to hide. Not from him.

"There are many Doms here you could play with, Becky. And then there's me. I've thought about you a lot today, hoping you weren't alone, dwelling on things you can't change. Seeing you here . . . I think I can help you." He glanced at Richter, waited for his nod, then held out his hand. "And I promise you won't regret it."

Her throat worked as she swallowed. She lifted her hand, lowered it, nibbling at her bottom lip. "What do you want from me?"

"Only what you're willing to give. We'll start slow."

"This is just for tonight. I'm not sure if I can come back." Her brow furrowed. "I'm not sure I should be here now."

"But you are here. And we'll see if you'll be happy with 'just tonight.' Because I already know I won't be." His breath caught as she laid her wrist in his palm. His skin tingled under the warmth of her smooth, delicate flesh. He pulled her to her feet and brought his other hand up to cup her cheek. Then he smiled. "I haven't scared you away?"

"No. Damn you, you said exactly what I needed to hear." She looked down at her bare feet. "I didn't want to come."

She hadn't seemed all that resistant when she'd arrived. He stroked her cheek with his thumb. "Why not?"

"Because, if I'd wanted something meaningless, I could have made one phone call and had it." She glanced up at him quickly, then away. "But I don't want that."

He knew she was thinking about Scott. Which made it even more important that he keep the man out of his head. So he teased the hair at the nape of her neck with his fingertips and chuckled. "I take it you wouldn't object to talking, before and after? And perhaps a date, even though it could be considered a little backward?"

"I don't mind doing things backward." She grinned. "My mom still wants you to come over."

"And I plan to take her up on the invite."

"Good." She nibbled her bottom lip. "But tonight . . .?"

"Tonight I'd like to explore your needs." He already had something in mind. Something that would leave her fulfilled, yet wanting more. "Make you happy you came."

She turned her head and pressed a light kiss on his palm. "I already am."

"Good." He leaned close, brushing his lips over hers. "Then I guess it can only get better."

Chapter Three

The music screamed, but Becky hardly heard it. It was nothing but white noise in the distance. And the scenes around her were nothing but echoes of movement in the shadows beyond the sectioned off area Zach led her to. A gasp tore her away from the tranquil state she was in for a beat, but then he picked her up and sat her on the leather, padded table, tapping her cheek lightly so her focus returned to him.

“We should discuss the rules.”

Her eyes widened. More rules than the obvious? Unless he didn't know she had experience? *Maybe I should tell him.*

She opened her mouth.

He shook his head and placed a finger over her lips. “Listen first, little doe. It's clear you aren't new to this. But I am new to you. I feel more comfortable going over what I expect from a sub before I play with him or her. I do enjoy certain formalities, but no more than you're comfortable with.”

“I'm comfortable with it all. I've been taught well.”

“Have you?” He rubbed his chin, nodding slowly. “You seemed surprised when I mentioned discussing rules.”

“I apologize. I'm used to Doms knowing how experienced I am.”

“So they assume you'll know what they want.”

“Exactly.”

“I try not to assume anything.” He glanced over at a scene where a Dom spoke harshly to a sub who fidgeted as she knelt before him. The girl gave her Dom a blank look, like she really didn't get what she'd done wrong. Zach shook his head. His lips thinned. “I need to know what you expect from me.”

“I don't understand.” And she really didn't. She was here. He was a Dom. All she expected was for him to take control and let her please him. Not that she was sure anything she could do would.

What if he's settling for me because there's no one else?

“Do you need me to help you forget what happened today, Becky?”

She winced. *Oh, Casey. I hope you're okay, baby.* Her gaze lowered to her bare feet. “I'm not sure that's possible.”

“It is. All you have to do is lose yourself to what I do to you.”

Do to me? She held her breath, more than a little confused. He'd asked nothing of her yet. Other Doms expected her to kneel gracefully, to dress just right, to anticipate their commands. At the clubs she'd gone to before, she never had a problem finding a Dom because she made them look good. Fine, some Doms wanted a challenge, but dealing with a young, bratty sub could get tiresome. She didn't need to act out to get attention. Actually, she didn't really need attention at all. She just needed to settle into the nice predictable zone where she could turn over control to someone else.

It wouldn't take long to show Zach she could do the same with him.

