



Break

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Dark, Sports

Description: My soul and skin are marked, burned with my tormenters touch so deeply I can never erase it. They took so much from me when they forced me to be theirs.

I never wanted to be theirs; I wanted to be safe in my own home and free from the monster that is my father.

So, I ran and hid for so long.

For 7 years I was safe from my father and his three star players.

But now the three that scarred my skin have found me. They are forcing their way back into my life. Destroying the walls I'd put up to protect me.

They've come back to claim what they believe is theirs and they won't back down until I break and submit to them.

'Break' is a dark sports romance. You can find the triggers on the copyright page.

Total Pages (Source): 56

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:59 am

Prologue

You would think being the coach's daughter would have some perks or at least keep you protected from bullies. Sadly, that's never been the case. Not at high school, nor at college. Somehow, I have something that lures bullies closer, something that says, 'Hey, you, tough guy, come be mean to me for no reason.'

I used to wonder why, but with growing up comes some wisdom. So, here's what I've learned about bullies and why they do whatthey do.

There's no reason.

I couldn't find it. Tried, though.

They just do whatever they want because they can. There's no one to stop them, no one daring enough to step up to them.

There's one thing I do know, and that's not to ask for help. Don't be a snitch, because it will only get worse.Way worse.

"Dad, please, do they have to come here for dinner again?" I ask as I slump on the couch, my chest tightening at the reminder of my father choosing his precious football player above his own daughter.

It's not even one player...

Iwishit were just one player.

“Don’t be like that. You know how his home situation is. He needs to have some better food in his system to up his game.”

Right, his home situation... but what about mine? No one ever hears me complaining about my dad’s... habits.

“I just thought...” I sigh as he wanders off into the kitchen, not even aware I was still talking to him.

The doorbell rings and a chill runs up my spine. The thought of being in the same confined space as them makes my heart pound heavily. If only I could run and hide.

“Get the door,” my dad bellows from the kitchen, and I hurry. Hearing the annoyed nag at the end, I don’t dare to bring it up again that I don’t want his star player—star players—at our house for dinner.

I swing the front door open and there they are.

“What are you doing here?” Dimitri snaps, his eyes piercing mine as he steps inside.

With their intimidating gazes, those cocky smirks plastered on their annoying faces, I have to remind myself how to breathe, gathering up all the strength and courage that I have to face them with a defiant glare.

“I live here, idiot,” I hurl back and move aside as Jaxon stomps ahead, his body grazing across mine with a sharp look on his face warning me to fuck off.

I meet his narrowed gaze with a glare of my own, doing my best to stand my ground until he follows Dimitri and walks away.

But they aren’t the dangerous ones. No, it’s the one at the back, staring at me with a

smug smile on his face. His head dips low as he peeks up through his dark lashes. His teeth rub over his lip and he glides closer.

“Such a daring little thing,” he whispers as he hovers by my side, the warmth of his body seeping into mine as his leather jacket clings to his body. “Always smelling so sweet.”

I stand frozen to the spot, my hand wrapped tightly around the doorknob, waiting for him to take one more step so I can close it. But he already knows what he’s doing.

“Hope, close the fucking door!” my dad bellows, and I take a sharp breath, my hip still bruised from my last... lesson.

Knox chuckles and moves slowly, too slow. Every second that passes by grows more and more intense, and it doesn’t help that he’s so close to me. So close that the hairs on my arm rise.

“For fuck’s sake,” my dad curses and stomps our way, his footsteps closing in and only a simple kitchen door standing in his way.

“Knox, move,” I seethe as my gaze flickers to the kitchen door and back to Knox’s smug grin.

“Maybe I like to see you get hurt,” he muses as he glowers at me. I swallow as tension presses on my chest, realizing he knows what will happen next, but he doesn’t know everything, even if he acts like he does.

I close my eyes. The kitchen door flings open and Knox steps ahead, leaving me alone with an open door and a fuming dad.

“Are you fucking deaf?” My dad yanks the door from my grip, slamming it shut, and

then his raged breath fans over my skin.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:59 am

I squeeze my eyes shut as my body quivers, almost curling into itself as I become smaller.

“Look at me,” he snarls, and my eyes flutter open, carefully dragging up until I meet his as the smell of cigarettes wafts over me. “Be grateful the boys are here. Go wash your hands and behave!”

I don’t dare to flinch or cower further since that fuels him even more. In my mind, I constantly question what I’ve done wrong to deserve such a hateful man as a father, but I get no answers. I’m always left with no answers.

Is it because my mom is gone? Is it because I’ve disappointed him? I’m sure he’d prefer to have a son over a daughter, but how’s that my fault? All I’ve done is try to be a good person and a good daughter, but that’s not enough.

Nothing will ever be enough for him.

He walks away without another word, flinging the door open to the kitchen to finish up dinner.

Tears prick at my eyes as I hear all their muffled voices coming from the kitchen and I hurry toward the hallway that leads to my bedroom. How can I feel like a stranger in my own house?

It’s wrong that these three football players feel more at home in my house than I do. I shouldn’t be surprised, though. Wherever they go, they rule over everything.

Knox, Jaxon, and Dimitri fill any room that they're in. Their presence is dominating. Suffocating. No matter how far away from them I am, I still feel them lingering.

I'm so distracted by my own thoughts that I don't even hear quiet footsteps behind me until goosebumps trail over my skin, warning me of the predator behind me.

Large hands cover my eyes, my breath hitching as a strong chest presses against my back.

His warm breath fans over my skin as he speaks. "Guess who."

My heart pounds heavily. The sound fills my ears and complete darkness obscures my vision. Adrenaline races through my veins. The warmth of his hands. The deepness of his voice. The strong smell of his cologne.

"Knox."

Knox chuckles softly, his breath tickling my ear. He just can't seem to leave me alone, but I also can't get them and their torment out of my head. "Good girl."

His words make me swallow hard, my entire body going rigid. As much as I want to, I can't pull away from him or shove him off. He's far too strong anyway, and like with my dad, fighting back just spurs them on.

They want me to fight back just to have an excuse to torture me further.

"Taking a while to 'wash your hands', don't you think?" Dimitri's amused voice sounds behind me, followed by Jaxon's chuckle.

"Her dad is too busy getting another six-pack from the garage to notice," Knox replies as he turns me around to face the others, his hands grabbing my upper arms

from behind.

A cold sweat threatens to break out as I know nothing good happens when my dad gets his hands on beer, but there's no stopping him. Like there's no stopping these three from taking whatever they want.

They live to torment me, and I have no idea what their obsession is with me. What have I done wrong?

"Let me go," I say, my voice coming out weak and breathy.

"What was that?" Dimitri asks as he steps closer to me. His frame might be a bit shorter than the others', but he's all muscle and still towers over me.

My mouth goes dry as he glares down at me. "I want you to let me go and leave me alone," I say.

Jaxon moves to Dimitri's side, reaching over to grab my chin in his hand. He smirks as a soft whine leaves me. "It's cute that you think you can tell us what to do."

My eyes uncontrollably train on his tongue piercing, my gaze skimming over the additional snake bite piercings and eyebrow piercing.

"What do you want from me?" I ask them, sensing Knox leaning closer to my ear from behind me.

"We know what you do at night, sweetheart." Knox's voice comes out husky and teasing, threatening to make my knees weak.

My eyes widen as my ribs tighten. No, they can't know. How? Do they think they can do the same?

With my chin still in his hand, Jaxon leans close, the air growing thick around us. “We’ve always known what a dirty little thing you are. We’ve seen what you like. How you moan when you ride Coach’s cock.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:59 am

Seen? No... They can't know what happens in this house behind closed doors, how my father touches me every time he gets the chance. How the fight in me has gone away as all it has done was entice him further.

"Then you know how wrong it is, what he does to me!"

Knox smiles. "We've heard the moans, how you come when he fucks you." He takes a sharp breath, closing the gap between us until his hard cock presses on my back. "We've heard and seen enough to know what's going on here. You might pretend you don't want this, but you're just a dirty little slut."

My heart stammers in my chest, and I whimper as Dimitri takes a strand of my hair between his fingertips, his voice hitting me hard and heavy. "He told us how you liked it, bragged how you crave his cock so much as if it wasn't enough. But we know how to fix that for you. You just need more, don't you?"

