

Chapter 18

Anja's mind was a blank slate. All she could focus on was the heat radiating from his skin, the clean, masculine scent of his sweat, the sheer overwhelming presence of him. Her carefully constructed walls of authority and composure were crumbling under a relentless hormonal assault.

The words tumbled out of her mouth before she could stop them, a product of pure, unfiltered impulse.

"Can I... touch your abs?"

The moment she said it, the world seemed to stop. The low hum of the gym's air recyclers was the only sound in the dead silence. Anja's eyes widened in horror at her own audacity. She wanted the floor to open up and swallow her whole.

"I-I was joking," she stammered, waving her hands dismissively. "That was a stupid joke. I should go." She started to turn, to flee from the most embarrassing moment of her new life.

A supernova of triumphant fire exploded in Bradford's eyes. He wasn't going to let this moment escape.

His hand shot out, his fingers wrapping around her wrist. His grip was strong, inescapable, yet somehow gentle, careful not to bruise her delicate skin.

He leaned in closer, his voice a low, husky growl that vibrated through her entire body. "Everything I have is yours, Mistress. You don't have to ask."

Before she could react, he guided her hand forward, pressing her palm flat against the hard, ridged wall of his abdomen.

The contact was electric. His skin was scorching hot, the muscles beneath

her palm as hard as carved stone. A full-body tremor shot through Anja, and the blush on her cheeks deepened to a fiery crimson.

He let out a low groan, his eyes darkening as they fixed on her hand against his skin. The sound rumbled through his chest, vibrating against her palm.

Anja's fingers, acting on their own accord, traced the deep grooves between his muscles. She felt them contract and shift with his every ragged breath.

Then, sanity returned with a crash. She snatched her hand back as if she'd been burned.

"I was just curious," she mumbled, staring at the floor, unable to look at him. "I... I should go get some breakfast."

A low chuckle rumbled in Bradford's chest. Before she could take a single step, he bent down, sliding one arm under her knees and the other behind her back, and lifted her off the floor.

Anja let out a startled gasp, her arms instinctively wrapping around his thick neck to steady herself. The feeling of being held so effortlessly, of her feet dangling in the air, sent her heart into a frantic, hammering rhythm.

"My hands are covered in sweat," Bradford said, his voice a smooth, reasonable explanation for his outrageous action. "Allow me to escort you to wash yours."

He had perfectly framed an act of intense intimacy as a simple matter of service. It was brilliant. It left her no room to protest.

He carried her across the gym to a large, marble washbasin in the corner. He set her down gently in front of it, but he didn't step away. He stood behind her, his body caging hers against the sink, his arms coming around her to turn on the motion-activated faucet.

Warm water streamed over her hands. He took them in his own, his large, calloused fingers gently lathering soap over hers. The gesture was so

unexpectedly tender, so domestic, that it made her head spin.

As he rinsed her hands, he shifted his weight. A large splash of water arched up from the sink. It landed directly on the front of her thin, silk robe.

The delicate fabric instantly turned dark and transparent, clinging to the curves of her breasts like a second skin.

Bradford's hands stilled. His gaze dropped, and his breath hitched. He saw the faint, rosy outline of her nipple through the wet silk.

His throat went dry. The world narrowed to that single, devastating detail.

He tore his eyes away, a muscle jumping in his jaw. The red haze of the Frenzy Period threatened to descend again.

"My apologies, Mistress!" he said, his voice tight and strained. He grabbed a fluffy hand towel, his movements clumsy and rushed. "I am so sorry. I was careless. Please, punish me."

Anja looked down, saw her own state of undress, and felt a wave of hot, frustrated embarrassment. She snatched the towel from his hand and clutched it to her chest.

"You're an idiot," she snapped, more flustered than angry. "Turn around. Don't look."

"Yes, Ma'am," he said instantly, spinning on his heel to face the wall. "I will retrieve a change of clothes for you from the master suite immediately."

"Just hurry up," she muttered, her face hidden behind the towel.

He strode towards the elevator, his back ramrod straight. He looked like a chastised soldier retreating from his commander.

But as the elevator doors slid shut, sealing him from her view, a slow, deeply satisfied smile spread across his face. A smile of pure, predatory triumph.