“Tell me what you need, Sir.” She let her hands rest on her knees, utterly passive, ready for him to tell her what to do next. The only thing that made her uncertain was his being gay. Most Doms would tell her to strip right off. He might not need her naked to play.

To him you're a sub. Not a woman.

Her throat tightened slightly. She'd wanted a man to see her as more. To want her as a woman. She'd be missing out on that with Zach.

He did mention a date.

Great. Maybe they could go shopping together. Or see some chick flick. It would be just like hanging out

with a woman. He could be her new best friend.

And what's wrong with that? You don't have many friends.

"I will tell you, pet." Zach took hold of the bottom of his T-shirt, then pulled it over his head. "When I'm ready."

Her mouth went dry. He was . . . *damn*. A pure work of art in muscle and ink. She drank him in like gulps of fresh, spring water after a long hike. The tattoo covering most of his right arm caught her attention, and she found herself drawn in to the intricate details. A weeping angel perched on a tombstone, beneath a tree with limbs that seemed barren at first, but looking closer, held tiny pale green buds. The dead grass among the graves gave way to fresh patches. New life amidst death.

She reached out to touch it, then pulled her hand back. One did not simply *touch* a Dom. Not without permission.

"Go ahead, little doe. As long as your hands are free, you may touch me whenever you'd like." The edges of Zach's lips twitched when she hesitated. "Not something you hear often?"

"Not really. Usually a Dom's all about touching me. Getting me naked as soon as I've agreed to scene with them" Her cheeks heated. She lowered her hand to her sides, fiddling with the hem of her dress. "Not that I'm complaining."

I need you to touch me. But only if you want to.

"You make me wonder how many 'real' Doms you've been with, sweetheart." He tossed his shirt aside and placed his hands on the table by her hips. "They sound rather selfish."

She shook her head. "Not at all. They gave me what I needed at the time."

His head tilted to one side. "So you never needed to touch them?"

An ache settled between her eyes. She wasn't sure what to say to that. Yeah, sometimes she wanted to touch them, but once they shackled her wrists, she didn't really think about it. It was all about the scene they orchestrated. And in pleasing them, most of her needs were met.

He took her hand and pressed it to the center of his chest. His skin was smooth, cool, like velvet molded over flowing steel. His pecs tensed slightly as she explored the fine, dark curls covering his chest. He rested his hand on her shoulder as she continued touching him, massaging lightly as she trailed her fingertips over the tattoo on his arm, then grazed them up his neck and along his jaw. Freshly-shaven, nothing hiding the sharp angles of his face. The rich, warm scent of cologne with dark, earthy tones, drifted in the air, so alluring she had to fight not to press her face against his throat to breathe it in. She smiled as she felt the small cleft in his chin.

Sweet mother, he's gorgeous.

"Go ahead. Say it." Zach tugged her hair, light creases forming around his eyes as she looked up, the only evidence she could see to prove he was actually a couple of years older than she was. He was the type of man who only improved with age.

"Say what?" She ran her thumb over his bottom lip, soft and silky and warm in contrast to the rest of him.

He kissed her thumb. "It's a shame."

"Why? Do you hear that a lot?"

"Yes. All the bunnies are in mourning since I 'came out.'"

"I believe it." She laughed. "Actually, I was thinking you're one of the most handsome men I've ever met, but it's probably a bad idea to say so. Your ego doesn't need any more stroking."

He grinned, gathering her hair in one hand, using it as a handle to tip her head back. "I have a feeling that mouth of yours has gotten you into a lot of trouble."

She made a face. "Umm . . . not really. Not at the clubs anyway. I don't usually—I'm sorry."

"For what? If I didn't want you to talk, I'd gag you." He leaned closer. "Or find another way to keep you

quiet.”

His hand framed her jaw as he slid his lips over hers, brushing back and forth, light as the caress of a feather. Her lips tingled, parted slightly as the tip of his tongue teased them. She closed her eyes as he kissed her, gently at first, then deeper, tasting her, holding her jaw and hair firmly so she couldn't move. Her pulse raced as he pressed his body against hers, stealing her breath. He teased her upper lip with one last flick of his tongue, then eased back.

The room spun like a carousel out of control, with her at the center, Doms in leather with whips and chains taking the place of the pretty ponies, the music a hard-core beat pierced by screams. The atmosphere of a club usually brought her closer to the right headspace than the Dom alone, but with Zach, it wouldn't matter where they were. If he could do this with just a kiss . . .