"He lies!" I spit out as Dimitri's finger brushes over my cheek. "Don't touch me."

They laugh as if my words don't mean anything. "I only see one liar here," Jaxon murmurs, and I realize how much my dad has twisted their minds, made them believe everything he says to them, even if it is something so foul as raping his own daughter. Again and again...

They idolize him in a way that made them blind for what is wrong and what is right. And now I know why they never said anything when my dad pulled me onto his lap, his hand brushing over my legs as if he were showing off for his precious players.

“We want to have a taste, sweetheart,” Dimitri whispers. “Coach doesn’t mind sharing with his top players.”

Tears well in my eyes as I try to shake my head. “Don’t do this, please.”

Knox chuckles darkly as his hand glides down my body and lingers on my hips. “We’re going to show you what happens to whores just like you.”

One

7 years later

The therapy room hums with the familiar sounds of equipment being adjusted and players preparing for their sessions. It’s just another day in the fast-paced world of professional football, and as the physical therapist for the local NFL team, I’m no stranger to the hustle and bustle.

But today feels different.

There’s this knot in the pit of my stomach warning me of something. The whispers of new recruits didn’t help, either. Rumor has it that three players are joining the team, and there is always a little bit of shake-up when new people join. But this doesn’t feel like that.

“Just keep doing those reps, Aaron. Don’t push too hard. Listen to your body,” I tell one of the offensive linemen, who nods and continues exercising his right leg that’s healing well from an injury a few months ago.

It’s my job to look after this team and make sure they’re ready and healthy enough to go on the field every week. I should be focusing on that, but that nagging won’t leave me alone. I’ll have three new guys to look out for, but I have no idea who they are

yet.

I walk to the front of the room and grab my schedule, my eyes skimming over the page to see the new additions since I haven't heard anyone speak their names. As soon as my eyes reach the bottom, my stomach drops and my next exhale comes out shakily.

This can't be real.

Knox Hunter.

Jaxon Steele.

Dimitri Kessler.

Three names that send a chill down my spine and bring back memories I had spent years trying to forget. I squeeze my eyes shut as those memories flash through my mind. The harsh words. The sharp eyes. The touches they left on my skin, branding me with scars I could never get rid of.

None of those things have left my mind. They probably never will.

"You okay, Hope?"

I snap out of my thoughts as I rub over my chest, feeling the scars under my touch. My gaze falls upon Jared Carter, one of the team's wide receivers. His friendly grin and warm brown eyes help me relax a little as I smile back.

"I'm okay. I just saw the new players on my schedule," I say, not getting into my past with him. I have to keep that hidden from everyone, even if it was years ago.

I thought I could move forward from all of that, but the three of them are apparently determined to haunt me forever.

Jared nods as he drapes his workout towel over his shoulder. “They’re pretty good players. We’ll have a better shot at the playoffs with them on our roster.”

I’m sure they’re great football-wise because they were always revered for their athletic talent. It was why my dad adored them. Why he cared about them more than his own daughter. Or at least, he cared differently for me.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:59 am

Bile threatens to rise up my throat at the thought of my dad, but I focus on Jared instead. I don't want anyone to think that something is up, and I definitely don't want anyone to notice any connections between me and the guys. It's best if I just keep myself in check.

I love my job, and I don't want them to mess this up for me.

"Right. That's what I was thinking." I put on a fake smile, nodding to Jared as he heads off to stretch.

My eyes settle on the therapy room as all the players do their instructed reps and stretches. This place had become a safe haven for me, helping me heal and move forward from the past. But that's obviously not the case anymore.

It seems like the nightmare of my past is far from over.

I try to keep myself busy, burying myself in work. Only when the gym empties do I realize it's time for lunch. I don't even have a sliver of appetite. My stomach is in knots, warning me that my predators are steadily getting closer.

Thankfully, I haven't seen the guys yet, but they have to be around here somewhere. I just haven't found them.

More like, they haven't found me.

The only saving grace is that there are still people milling around. People who aren't like my dad and wouldn't just let the torment happen.

Some of the staff are cleaning off the many machines we have, while others are chatting at the check-in area out front.

The bright white lights of the physical therapy office make shadows a rarity, which means that it's harder for any of the three big guys I remember to hide. After a few breaths, I wave to one of the front desk workers and head to the cafeteria to eat. Some other people mill around, talking and laughing.

It's not as huge as a school cafeteria, but there's plenty of room for a whole football team and our staff.

I grab a salad and take a seat off to the side. Typically, I have no problem sitting with the other staff members or some of the players, but I'm not really in the talking mood today. Those three names have shaken me up so much that I need time alone to settle down.

If I could disappear, I would.

Just as I poke my fork into my lettuce, movement around the cafeteria door catches my eye. I peek up and feel my stomach twist as Knox, Jaxon, and Dimitri stride inside, looking like they own the place.

Their smirks and confident strides make my heart race with a mix of anger and fear. They were my tormentors, the ones who had made my college years a living hell with their relentless bullying. Now, they're back to torture me some more.

I almost wonder if they know I'm working here, but that's a stupid question. It's not like anyone pays attention to who works at the therapy office when they're focused on their NFL career. Just as it passes through my mind, Knox glances my way.

Uh-oh.

Knox's brows knit as he stares down, then I see the moment of recognition. He grins and nudges the others before he stalks toward me. Jaxon and Dimitri follow.

I try to stay strong as they approach, but the memories flood back with a vengeance. The taunts, the laughter, the feeling of isolation that had consumed me every day. I thought I had left that behind, buried deep beneath the façade of professionalism I wear like armor.

But now they're here, in my workplace, threatening to unravel everything I had worked so hard to build.

I force a smile onto my face as they greet me. I'm going to stay professional. That's all that matters.

Their grins widen and that evil glint in their gazes chills my core. I can't let them see how much they still affect me. I can't give them the satisfaction of knowing they still hold power over me.

And I can't let anyone else know about our history.

Once they approach the other side of my table, my eyes sweep over them. My left hand tightens into a fist as it rests on my thigh out of sight.

"Welcome to the team," I say, my voice steady despite the turmoil roiling inside me.

Their dark chuckles echo in my ears as they exchange knowing glances, and a shiver runs down my spine. This can't be happening.

"Long time, no see, Hope," Knox says as pulls a chair back and sits across from me. Dimitri does the same and takes a seat next to him.

I swallow hard as Jaxon sits next to me, his body even bigger and more muscular than I remember. They don't look all that different, but they have stubble and more muscle on them.

We're not alone in my dad's house. We're in a public area. This should be fine, or at least that's what I tell my anxiety. I clear my throat. "I didn't know you guys went pro."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:59 am

“Of course, we did, Princess. Remember how good we were?” Jaxon asks as he leans closer to me. His cologne with touches of cedarwood and sage washes over me.

I grind my teeth as my eyes sweep over all of them, doing my best to not look affected in the slightest. That’ll fuel them. “Well, I’m sure you know, but I’m the team’s physical therapist.”

“Which means we’ll see plenty of you,” Dimitri says, the sleeves of his white T-shirt pulling tight around his large biceps.

“After you help us stretch, we’ll have to stretch you,” Knox comments with a devilish glint in his eyes.

“Has that line ever worked for you?” I huff, pretending their words and presence aren’t anything out of the usual. But as heat rushes to my cheeks I quickly add, “We should keep things professional.”

Jaxon clicks his tongue, and I jump a little when his hand lands on my thigh under the table. His touch burns right through my khaki uniform pants. “Where’s the fun in that, sweetheart?”

I try to shift my leg away, but he grips my thigh, anchoring it in place. “Get your fucking hand off me!” I dig my nails into his hand, tightening my grip until I’m sure I have broken his skin.

“Oh, look who got some bite,” Knox says as his face softens. However, his tone remains sarcastic. Teasing.

My grip won't stop Jaxon's. As I try to move my leg and squirm away, he just stares at me.

This is what they do. Trap their prey, then let them fight because then they can have even more fun.

"Just leave me alone," I spit, and Jaxon's grip finally leaves me. "Don't you have to meet your new teammates?"

Dimitri shrugs. "We've already said our hellos." He crosses his arms on the surface of the table and lowers his head until he peers at me through his lashes. "We saved the best for last."