“I won't restrain you tonight, Becky.” He stroked his hand down her spine, watching her face as he laid her down on the padded table. “I'd like to see how well you can follow basic commands. Like, ‘don't move.’”

What is this, Submissive for beginners? She knew better than to frown at him, but by the way his brow rose, she'd come close. “I've never had a problem with restraints.”

“Good. Then you should do just fine without them.”

“But—”

He put a finger over her lips and shook his head. “Come to think of it, I believe we *should* have some speech restrictions. You are permitted to speak to discuss limits. To use the club safeword—though I doubt you'll need it during this scene. If you don't understand a command, you may ask me to clarify, but I think I've been clear so far.”

Don't scowl at him, dummy. She inhaled slowly, then nodded. “Yes, Sir.”

“Do you have any limits I should know about?”

“Ah . . . no blood, scat and such, no heavy impact or anything that leaves marks that last more than a day or so.” Her cheeks heated, but she knew she had to be honest. And her last limit could end things before they'd even started. “No anal.”

The edge of his lip twitched. “Was that something you expected me to want?”

“Well, you're . . .” *I really hate this part.* Negotiating with someone new meant talking about embarrassing things. She preferred writing it all down and letting the Dom read the list ahead of time. Discussing only what she'd marked as “uncertain.” But Zach hadn't even asked Dean for her limit list. “Do I have to say it?”

“Yes.”

“You're gay. I figured the only way you would . . . I mean . . .” Hell, she didn't even know if gay men did that with women. But he wanted to play with her, so he had to be getting something out of it. “I understand if you're no longer interested.”

He sighed and bent over, bracing a hand on the table by her head. “There will be no penetration of any sort tonight, little doe, but once we reach that point, I will enjoy your body, however you are willing to give it to me. If that is a limit, I will respect it. However, we will discuss why you're not open to trying it.”

“I have tried it.”

“I see.”

“I didn't like it. It hurt and I'm not into pain.” She spoke in a rush, not sure he could possibly understand since that was the only way he could be with most of his lovers. “That's another problem, actually. Some Doms aren't interested in a sub with no tolerance for pain. Not that I mind a light spanking now and then, but—”

“Shh.” Zach kissed her, then let out a light laugh against her lips. “It's okay. That's enough for tonight. I know you're not comfortable sharing all this. But I will tell you one thing.”

She swallowed, her whole body trembling as she realized he wasn't ending things and sending her off to someone else. He still wanted her. She dented her bottom lip with her teeth, hissing through them. “What?”

His lips grazed her cheek. He spoke quietly in her ear. "It doesn't have to hurt."

She shivered as he straightened, leaving her arms slack as he drew them up to lay on the table above her head, stretched out much like they would be if she *had* been restrained. He did the same at the bottom of the table with her ankles, setting them far apart, making her all too aware of how short the dress she'd borrowed from Silver was. Thankfully, Dean hadn't told her not to wear panties, because the dress was snug enough to bare her to the hip with her thighs spread. Since she hadn't planned to play tonight, she hadn't thought to shave during her shower this morning. Her legs weren't too bad, but she'd have been humiliated to show any Dom that she'd neglected to shave her privates.

If I'd known Zach would be here—that he'd want to—

"You stiffened up. What's wrong?"

I did? She tried to relax. Zach had already decided on no penetration. But as much as she didn't want him to see her unkempt, she couldn't help being a little disappointed. It had been a long time since she'd wanted a man this much. A thought of Scott had her rolling her eyes. Okay, not *that* long, but Zach was the first one she wouldn't feel cheap with in the morning. She had a feeling he—unlike Scott—would still be there when she woke up.

"It's nothing." She forced a smile. "You just have me feeling a little reckless."

"Do I?" He chuckled. "Don't tempt me, Becky. It would be easy to forgo the whole scene and simply make love to you, but that wouldn't satisfy either of us."

She nodded. "Because I'm a woman."

His jaw hardened. "No. Because I'm a Dom, and I need to give you more." He raked his fingers into her hair, tightening his grip to the edge of pain. "As you said, you could have had that with a phone call. I could have had it with less."

Perfectly still, needing to show him, at very least, she could follow instructions, Becky wondered exactly what Zach's relationship with Scott was. There were whispers that Scott would do anyone, anywhere, but was he really bisexual? Zach didn't seem the type of man to take on casual lovers, but Scott wasn't the type of man to take on anything but. Her attraction to Scott was frustrating as hell, because she knew nothing could come of it. How much worse would it be to be used by him when he was also a friend? A teammate?

Scott had been seen with more women over the summer than in his whole career. A different one every night. It had started not long after Zach had come out to the press.

If the two were connected, Scott wasn't just a player. He was a coldhearted son of a bitch. He'd blatantly rejected Zach. And that had to hurt.

"Zach—*Sir*, I didn't mean to . . . I didn't think that you and Scott were—"

"Serious? We're not." Zach sighed. "Please don't apologize. You have the right to know if I'm involved with anyone—I'd expect you to tell me if you were. Can we agree that we're both single, that we both have similar interests, and that neither of us is interested in a one night stand?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then shall we start? Do you understand what I expect from you?"

"Don't move. Don't speak unless for clarity or to safeword."

"Excellent." He gave her a slanted smile, then slowly circled the table, his hand moving in an outline of her body without touching her. "That dress looks lovely on you."

"Thank you." She groaned when he clucked his tongue. "Sorry, Sir."

"Do you often have difficulty submitting?"

She shook her head.

"Hmm. I see." He stopped by her side. Drew his finger up her arm from her inner wrist to her elbow. She twitched. Clenched her fists. "But you are finding it difficult to obey me?"

“No, Sir.”

“Neither safeword or clarification.” He smoothed his hand over her cheek. “All the Doms you’ve been with haven’t asked for much, have they? No, don’t answer.” His tone was rough, but not with anger. More . . . carefully restrained. “I’d love to push you. Challenge you. But not yet. First you have to prove you can handle this.”

She almost said, “I can,” but then remembered she wasn’t supposed to say anything. The restrictions suddenly felt more imposing than any gag or restraint. She settled into the sensation, relaxing because giving him what he’d asked for was really very simple. No guesswork involved.

The approval in his eyes was like a bright golden star bursting in the center of her chest. She inhaled deeply and held her breath, waiting to see what he’d do next.

He circled the table again, stopping at her other side. Hooking his fingers into the thick straps of her dress above her shoulders, he pulled it down, moving her as he pleased, taking one arm, then the other, until both were free of the dress. Only the neckline covered her breasts as he placed her arms. Her nipples tightened into sensitive little points as she waited for him to expose them, but instead he walked to the end of the table and traced his fingertips down the soles of her feet.

A giggle escaped her, and she squirmed as he did it again.

“Be still.”

And again. It tickled, but she pressed her eyes shut, ground her teeth, and fought not to move. His hands curved around her feet and she bit back a groan as he pressed his thumbs into her soles. He stroked, massaged, then tickled, alternating until the pleasure edged on torture. Yet, somehow, she kept still. Sank into a place where all that mattered was his touch. As it moved up to her calves, she sank even deeper, responding to his slow, even breaths, to his soft praise. She needed to know she had it in her to please him. To be everything he needed and wanted by doing nothing but what came naturally.

“I was right. You are precious.” He kissed her bare shoulder, then rolled the material of her dress down over her breasts. “This isn’t just sex for you. It’s so much more.”

“Yes.” She absorbed the satisfaction in his tone like earth soaked in rain after a drought. She knew she shouldn’t speak, but she had to make sure he wasn’t just doing this for her. “Am I . . . do I make you happy?”

“More than I can say.” He lowered his head to her breasts, resting his forehead between them. He kissed the side of one breast and she shivered. The sensation was both tender and erotic. Lingering, building as he kissed his way up to her nipple. “Don’t forget what I’ve asked of you.”

Don’t move.

Pleasure speared her as he sucked her nipple into his mouth. Her eyes teared as she struggled not to arch up. As she pressed her lips together.

“No man or woman has pleased me as much as you have.”

He pinched her nipple between his finger and thumb as he sucked the other.

“I won’t be easy on you, little doe.”

He shifted down her body, drawing the hem of her dress up over her hips, over her belly, kissing the exposed flesh as he worked his way down.

“But if you are mine . . .”

His fingers traced the edge of her panties, along the sides of her pussy lips, close to where the material had grown damp. He bit down just above the slight swell of her stomach, rubbing her panties into her clit.

“I will give you what no one else can.”