I push Jaxon away and rise to my feet, feeling their dark eyes follow my every move. Jaws tense. Eyes narrow. For not staying to play with them.

"All of you are on my schedule. I'll see you at those scheduled times," I say and start to step away from the table, but Jaxon strikes his hand out and grabs my wrist, stopping me in my tracks. "Jaxon—"

"You don't want to leave things like this," Jaxon warns me.

I swallow hard as his grip tightens, making my wrist ache. Part of me wants to cower, run, and hide like I used to, but I need to put up a boundary, even if they try to break it down. "I'll see you all at your scheduled times."

Tearing myself away one more time, I walk away from the table, hoping desperately that they won't try to follow me. Before I leave the cafeteria, I pitch one more look over my shoulder in their direction.

They're probably calculating their next ambush, and I doubt it'll stop there.

This is going to be a long season.

Two

As the sun starts setting, I'm dying to get home just to be away from the guys. I'm even more exhausted than I usually am at the end of a long workday. The three monsters from my past sap the strength right out of me, leaving me feeling even weaker.

I don't know how they do it, how they have this effect on me, but I'm sure they have everything planned out and at least a few backup options.

I stride to the entrance of my apartment building that isn't too far away from the football stadium, aching to slip my shoes off, change my clothes, and take my mind off today and the hell that probably awaits me in the days to come.

Who knows what's going to happen next? What else do they have in mind for me?

They've already found their places among the team. The coaches like them, and I just hope they're out having drinks or dinner with their other teammates. Maybe they'll make some close friends and leave me alone.

Wishful thinking.

When I head through the lobby of the tall, modern apartment building, I come to an abrupt stop at the sight of Dimitri talking to one of the front desk workers. He's in another room, but the wall is made of glass, so I can see him perfectly clearly.

And that means he can see me too.

Dimitri looks to the side and smirks at me, his eyebrow cocking up.

What the hell is he doing here?

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:59 am

With my heart pounding, I do a quick glance around the office. There are a few other people lingering around or talking to the workers, but I don't see Jaxon and Knox. There's no telling where they are, but I'm not going to stick around long enough for them to find me.

Keeping my head down, I hurry to the elevator just straight ahead, praying that I'm able to make it to my apartment before Dimitri gets to me.

A man walks in front of me to get to the recreation room attached to the office, making me stop in my tracks.

"Excuse me," I say, an awkward, apologetic smile forming on my face as I quickly side-step him.

The man pitches me a strange look, probably wondering why it looks like I'm running for my life.

In a way, I am.

When I reach the elevator, I press the up button what feels like a hundred times. "Come on. Hurry up."

I lift my eyes, watching the red digital number slowly go down toward the lobby. My skin grows warm and clammy, and I swear I'm on the verge of a panic attack as the elevator gets closer and closer.

"Where are you running off to so fast?"

My blood runs ice cold as I whirl around and face Dimitri, my heart threatening to pound out of my chest. He's wearing a black bomber jacket, a white T-shirt underneath, and black pants. Dark just like his short hair.

"I'm going home. What are you doing here? Are you stalking me?" I bite out as I try to take a step back from him.

Dimitri laughs, the sound chilling me to my core. "No, me and the guys live here. I was getting an extra pool key."

I can't stop my jaw from dropping. "Wait, what? You live here? Why?"

Dimitri gestures around us. "This is a nice place, and it's close to the stadium."

Those things are true, but there are other nice apartments. Ones that are better, and more importantly, away from me. How can I deal with them at work and as neighbors?

When the elevator dings and the doors slide open, I step inside, turning around just as he steps on. Our bodies almost collide, and his eyes only leave mine to hit the button for the third floor.

"What floor?"

I keep my mouth shut, not wanting him to know where I live. He knows the building, but he doesn't know the floor or unit number. I'd like for things to stay that way.

When the doors slide shut, Dimitri suddenly surges forward and grips the lapel of my army green jacket, pulling me forward. "Do you really think we won't be able to find you? Do you think you're smart enough to dodge us?"

I stare up at him with wide eyes, my breath getting trapped in my lungs. I grab his arm to keep myself from falling, my heart pounding heavily. “Let me go!”

Dimitri pulls me even closer until our bodies press together. The warmth of his body seeps into mine as his ridged muscles box me in. “We finally found our little plaything. We’ll never let you go.”

I can’t stop the shaky scoff that breaks from me. “Plaything? I’m not your puppet to control! You can’t just storm back into my life and ruin things!”

Dimitri laughs in my face as he tightens his grip on my jacket. “We didn’t come here to ruin things. We came here to claim back what’s ours.”

My blood runs hot now, a twisting sensation filling my stomach. The problem with them is that they don’t just talk the talk. They act on their promises. “Where are the others?”

Dimitri smirks. “What? Just one isn’t enough for you?” He scoffs. “It never was.”

His words are like a punch to the stomach, knocking the breath right out of my lungs.

The elevator doors sliding open saves me, and he finally lets go of my jacket. I catch my breath, my hands slightly shaking.

“We always get what we want.” Dimitri pats my cheek, making me grimace. “See you around, sweetheart.”

More churning in my stomach. I turn and watch him walk out of the elevator, waiting for the doors to close before mashing the button for the fourth floor over and over. When the elevator finally reaches the fourth floor, I rush down the hallway to my unit, throwing myself inside and locking the door behind me.

I press my back against the front door, listening to the sound of my heavy, rapid heartbeat. I can barely wrap my head around today.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:59 am

I overheard some of the other players talking today in the gym, and they already like the guys. They think they'll be good teammates and cool guys off the field. The three of them trick and manipulate others so easily, but they let me see their true, twisted sides.

Even years later, I still don't understand why I'm the exception.

After taking a minute, I push off my front door and head straight to the kitchen, flicking on the light. Hues of lightgreen and white meet my eyes, and my familiar apartment color scheme slightly comforts me. As long as they don't find this place, I'm safe here.

I can hide here. My own sanctuary.

But when I leave, I know what I have to face.

I stare at the bottle of whiskey I have hidden in the back of the cupboard. My chest moves with every breath and slowly, my heart rate drops.

I shouldn't go back. I shouldn't become the same person my father was and drink away the pain.

Tears cloud my sight and I close the cabinet, knowing it will make me feel better for just a little bit, but then control slips through my fingers and one drink becomes another. I have to stay strong because the guys aren't just going to leave. They've been offered positions on an NFL team, and they have the added bonus of having me as their physical therapist. That's constant contact. Constant torment.

But I'm going to fight my way through this. I have to be strong.

Three

I check the time and groan. It's a whole hour before I should wake up, but there's no way I'm falling back to sleep and into the nightmares and memories of my experience with Dimitri, Knox, and Jaxon.

The guys have infected my mind.

"Oh, screw it," I mutter as I toss the sheets off my bed.

I'll just get an early start at work, and I'll be able to avoid them for at least a little while. I'll have some peace and quiet to do my job.

As I brush my teeth and fix my thick black hair in a high ponytail, my eyes settle on my reflection in the mirror. Dark crescents paint the skin beneath my pale blue eyes, reminding me of how bad of a night I've had. The last thing I want is for the guys to know that they're getting to me, so with some concealer, I cover up the tiredness on my face and add some extra blush and bronzer to give me some color.

My stare drops to my chest, following the carvings, the scars they inflicted on me on that night seven years ago. The night before I ran.

Some curve lower to my belly, some even paint the insides of my thighs. They marked me, made me theirs, and now it seems they're here to claim me again.

I scoff and shake my head as I put on my team polo shirt and fitted khaki pants. I close a few extra buttons to be sure no one sees the scars and slide on my tennis shoes before I head out the door. My eyes dart up and down the hallway to make sure the coast is clear.

They can try whatever they want, but this time, I'll fight harder. I'll take back what they stole from me.

They're probably all on the third floor, but I don't know that for sure. They could be spread out. Knox or Jaxon could even be somewhere on this floor. It's bad enough that they live in the same building as me. With my luck, one of them will be on my floor too.

This must be purposeful sabotage. This can't be a coincidence.

With a racing heart, I hurry to the elevator and hit the down button multiple times. Luckily, the elevator isn't busy right now since so many people are asleep, so it reaches me quickly. I hit the floor for the lobby and leave the building in a brisk walk, not even daring to glance around.

Once I feel like I'm in the clear, I slow down and take a deep breath of cool, early morning air. The sun has barely broken through the horizon, slight darkness still painting the sky. I head to the stadium and park in the employee parking lot.

When I round the building to go to one of the side entrances closest to the gym and therapy room, my heart plummets at the sight of Knox leaning against the building with a cigarette between his fingers.

"What are you doing here?" My words escape me before I can even stop them.

Knox takes a drag, blowing a cloud of smoke into the air. He lowers the cigarette and smirks at me. "Getting a head start on the day."

The same idea I had. Of course.

"By standing outside and smoking a cigarette?" I question him, unable to rein in my

sass.

Knox smirks and crushes his cigarette under his shoe before stepping closer to me.

I take a step back. “Don’t.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

Knox puts his hands up innocently. As if he could ever be innocent. “How do you like your job?”

“Is that a trick question?” I ask as my eyes narrow.

Knox’s piercing stare finds mine, making my heartbeat stall for a second. “No.”

I sigh. “I love this job. I worked hard to get it,” I say in a firm voice, hoping he has enough heart to not screw this up for me. But does he have a heart at all?

Knox hums under his breath as he nods, the side of his mouth turning up. “It’s a lot of pressure.”

“I can keep up.”

He grins, but he always looks wolfish when he smiles, like he can eat me alive at any second. “Well, I did choose this team because it had the best physical therapist.”

White noise rings in my ears as I stare at him in shock. “YouknewI was on the team before you transferred?”

Knox shrugs, tucking his hands in his pockets as he steps closer until his frame towers over me. “Perhaps.”

My heart thunders as I try to make sense of this. “You could’ve picked any other team, and you came to this one for me?”

Knox lifts a finger and clicks his tongue. “Me and the guys had multiple offers, but you definitely sweetened the pot for this team.”

I was a deciding factor? I drew them here like bees to pollen, and I can’t get rid of them. I shake my head. “You need to leave me alone!”

He laughs. “You should calm down, Hope. This is a good thing for all of us.”

My finger jabs his chest. “A good thing for you! You three! Not me!”

Knox smirks and catches my hand before I can pull it away and draws me closer, the smell of his cologne filling my nose. “It could be good for you too if you just behaved.”

I peek down at our joined hands, my stomach flipping. I try to pull away, but he tightens his grip that much more.

“Stop this,” I grit.

Knox leans even closer, his face only inches from mine. “Why? Can’t handle it? You already handled us before.”

My eyes widen as I lean away, my heart threatening to pound out of my chest. “Just leave me the fuck alone, Knox!”

Knox laughs again, the sound chilling my very soul. “Don’t lie to yourself, sweetheart. I bet you still think about us at night.”

I can only stare at him, my face paling. Of course, I think about them at night. Just not in the way that he thinks. I grit my teeth and steel myself as much as I can. “You wish!”

A smirk crosses his face as his eyes roam over my tense face. He finds amusement in every little thing that I do like I'm some sort of toy or game that he can play. His free hand cups my cheek, and I'm too frozen to jerk my head away from him. "Don't worry, we still remember how rough you like it."

All of the oxygen in my lungs evaporates, leaving me stunned and breathless. His words grate on my very soul, stripping away my strength. My control. He has me in the palm of his hand, waiting to crush me at any moment.

"You have no idea what you're talking about, Knox," I tell him, my voice coming out in a harsh whisper.

Knox slides the hand on my cheek around to the back of my neck, tightening his grip and keeping me from pulling away. The ghost of his touch on my skin burns, and I feel weak at the knees as his tongue trails over his bottom lip. "Maybe we should remind you."

My survival instincts kick in, and I gather enough strength to shove him away from me. I stumble back from the force, but I manage to plant my feet and ground myself as he takes a few steps back. "Fuck off, Knox!"

Knox merely chuckles, and a chill races up my spine, and my fight or flight instincts intensify again. This time, I want to run and get as far away from him as I can, like I've done before.

Noise from me behind me makes me turn. A relieved breath leaves me as I force a smile on my lips. Other team players are strolling our way, helping me by just being present.

"Hey, Hope."

“Morning, Hope.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

“Hi, guys.”

I watch them walk up to Knox and slap hands with him in greeting, acting like they're old buddies. Heat bubbles within me as anger climbs to see how easily the guys were able to integrate themselves into the team. How can no one see past their masks?

Why am I the only one who is able to peek behind the curtain?

While Knox is distracted by the two other players, I quickly slip past them and go to the therapy room.

As I flick on the light, I'm welcomed by that familiar buzz of them above me and I rest my back against the wall to catch my breath, my skin burning hot.

It's only day two, and I wonder what they have in store for me. I'm terrified to find out.

Four

I just have to get through another day. It's a day like any other. I can manage it. I have to. Dimitri, Knox, and Jaxon have taken too much of my life away from me. They don't get to take my job too.

So, I start the day by avoiding them. I check in with Jared instead. He's safer. He smiles gently and increases the weights until I give him a playful glare.

“Go easy on yourself, Jared. I don’t want you hurt and out for the rest of the season,” I say gently, touching his bicep. “I’m serious.”

“You’re sweet is what you are,” he says, his warm smile washing away another bit of frustration and upset that lingers from my three bullies returning with a vengeance.

“Sometimes sweeter than others. Watch how bitter I get if you push yourself too hard,” I counter.

He chuckles and stops pumping weights for a minute. “I don’t think you have it in you to be mean, Hope. I like that about you.”

I wish I were the kind of girl who could tolerate dates. I’ve tried it, but something always reminds me of the past, makes me feel unsafe, and since I’m determined to find a good man, I don’t want to drag any of those guys into my problems. I chose the type that aren’t heavily muscled or threatening, which means they can’t hurt me, but they can’t protect me from my night terrors either.

“Hope?” Jared asks, starting to stand up.

“Hope!” my boss calls. “I need you to do the physicals for the new guys. Can you handle that?”

It’s a rhetorical question. I’m sure of it. It’s my job and since it’s my job, he’s just making sure I’m going to do it. I force a smile and nod. “Of course. Let me just wrap up with Jared.”

My boss gives me a thumbs-up before walking away, and Jared gives me a warm smile. “I’m almost sad that I’m not going to get one-on-one time with you once I’m better.”

“That’s silly,” I say. “You’ll be able to get back on the field with plenty of fans screaming your name instead of riding the bench.”

I linger with Jared, going over everything way more in depth than necessary. If he notices, he doesn’t say anything. He feels safer. He’s warm and has such a kind, sweet face. He’s plenty muscled, but Jared has always made sure I feel comfortable.

The three I’m supposed to be checking out today have never made even the slightest effort to make me feel safe, let alone comfortable. In fact, I have this constant, pervasive thought that they’re actually competing to see who can upset me the most.

Based on the list I’m given, Knox has the first opportunity to ruin my day. Of course he’s going to take it. It’s Knox.

I walk to the private office and call Knox over. He sets some weights down and stands at his full height. He flicks his dark brown hair off his forehead and subjects me to his intense green eyes. Seven years and his eyes are still as entrancing, wicked, and intense.

Knox walks over to me, his broad shoulders, his fists down at his side, tightening his biceps. God, he’s big. Too big, too intense. He doesn’t need piercings or tattoos to overwhelm anyone.

“Eager to see me again?” he asks in a low, deep voice.

“I need to do your physical,” I say as calmly as I can after this morning.

“Oh, so you’re going to call in your backup so that way you can control yourself, right?” he asks, his gaze flicking to Jared.

“No. Your privacy will be protected,” I say, trying to focus on the checklist rather

than the fact that I'm going to be alone with Knox in a small room... asking him to strip.

"So, you want me all to yourself," Knox purrs. "Want to properly make up for the lost time, sweetheart?"

I ignore his comment, trying to let everything he tosses at me glide off my skin. "Professional physical checkup so we have a baseline for—"

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

“Whatever you want to call it to save your job,” he says with a wicked smile.

I take the deepest breath I can, and I wonder how long it will be before I crack or when they’ll do something... again. But now, I’ll be fine. If I raise my voice once, someone will come, right? It’s not like we’re really alone.

Once I close the door, I turn around and bump into Knox. He grips my chin and lifts my face so I’m staring up at him.