The muscles in her thighs tensed. Pleasure curled up in her core, sizzling like a live wire in a shallow pool, electricity zipping across the surface.

“Come for me, little doe. Lose yourself. Give up control. It belongs to me.”

Becky opened her mouth wide and choked back a scream. She came as though he'd pulled a trigger, set off a spark which ignited everything inside her. A sob tore from her throat as she shook, her hips bucking, her core tightening and releasing sporadically, the sensation fierce even though nothing filled her. Nothing grounded her. And suddenly she needed that. Something to hold her down before she shattered.

"Come here." Zach gathered her in his arms, carrying her to a chair to hold her tight as she came apart. It felt like she'd been torn open, exposed in a way she didn't know how to handle. She shuddered, gasping as she curled into a ball on his lap. His dick pressed into her hip, and she blinked fast.

She'd done nothing for him.

Nothing!

"Don't cry." Zach pressed her head against his shoulder as another sob tore out from her chest. "Rest for a minute, then tell me what's wrong."

A hysterical laugh broke free as she lifted her head. Blinded by tears, she tried to meet his eyes. "Not for me. It's not okay if it's just for me."

"It wasn't, little doe. Believe me." He kissed her forehead. "You have no idea what you've given me. And it's not over. There will be more. So much more."

"It's not enough!" The tears stung her eyes. And she didn't know why. It was so wonderful, but taking more than she gave felt so wrong.

"For tonight it is." Zach kissed her forehead, "Come home with me, Becky. Let me hold you while you sleep. I need to see you when I wake up."

Casey . . . Becky's throat locked around a hard lump. Zach *had* managed to make her forget. Her daughter was away. Would be for three weeks. She had nothing to go home to. Except her brother—who had Silver. And her parents—who had each other. Waking up alone in a house that wasn't hers, thinking of the moments she'd spent not thinking about her daughter at all. How could she . . .

"I can't . . . Sir, I screwed up. I shouldn't have done this. What if—"

"What if what, Becky? What could have happened while you were with me?"

"I don't know. Something bad."

"No. Your mother is still at Dean's. He has his phone. Someone would have called him."

"I'm her mother."

"And Casey is with her father. You had no choice."

Helplessness ripped through her, like someone had cracked open her chest. "It's not fair."

"No. It's not. And we can talk about it more in the morning."

Zach dressed her, then held her close to his side as he approached Dean. He spoke low, and she couldn't make out a single word. All she could think of was what a horrible mother she was. She knew Patrick would screw up. Her daughter would need her. And she'd been so incredibly selfish—

"Rebecca, look at me." Dean took hold of her chin, trapping her with his gaze until his words were all that mattered. "You know my number. I will call you if there's anything. Swear to me you'll do the same."

Why would I need to call you? She blinked at him, confused. She was a grown woman, not a little girl who needed protection. But Dean obviously didn't see it that way.

"I will."

"Good." Dean turned to Zach. "Make sure she gets some sleep. She hasn't gotten much at my place since that asshole called her."

"I'm not surprised." Zach pressed her head against his chest. "But she's tough. Don't hesitate to call if—"

"I won't."

"All right." Zach's arm was heavy on her shoulders. Solid and steady. More so than the ground beneath her feet. "Any more objections, Becky? Tell me now."

All that she'd thought was stable within crumbled. She rasped in a breath as she shook her head. It was ridiculous to need aftercare after the little they'd done, but she knew she did. If he'd sent her home without letting her . . .

What can I do for him? He'd mentioned talking in the morning. That could work. She could make him breakfast. Maybe clean for him.

Which was funny, because she'd hated cleaning up after her husband. He'd always been a slob. And doing things for him never meant anything. But doing things for Zach would. She relaxed against his side and let out a sigh.

"No objections. I wouldn't have liked for the night to end like this."

Zach chuckled and kissed her hair. "Sweetie, we're nowhere close to the end."

* * * *

The central air in the condo kept the temperature comfortably cool, but as Zach watched Becky step up to him, shivering, he wondered if he should turn it off. He studied her face as she took hold of the bottom of his T-shirt. She didn't seem cold.

Nervous?