“Tell me how much you missed me, Hope. How much you’ve been craving everything we can do for you and to you,” he says as he slowly looks me over. His free hand reaches for the buttons on my Polo. “I bet you touch those marks and think of us when you—”

“Are you... are you trying to avoid stripping?” I ask, trying to distract him before he can strip me, specifically.

Knox pauses, and his eyes lift from the one button he’s managed to undo to focus on my face. His gaze burns through me and he jerks me closer to him. “You didn’t see me naked last time. What makes you think I’m going to give you that now?”

“It’s... it’s for the physical. I have to take your vitals, we do a stress test on your heart, you answer some questions, then you strip down to your boxers so I can note any bruises, old injuries, anything that might be a problem in the—”

“No,” he snarls.

“Knox, it’s not your first time on an NFL team. You know how it—”

“There’s no reason anyone needs to see me in less than what I have on. Do your fucking tests, Hope, but you don’t get to see me stripped down to my boxers,” he hisses.

My brows tug together. I’m not sure why he’s so pissed about it. He’s always talked about how many girls want him, how many guys want to be him, so why is he so hesitant to show off? Clearly, stripping me would be fine, so why...? It doesn’t make sense, but I just go through what he’ll allow.

I take his pulse, test his respirations, his blood pressure, take his weight, then hook him up to a heart monitor, even though he steals the electrodes from me to put them on his chest. I don’t get what he’s hiding.

He’s attractive and he knows it. It doesn’t seem like he’s insecure or anything, but he clearly isn’t budging when it comes to stripping. I thought this would be difficult because he’d try to make me strip or make a move or a hundred different horrible options. A hundred different ways to hurt me and remind me that my father is not the only monster in the world.

Once we finish the tests, I have a nurse come in to take a blood sample, then he has to give a urine sample, huffing the wholetime about how I’m probably going to take a peek to remember him better.

After checking all those boxes, only one remains. I stare at Knox as he watches me with those dark emerald eyes.

“Keep staring and I’m going to think you want me to gag you, toss you over that exam table, and see if I can make you scream like that last night,” he growls.

I shake my head. “Take off your shirt, Knox. I can work with that. Then I can—”

“If you’re not going to have me between your legs, then you don’t need me to strip, Hope,” he snarls.

“It’s not what I want or need. You need this to be on the team,” I remind him.

He grabs my shoulder and shoves me against the exam table. He holds me down, his hand moving to my throat. He snarls. “You are going to sign the fucking box saying everything is just fine. I don’t do drugs. My blood is fine, and I don’t have any fucking injuries.”

“Knox!” I rasp.

His grip tightens on my throat. I don’t want to admit that it’s almost comfortable. It’s what I expect. It’s his control and anger washing over me in a way so familiar that I hate it and fall into it at the same time.

“You’ll do it, Hope, because I still have a very specific video of you. The team doesn’t need the audio to know that you’re an eager little slut, do they?”

I scratch his hand and kick his thigh, making sure not to damage his knee. It scares him enough that he lets me go. I pant. “Show that video and it will be the last thing you ever do as a football star!”

He glowers at me.

“It’s called revenge porn and it’s against the law. Are you worth a teamwide scandal and potential sanction?” I demand.

Knox doesn’t back down. He gets in my face no matter how I try to keep my knees

from shaking or how I try to keep my back straight. Knox glowers into my eyes. “He-said, she-said, and considering your past—”

“Don’t,” I order, even though my voice shakes.

“Don’t force me,” he counters. He shoves me back and tosses the electrodes to the floor without taking off his shirt. “Check the fucking box and be done with it or we’ll have a problem. I’m not stripping for you.”

Knox pushes me out of the way, opens the door, and just as I expect him to slam the door to show the full extent of his frustration, he just pulls it shut with a soft click, leaving me with a whiplash of emotion.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

Five

My hip is sore, as is my back from Knox's touch. I try to ignore everything with Knox after he storms away, but the promise of his retribution hangs in the air. I'm not going to check a box that could cause me problems down the line all because he's too uncomfortable to strip in front of me.

It's not like...

No, I'm not letting myself go down that train of thought. I refuse. I just can't allow it. I take a few deep breaths, then call for Jaxon. He smirks and nudges Dimitri.

Jaxon walks over to me, winks, then walks into the room without comment. He hops onto the exam table, then spreads his arms, grinning at me as he looks me over slowly. "Undo a few more buttons and I might be a little more willing to follow your rules."

I sigh. "They're the NFL rules," I argue.

"Oh, so you don't have a list of things I'm not allowed to do?" he asks, his dark eyes spearing through me.

He's nearly as tall as Knox, but his light brown hair is almost blonde. He's broad, muscled, and big, and he's covered his skin with ink. One entire arm is covered, and I think that those are roses and barbed wire on the left side of his neck.

Even though he's here to train, he still has his piercings in. The two snake bites, and

when his tongue swipes over his top lip, I see he still has his tongue ring too.

I shudder and wonder if he still has his piercing... down there.

No. No. Stay focused. I don't like Jaxon. I don't want to be stuck in a room with him for longer than necessary, and I'm not about to give him the wrong idea about that.

"Those piercings will have to come out when you play," I whisper.

"All of them, or just the ones you can see?" he asks.

I peek up from my checklist, expecting him to be taunting me, but it seems like a legitimate question. When I stare at him longer, he shrugs. "There's one I've always left in."

"Um... it's smarter to take them all out so you don't get hurt in a hard tackle," I say.

He inclines his head and lets me take his vitals, but while I wrap a blood pressure cuff around his bicep, he flexes which means I have to start all over. I almost huff, but when I look at him, he's staring right at me, studying my face intently.

My throat tightens as his dark eyes seem to deepen. They're black holes trying to suck me into their gravity. Seems about right considering how Jaxon is.

I try to ignore the pull of his gaze, instead focusing on setting everything up. He doesn't tease me, intimidate me, nothing, but considering I sense his eyes drinking me in constantly, he doesn't need to.

It's impossible to forget he's right there, staring at me. My body heats wherever he looks. I hate it but can't shake it.

Finally, I turn to face him. “I... I need you to strip.”

He makes a low sound and his face changes ever so slightly. He goes from passive and calm to heated and feral in a second. All his muscles tense as he watches me. He seems bigger, more overwhelming.

This is a man who could toss me wherever he wants me, who wouldn't hesitate to be rough, who would snap me in half if he felt like it. I don't stand a chance with him and that has never changed.

He takes off his shirt and drops it at my feet. His abs tighten as I look him over, but his hands drop to his workout shorts, revealing tight black boxers.

He has tattoos over his side too, dipping under the boxers. I take a step forward and shake my head as he reaches for the waistband of his spandex boxers. “No, just... this is fine.”

Jaxon chuckles but his eyes focus on me.

I touch a scar on his side. “This?”

“Had my appendix removed two years ago. It's fine,” he mumbles.

But as I move away, my eyes drop to his boxers again, staring just long enough to see how the outline of his cock changes. I take a breath and circle him slowly. “No other injuries?”

He scoffs. “I do the injuring, not the other way around,” he says, and I can't stop the roll of my eyes.

I round back to his front. His fingers linger along my hip, slipping under my shirt to

touch my skin. I suck in a breath as I step away from his touch. His touch makes my skin feel wrong, reminds me of his hard hands on me, the way all three of these assholes hurt me.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

“Professionalism is important here, Jax.”

He continues watching me with mischief in his eyes. I swallow. “You can get dressed.”

“Do you want me to?”

The twitch in his boxers draw my eyes low, and I quickly turn around to check the last box. “As long as your drug test comes back clean, you’re good.”

I hear the rustling of his clothes but don’t turn around. I hate them. I have to hate them. For what they did, what they knew about and allowed when it came to my dad, the way they blamed me for it.

I clear my throat. “We’re done here. Feel free to go back to the gym.”

“It’s only a matter of time, Hope,” Jaxon says.

As I try to walk toward my desk, he grasps my wrist, spinning me around until he has me caged against the counter. My body heats, and as twisted as that is, I still don’t ever want him to touch me again.

His eyes dip over me and he shakes his head. “A matter of time.”

“Your time is up,” I grit. “Head back out there.”

He takes one step back, then another, but his fingers ghost over my wrist like a

promise. When the door shuts, I rub the place on my hip that he touched. One little touch, his intense gaze, it shouldn't rattle me.

Maybe when they... did what they did, they broke something in me. They screwed me up in a way I can't undo. Because some part of me, some dirty, depraved part, wanted Jaxon to strip me, to force me on my knees and make me choke on his hard cock no matter how much I fought.

I wanted him to grab my wrists, slam me against a wall, and make me his. I know he can. I know he wouldn't hesitate and... And that's all the more reason to push these three away at every opportunity.

They're predators, hunters, and if they smell any weakness on me or some lingering lust—even if it's not for them, even if it's the kind of lust that just gets me through the worst memories of my life, they'll pounce.

I might not be able to find someone who will engage my kinks—they're dark, so that's understandable since most people only see me as 'cute'—but that doesn't mean I'm going to go to the three bullies who made me develop kinks to deal with the past.

Trauma bonding isn't the same as a relationship, and I'm done settling for being a toy. I'll have a say in my next relationship. I'll have some kind of power, even if the power is just deciding yes or no. And no amount of long, eager gazes, threats, or sex appeal is going to change my mind. Especially not where these three animals are involved.

Six

Thankfully, I take lunch before I have to deal with Dimitri. Knox was unpredictably pissy, beyond what I've come to expect of him, and Jaxon's gaze still lingers on my body. I don't want to deal with Dimitri quite yet.

After a few sobering breaths and some time away from the guys since I decide to go to a local restaurant and get a sub rather than chance the cafeteria, I almost feel in control of things again.

Maybe I can survive these guys being in my space. Maybe I can keep enough distance between us and push back enough until they leave me alone.

And if they do try to start shit, most of the guys on the team like me. I've made sure to build up my defenses. I won't be alone like last time. I won't be the girl who's easy to pick on with no friends and no backup.

Jared would absolutely protect me. So would some of the other guys I've helped with injuries. Mike is huge and dense. He's a defensive lineman, which means he knows how to take hits and dole them out. I half think the padding he wears in games is to protect whatever offensive players have to take him on because he isn't the kind of guy anyone wants to fight singlehandedly.

Continuing to think about the guys who like me enough to invite me out to team nights at bars and pubs makes me feel better. I'm almost smiling when I finish my sandwich. Until my phone rings.

Then I just stare at the horror movie theme song.

I made sure my dad had a specifying tone. I glare at the phone, watching it ring because I can't deal with the idea of talking to him at all, even over a phone.

My hands start to shake at the memory of his voice, the mental image I have of him, of everything he put me through.

Dads are supposed to protect their daughters. They're supposed to love them from a distance. They're supposed to cherish them, help them grow, maybe scare the shit out

of some boyfriends. They aren't supposed to...

I shake my head of the thought. If I let myself slip into those memories, it will take me hours or days to pull myself out of them. So I just hit the button on the side of my phone to silence the ringing.

Dad always gets mad if I send him to voicemail. And when he's angry, it becomes an issue that I have to deal with. Right now, I have enough on my plate. I can always just tell him later that I was working and I'm not allowed to have my phone. Maybe that will curb some of his anger and let me off with a warning or just a very long tirade.

But after a minute where I'm hopeful I can escape without a call back, my phone starts ringing again.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

Shit. He only calls back to back when he's drunk.

He likes to say that I'm ungrateful, that I'd be the worst person to reach out to if he was in trouble because I never answer the phone, and that thought lingers in my head. What if it's police telling me he's dead? What if it's someone telling me that they found his phone but not him?

No, it's better to know and be able to evade him. I've been doing it well for the last few years. I've used plenty of excuses, and whether he believes me or not, it's kept him from knowing where I live. It's kept him from knowing where I work. It's kept him away.

I have to keep that up.

Answering the phone, I wait for him to talk, like always.

"You're not being very sweet, Hope," he snarls. "Refusing to answer the phone the first time. That's bad, and you know what happens when you're this bad."

I swallow as my throat tightens. "I was at work. I stepped away to call you back."

"Sure you did. You're always ungrateful, only think about what you want and need, never what I want," he says.

Don't think about his wants. Ignore them. Don't think about it. Don't let yourself slip. Stay in the present.

“When are you gonna come visit me?” he says, his words slurring together and dropping off oddly.

My whole body chills and my stomach rolls, threatening to empty everything I just ate. I stand up and start heading back to the stadium. I may hate the guys, but they’re better than the monster who’s currently drunk dialing me.

“I miss my little girl. It’s been so long since I’ve seen you... touched you... held you...” He trails off, then groans softly.

My other hand balls into a fist, but the tremble won’t stop. “We talked about this. You’re not supposed to—”

“You are the child! I’m the adult. I give you an order and you obey!” he yells. “If you’re going to keep being bad, you know what’ll happen. If you raise your voice at me, if you run, if you... fight.”

I hang up and hurry to the stadium. My surroundings swirl, and when the stadium wall is beside me, I crouch down. I put my hand on the brick of the building and the smooth concrete under my feet. I’m here. I’m not in his house. I’m not where he can reach me.

He doesn’t know where I live. He doesn’t know where I work. I have a P.O. box in another town specifically for him. Because I know that if he gets me again, there’s no stopping him. I’ve tried that already.

My stomach tightens, and I close my eyes to stop the tears and the gag that try to bubble up my throat.

I went to the cops. I told them everything my dad did. I told him that there was evidence because Jaxon outed that. Knox even confirmed it. All the police had to do

was look. I showed them the bruises on my wrists, showed them my diary, but the officer didn't even open the cover.

The officer just looked at me and snorted. "Another teenager who doesn't want to obey her father."

"It's not like that," I tried to argue.

"What's this?" Dimitri's dad had walked in, taken one look at me, heard me say my dad was hurting me, that when he was drunk, he was too rough and I was constantly covering bruises since I was sure they wouldn't believe that more was happening, and he'd shook his head. "Please. George is a good father. He might be a little rough, but he's not a monster."

I'd tried to tell him, but he'd just put me in his car.

On the way home, while I'd been crying, he stopped the car. I flinched away, sure he was going to hurt me, that his son had told him I'm a slut, that I'm easy, that I like older men and never say no, but instead, Dimitri's dad turned around and glowered at me.

"Your dad's been through enough. After your mom left him for someone else, he had to pick himself up and take care of you. He had to take care of everything, and he's good to my boy, to Knox, to Jaxon. I've heard what a good man he is and what a brat you are."

"I'm not lying!" I'd insisted.

He'd scoffed and shook his head at me. "I'm giving you a chance to walk back in and pretend like nothing happened. Keep this up, and I'll make sure your father knows what you're trying to do to his reputation, his career."

If the police wouldn't believe me about physical abuse, who would believe me about the rest? I didn't even bring up what the guys had done. I didn't bring up anything but... the truth, the gentlest part, and I felt like I'd been slapped for revealing that.

If I couldn't go to the police, there was no hope. And even though the officer had promised not to tell my dad, he had, three days later.

My father had come home from the bar and made an 'example of me' all night. I hadn't been able to go to school Monday, but that hadn't stopped him from having Jaxon and Knox over for dinner.

Neither of them had commented on my long sleeves, my heavy makeup, my silence. Jaxon hadn't goaded me that night. Knox had mocked me whenever my dad wasn't around. I knew that they knew. They knew everything but still made my life hell, still blamed me.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

If they blamed me, if the police didn't believe me...

The horror movie theme song blares again, bringing me to the present. It's my father. Again. Because I'm not supposed to hang up.

I keep the side button pressed until my screen goes black and give myself another two minutes to try and calm down. I can't let anyone on the team see me like this. I can't let my three bullies see me like this.

If I'm weak, I'm chumming the water, just inviting those sharks to attack me, rip me to shreds, and dismantle my whole life until there's nothing left.

I won't be that girl again. I won't be that girl again. None of these monsters get to take my future from me.

Seven

DIMITRI

"What's up your ass?" I ask Knox.

"Don't start with me right now," he warns, his temper peeking through the cracks.

He has had an uncontrollable temper since we were in high school. It eased up a bit in college, but when he's pissed, he's pissed and he has to take it out on something. I point at the leg press, and he walks over obediently.