No. Excited. Maybe even impatient. Her cheeks were flushed, eyes wide and bright as she quickly pulled his shirt up over his head. She hadn't hesitated when he'd told her to undress him. He grinned as she dropped the T-shirt and moved closer to him, exploring the muscles of his arms and chest like she couldn't stop touching him. His eyes drifted shut as she pressed a kiss to the center of his chest, and blood pumped steadily into his dick. There was something so close to worship in the way she kissed him. The way her hands caressed him. And the look in her eyes as she lowered to her knees and undid his belt . . . it was as though, in that moment, he was her whole world.

How long had she needed this for the little he'd done to mean so much? He kept his expression neutral as he fought the urge to pull her into his arms and ask her. This wasn't the time to force her to think about what had been lacking in her life. With how she'd reacted to receiving more than she gave, the best thing he could do was let her serve him.

He stepped out of his jeans, then clucked his tongue as she flung them aside. "Is that how you treat your Master's things, pet?"

Becky gaped up at him, blushing even as a shy smile graced her lips. She shook her head. "No, Sir."

After she'd folded his clothes and placed them on his dresser, she returned to him and hooked her fingers into the elastic of his boxers. She bit her lip as she eyed his erection, barely contained by the snug, black cotton.

"Wait."

Blinking at him, she rested her hands on her thighs. He could tell she was trying to hide her disappointment—she might have succeeded if he hadn't been watching her so carefully.

He motioned for her to stand. "I need to see you. All of you."

Letting out a sigh of relief, she held still while he eased the slave dress off her shoulders and let it drift to the floor.

Chuckling, he tapped her chin with a finger. "What was that for?"

"It's just . . ." Her brow furrowed. She stared at her bare feet. "I don't understand why you waited so long to get me naked."

His lips curved slightly as he let his gaze travel slowly over her lush body, from her ample breasts to the swell of her hips. He cupped her cheek. "You were already naked to me, little doe."

Her breath caught as he kissed her, and he smiled against her lips as she moaned softly and leaned into

him. She went still as he took a knee, and he heard her swallow hard as he pulled down her skin-tone, silk panties. A shadow of stubble covered her pussy and he glanced up, taking note of her blush.

“I’m sorry I didn’t—”

“Don’t be. It pleases me that you didn’t go to the club ready to give yourself to just any man. And you haven’t tried to cover yourself from me. Very nice.” He traced a finger over her stomach, pressing his lips together when she stiffened. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s just . . . my stomach is gross.”

His brow lifted. “I don’t think it’s changed since the club.”

“No, but it was dark. You couldn’t see all the stretch marks and—”

“Stop right there and listen carefully.” He straightened, putting a hand on her hip to hold her in place. “You are beautiful. Each and every inch of you. As long as you are with me, this is my body. And I won’t accept you saying—or *thinking*—anything negative about what is mine. You bear those marks from carrying a precious child. You should be proud of them.”

She inhaled, then nodded. “I never thought of it that way. But I will now, Sir.”

“Good girl.” The way she glowed at the simple praise quickened his pulse. Suddenly, he had to show her, with more than words, that he meant exactly what he said. Tonight she was his, and he was desperate to claim her. But not with sex. He’d only ever fucked one person in mindless lust and passion, and he still regretted it. He refused to go there with Becky.

But there were other things he could do to her which would satisfy them both.

“I always shower before bed. Would you care to join me?”

The fact that he’d asked seemed to throw her off, but he would only go so far on taking her choices from her on the first night. Eventually, he could see them falling into a peaceful routine. But not yet.

Her fingers curled, then straightened, as though she’d resisted making fists at her sides. She dropped her gaze to the floor. “Yes. I would.”

He gave her a level look.

“S-sir.” She drew in a sharp inhale. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. If you have a problem with my requests, say so.”

“I don’t. It’s just . . .” Her forehead creased. She clasped her hands in front of her. “There are things I’d do for you if—”

“Like what?”

“I . . .” She bit her lip hard. Then released it as soon as she caught his frown. “I’d like to wash you.”

“I’ve never had a sub do that for me.” He let out a soft laugh at her scowl. He’d openly criticized her former Doms—which was bad form, but he couldn’t help it. They’d shamelessly used a sub who desperately wanted to serve. Her actions and words condemned them to his mind. He had a feeling his own words had just condemned every sub that came before her.

She gave him a heavy-lidded smile. “Let me take care of you, Sir. After me, you won’t accept any less.”

He hooked an arm around her neck and kissed her forehead. “I don’t doubt that for a second.”