Knox just needs to burn it off. Throwing punches works better for him, but we don't have a punching bag here, so we'll have to wait until we're set free and he can go to the boxing gym in town.

Jaxon's eyes flick to the side door, and I follow his gaze as Hope walks in. Her raven hair is barely tamed in a ponytail today. Her eyes are nervous, her cheeks and nose red like she's been crying. It's the same version of her I remember from college. She rubs her shoulders, then one of the guys walks to her and she switches it off, or as much as she can.

She smiles, her deep blue eyes sparkling as she tries to make herself okay. She's still a hot little thing. Not exactly petite anymore. She's filled out some, and her curves are so much better than they used to be. Has it really been seven years?

I rub my jaw, and Jaxon exhales slowly. "Something's different."

"Years of difference, but she's still ours," I grumble. "No way she's forgotten us."

Jax doesn't say anything to that. He focuses on working his legs out. Since he and Knox have been called for their evaluation and physical, I know I'm next.

After a few minutes, she calls my name, her eyes focused on me. There's no fear like in the elevator. Her chin is high, her ponytail straight behind her neck, her Polo and khakis too loose for my liking. She has nice legs and a good body. She should show them off.

I saunter into the office and watch as she shuts the door.

She looks at her checklist. Is our little slut no longer looking for attention? When we found out what she was doing with her dad on a regular basis, saw that she never said no, that she let him flaunt it, video it, show us, we were more than happy to show her

whatwewere capable of.

I think she needs a reminder. It's been seven years and I don't care how many relationships she's been in. She doesn't get to forget the night we made her ours.

"We need to do a physical. That means running some tests, having you complete a drug test, taking some blood, and—"

"If you want me naked, you know how to make that happen, don't you? You still remember. Lie down on that table and convince me to listen to your recommendations," I goad.

She doesn't look up from her clipboard. "If you want to play, you'll allow me to go through the checklist."

"Maybe if you purr for me or scream my name, I'll be more incentivized," I say darkly.

I could tell her I know she lives on the fourth floor because she was too ridiculous and hasty thinking I wouldn't watch where she went once I was out of the elevator. There's plenty I could do or say to get her into the headspace I want, but she just looks tired.

Why is she tired? When we got here yesterday and I spied her from across the room, she looked happy to be working. Even this morning, she took her time talking with Jared. She smiled for him, teased him, gave him plenty of attention.

"The whole team is excited for you to join, Dimitri. Do it for them," she whispers.

There's a bit of pleading in her tone. My whole body reacts to her. I lick over my bottom lip and nod. She takes my vitals, but her light touch, not nervous but not

exactly confident, makes me hard.

It's almost pathetic. I've been with plenty of girls. Girls who know what they offer, are willing to do whatever I say without question, but Hope... there's something about her that works me up even as she presses a stethoscope to my chest. I sit up taller and keep my eyes on her.

Her eyelashes are a little wet. Interesting.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

Once she pulls out the stuff to do the stress test, I toss my shirt to the side. She doesn't stare, just presses nodes against my skin.

"Are you dating someone?" I ask.

She looks up at me, her brows tugging together. "Why?"

"Because you look like you just got broken up with," I counter.

She shakes her head. I don't know what she's saying no to, but I lift her chin as she places an electrode low on my belly. "If you want to touch lower, you know how to make that happen, don't you? You can get on your knees and choke on my cock."

She slaps my hand away, her blue eyes darkening in warning. "This is for a stress test—for you, specifically. It's not to see how much trauma I can handle in one day."

"Say whatever you want, sweet cheeks. You can pretend you don't like me, but I bet you can't stop thinking about that night we had together," I purr.

She says nothing, only sighs and motions to the treadmill.

Hope used to have more bite to her, but I don't overthink it. She's a perfect little toy, and that's all. She belongs to me, to Jax, and to Knox. We're not going to let her forget it, not after working so hard to get to her.

She belongs to us and seven years, ten years, twenty aren't enough to change that. Even if she were dating someone, we'd fix that quickly.

I complete the stress test, pee in a cup again, then give blood. I stand in front of Hope, and she motions to my pants. “Down to your boxers, please.”

“Say please like you mean it,” I tease.

Her eyes flick to mine. “Dimitri, please, just...”

I smirk and drop my pants. I’m not wearing boxers. Her face heats as she quickly glances away. “Any injuries?”

“None that haven’t healed well,” I comment. “None that are recent.”

She circles around me. Her hand strokes over a scar on my shoulder. I look back at her as my dick hardens again. “From a fight, unrelated to football.”

“If you get injured off the field, we’ll have a problem,” she murmurs.

“You’ll get so turned on that you soak through your panties?” I tease, and her eyes meet mine. “I remember how much you like fighting.”

She shakes her head but touches my chest. I catch her hand and slowly have her stroke over my chest, my abs, and hold her hand just above my hard cock. She doesn’t flinch, doesn’t do anything other than stare at my neck. “Another fight?”

“Yes,” I breathe.

“You can get—” she starts, and my hand tightens on her.

“If I reached into your too-loose pants right now, would I find you slick for me? Would your pussy feel just as tight as it did last time?” I ask.

She rips her hand away and turns around. “You can get dressed.”

“We both know that’s not what you want,” I say as I walk up to her, pulling her hips back so she can feel how hard I am just looking at her. She squirms, trying to pull herself away, but I whisper in her ear. “How much does your pussy ache for me?”

“You should wear boxers when it comes to working out. Someone will see up your shorts,” she whispers. “I have to turn in the results so you get approval.”

“Ask permission,” I say against her ear. She still smells just as good. Her perfume is light, fruity, but clean. How can just her perfume make my mouth water like this?

“Let me go, Dimitri. We’re at work. I don’t want to call H.R. or talk to Coach,” she whispers without an ounce of grit to it.

Jaxon is right. She has changed. She doesn’t yell, doesn’t whine. She’s so... apathetic, almost. She wasn’t yesterday. She was skittish and nervous. She was like a scared little rabbit. The power I felt was insane.

“You won’t as long as you stay quiet like a good girl, and I know the best way to ensure that,” I say as my fingers skim over her stomach and curl inside her pants. “All we need is Jax or Knox joining us.”

Her body stiffens in my grasp, and my hand only lowers until it curves around her mound and I can press my fingers against her entrance.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

A smug smile tugs on my lips as the tremble in her body isn't fully one of fear, but one of anticipation, need.

“Well, well, look at that,” I taunt. “Is that all for me?”

She turns from my grip and leans on the counter, quickly putting her sneaker against my chest. “This is a professional space. You worked hard to join the NFL. You are a professional, Dimitri. Let's keep it that way so we don't have problems, okay?”

My hand grips her ankle tightly and I shove her leg down to my hip, forcing myself between her legs until my cock nudges against her.

“I'll be professional here. The apartment is another thing entirely.”

“Dimitri,” she warns.

“Floor four, right? Ten or twelve apartments per floor... I'm sure I can narrow it down if I sweet talk those in the office just right,” I taunt. “No reason to be professional where we live.”

Her face flushes and her lips turn down. I keep waiting for her to flinch away, but she grabs my wrist and removes my hand from her, only because I let her. I'm sure she knows it too since she's staring at me.

I step back as my gaze remains on her and get dressed.

“I'm sure the team will be happy that you'll be on the field. You have a bright future

ahead of you.” She hops off the table with a forced smile. She’s so tense, so empty. But Knox, Jaxon, and I know how to fix that. It’s just a matter of time before we do.

History always repeats itself, and where Hope’s involved, I can’t wait.

As she steps past me, I grab the end of her pony and force her to tilt her head back as I hover over her.

“Do you still dream about me?” I whisper, my breath teasing over her parted lips.

“Nightmares,” she grits, and I smile down at her.

“All the same, sweetheart.”

My fingers release their grip as her blush brightens. She opens the door, and I step through, my eyes catching Jaxon’s as his brow arches in question.

She’s different, but she’s still ours. Nothing will change that. Knox shoots a look at Hope too. His frustration doesn’t ebb, his anger doesn’t change. Sure, he can be a sadistic fuck, but that’s not what his expression looks like.

He looks like he needs a face to rearrange, a fight to get all his fury out. We’ll use Hope without complaint. She takes us so well, but we don’t beat her, not like we do when we get in real fights, and that’s what Knox needs.