In the shower, beneath the hot spray, he stood, relaxed, letting her soap his body with a facecloth covering her hand. The mist surrounding them picked up the subtle aroma of his orange and ginger body wash, fresh and invigorating. She scrubbed his back, then rubbed the tension from his muscles with slick, surprisingly strong hands. Up on her tiptoes, she washed his hair, using her fingertips to massage his scalp. He let out a soft moan as the soothing sensations slowed his pulse. As she shifted closer, he held on to her waist, partially because he was afraid she’d slip. Partially because he couldn’t help himself. Already he was making plans for what he would do with her in the days, the weeks, to come. Having all her focus on him, drawing all his focus to her, created a level of intimacy he’d never felt with anyone.

After rinsing him off with the showerhead, she knelt gracefully, gazing up at him as she wrapped her hand around his dick. He nodded, and she took him in her mouth. Jaw clenched, he held off release as long as he could, then dropped his head back, a rough sound escaping him as he came down her throat. Pleasure rocked his body so hard all his strength went to just staying on his feet. Her hot mouth held him until he went slack. And as she drew away, the selfless contentment in her eyes humbled him. He could bring her to bed and do nothing for her and she'd be happy. Because this wasn't about her at all.

It wasn't enough for him though. A sub like her could give again and again, expecting nothing in return. But he needed to give it.

Not that his needs weren't a little selfish.

Tone rough, he pulled her to her feet and latched on to her thigh. "Put your foot on the ledge of the bath."

She obeyed without question, trembling as he dropped hard to his knees. He molded her ass in his hands and buried his face between her thighs, tasting her with a loud groan he knew she would feel, deep in her core. He flicked his tongue roughly over her clit, then took the nub between his teeth, tugging gently. She whimpered. Her feet slipped.

"Hold on to me." He slipped his tongue between her slick folds as she braced her hands on his shoulders. "For as long as you can."

He dipped his tongue in deep, over and over until she cried out. The muscles of her cunt tightened around his tongue as he thrust in. Her juices covered his face, sweet and hot and so fucking delicious. He drank her in as she trembled, catching her as she fell and lowered her so she could sit on the edge of the bath. With long strokes, he drew out her pleasure, dipping, sucking as she came again. He knew he could force another orgasm, but that would be cruel. She was exhausted. Barely able to stand even as he pulled her to her feet.

And she wouldn't be happy until she knew she'd done more for him than he'd done for her. He caught the subtle stiffening of her shoulders as she stepped onto the bath mat. Part of him wanted to simply carry her to bed and curl up with her in his arms, but he couldn't rest until he knew he'd fulfilled that baser instinct she had to please.

"I can't go to bed like this, pet." He glanced over at the towel hanging by the bath, then let his arms fall to his sides. "If you don't mind?"

"I don't." She grabbed the towel, fumbled with it, bowing her head as she dropped to her knees. "You don't even need to ask."

Fuck. Good job, Pearve. He'd helped her reach the level of submission that satisfied her, but a request, rather than a command, shifted the balance. This was new to him, but he had to adapt quickly or he'd throw her off.

They still had so much to learn about one another. He reached down and tipped her chin up. "I won't ask next time. But you have to promise to tell me when you've had enough."

"I will." Her eyes twinkled even as she rubbed the towel down his thigh. "I'm not interested in a 24/7 arrangement. On our date, I'll be Miss Independent." She laughed, and the carefree sound made his heart skip a beat. He hadn't found himself a slave. He'd found a woman with many layers he wanted to explore. Her next words proved it. "That's when my mouth gets me in trouble."

He grinned. "Hmm. Well, I should warn you. I tend to punish mouthy subs."

"You will *not* punish me for speaking my mind."

"Of course not. So long as you do so respectfully." He placed his hands on his hips. "'Yes, Sir' and 'No, Sir' resolve most debates rather quickly."

Her eyes went wide. "You're not serious, are you?"

"No. I already know you're a very intelligent woman, Becky." He took the towel from her as she stood, using it to wipe the beads of moisture from her cheeks. "Challenge me. I look forward to it."

She placed her hand over his, holding the towel against her face, her eyes searching his. "I've never had a

real relationship with a Dom. Was never sure I wanted one. Sometimes, the way I get when I'm in a scene . . . I'm afraid to lose myself."

"I won't let that happen." Pulling her into his arms, he rested her head against his shoulder and kissed her damp hair. "I want you, little doe. All of you."

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