We’ll figure out how to calm him down because that’s what friends do. We share our fun and we take care of each other when other shit gets in the way.

My eyes go to Hope as she walks to one of the bigger guys on the team. The quarterback walks up to her too, talking about an injury. Things have changed. She’s not alone, not a little thing that’s easy to toss around, but us guys have changed too.

This will be a new kind of fun.

Eight

HOPE

I managed to survive seeing all three guys privately in one day and a call from my father. That's a new win for me. The fact that it's a win makes me feel good when I get ready for another day at work.

But can I count it as a win when I let Dimitri curl his finger in my pants, letting him skim them over my panties as he hummed at the wetness that was building just from his taking what he wants from me?

How messed up is that?

I shake away the thought and put my hair up in a neat bun, do a little bit of makeup, and pull on my uniform. As I remember what Dimitri said—a stupid thing to do—I do look at my pants. They're loose, but that's a good thing.

I've put on weight recently, and my ass is definitely bigger than it was in college. Maybe a small part of me hoped that the guys wouldn't be as interested.

When I get to the stadium, I head in with a bounce in my step. Today will be good. I'll find a way to make it good, but something's different in the air here. Namely, I don't see the guys on the machines.

Jared walks in beside me and gives me a warm smile before he sees what I see, a bunch of guys all crowded around Knox, looking at his phone. One of the guys whistles and my whole body goes cold.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

No. No. He wouldn't show them all, would he? He wouldn't...

Then again, none of these guys say things they don't mean. They always follow through on each and every threat, which means he knows I didn't check a certain box on his form and he's showing everyone the video of that night, the night where he and Jaxon and Dimitri all...

Vomit starts rising in my throat, but my legs shake and I can see my whole life, my job, everything I've worked at falling away. One video and I'm done. One video and it's all over. I won't be taken seriously. I can kiss my independence goodbye. I'll have to move back in with my dad or keep trying to track down my runaway mom and see if she has any kind of love for me.

I'll end up right where I started from—with no one to help me, to balance out the insanity I grew up with.

My chest tightens. My skin buzzes. I can't breathe. I'm going to pass out, and then I'll be at the mercy of my bullies all over again, and now that the team has seen the video, it won't just be my bullies using my body however they want, no matter how I feel about it.

I cover my mouth before a sob can leave my throat and head down the hallway. I have to get ahead of this. I'll throw Knox under the bus. I'm just saving the team a scandal. I'm saving the coach from these assholes and their streak of horror.

And if Knox still has that video, then he'll get caught and it's not my word versus theirs. It was obvious I fought in the beginning, and his showing the other guys

means it's revenge porn, even if I would have liked it the first time around.

No head coach wants to take that kind of risk with cancel culture the way it is. People love football and they won't hesitate to attack anyone who threatens the institution. Hell, Superbowl Sunday is basically a national holiday.

I slip into Coach Carpenter's office and clear my throat. He glances at the assistant coach, nods to something and tells him to go ahead, then Coach Carpenter smiles at me. "Hope. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I wanted to talk to you about the new recruits. Knox, Jaxon, and Dimitri," I say softly.

I have no idea how to word this, but if Knox goes, I'm sure the other two will as well. Especially if they have the video. It will make all of them a problem. The nagging voice in my head reminds me that police didn't believe me and neither did the guys, but—

"Yes!" He beams at me. "You made all the difference. The guys are absolute animals on the field and we're lucky to have them. Knox can outrun nearly anyone on offense. Dimitri could stop a brick wall, and Jaxon has an eye for the plays that succeed. I swear, he'll be a coach one day. He can read another team in a matter of minutes."

Okay, not a great start. If he's already gushing about them, then he probably won't take me seriously either.

"I'm going to do everything in my power to keep them before all the other coaches realize exactly how fantastic they are. They're all mine, and it's all thanks to you," he says brightly.

My mouth opens and closes. “What... what do you mean?”

Coach Carpenter stands, then sits on his desk. I always appreciate that there’s distance between us when I talk to him. He’s a good man and I’ve seen him with his wife. But still, older men... I’d rather keep a distance.

“When I offered them the open spots on the team, they kept wavering. They asked me what I offered that other teams couldn’t. I mentioned our staff, then mentioned you, that you’re the best physical therapist a team could have, that you’re professional and smart, a real part of the team. That tipped the scales,” he explains.

My head swims. He gave them my full name? He told them I worked here and that’s why they joined? I’d been sure it was a surprise, that they were talking shit when they mentioned me, that they knew I’d be here.

Something empty and terrible in my chest opens up, but Coach continues. “They said that your dad was their old coach. They’d always appreciated what he did for them and you might as well be family. They talked highly of you, of how great it was that you were living your dream and how could they say no if you were involved?”

I shudder, but I can’t say anything now. He won’t believe me. Or he’ll fire me to keep them. They matter more in the long run, and now that these three have found me, it’s not like they’re going to quit mid-season. No one would take them.

I give Coach my best smile, but if he notices anything wrong, he doesn’t comment on it. That’s a running theme in my life. People don’t look closely. They don’t notice. If they don’t notice, it’s not a problem. If they do notice, they explain it away.

No one wants to believe the terrible things that can happen right in front of them.

He stands up, saying, “Come on, let’s see them train.”

My body moves with him as if I'm not really here. We head to the stadium field to see the guys running plays. The assistant coach cheers the guys on, yells what to do, then Knox slams into someone and keeps going. The sound of bodies colliding always makes me cringe.

I only know it's Knox because he's kept the same number. 11. It's his lucky number. Which means that Dimitri is 76 and Jaxon is 18. They move even better than I remember. Dimitri actually flips a guy when he slams into him, and I wince. Jaxon can launch a ball like his arm is a catapult. It's astounding.

I knew they were good considering my dad would constantly rewatch games, but seeing them move on the team is insane. They elevate everyone's game. Jaxon barks orders, points out holes, and then they're taken advantage of ruthlessly. I think Knox is actually aiming for guys just to prove he can take a hit and keep going, but he's rough as hell.

If I didn't hate them, I'd be in awe of them. They were always a force on the field, but now they are just beasts.

Jaxon catches me looking and his dark eyes meet mine. He winks at me and blows a kiss. I move back a step, but Coach chuckles. "Guess they weren't all talk about you, were they?"

I shake my head. They're not all talk about anything. Knox doesn't look up at me. Instead, he tackles another guy, taking him out in a way that makes me flinch.

Coach sighs as he crosses his arms. "They feel right at home here, don't they?"

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

Play nice, I remind myself before speaking. “They sure do.”

“Oh, and I’m not sure if I can say this, but I believe their old coach is coming. He’s your dad, right?” Coach says, chilling me to the core and nearly sending me into another panic attack.

Nine

I try to remind myself how to get through panic attacks, but the ringing in my ears, the fact that no breath seems to give me oxygen, and my own shaking prove I’m not doing well at all. Sweat dews on my cold forehead, and I have to sit down as my vision starts to narrow.

“Hope?” Coach Carpenter asks. “Hey, are you okay?”

“Yeah. I, um... I should...” I can’t even make a sentence happen.

“Hey.” Coach lifts my legs. “Lie back. If you’re going to pass out, let’s make sure you’re safe, Hope.”

After a moment, I manage to calm myself down enough to function. I can’t stop the hurt and fear rippling through me at the thought of my dad coming here. Which means that the guys told my dad where I am. I’ve hidden so well.

Seven years of work, all for what? To end up in the same fucking situation? How can I just let all that information just roll off my back? I feel like absolute shit. I can’t focus, I can’t think straight. My mind just keeps swirling. After everything I’ve

done... I've gone nowhere. I've achieved nothing.

"When's the last time you took a day off?" Coach Carpenter asks.

I shrug. Time doesn't mean anything. That's obvious, more obvious now than ever. My whole world is collapsing in on itself. I'm collapsing in on myself.

"Are you able to go home, Hope?" Coach says, trying to get me to focus on him.

"Can you drive?"

"Y-yeah," I finally get out.

He helps me up, makes sure I can stand and walk, then nods. "Go home. Get some rest and Gatorade. I know you want to be here, but take some time to rest, okay?"

I nod and without looking back, I go home. The whole way is a blur, and before I realize it, I'm back at my apartment feeling more like a zombie than a person. I lock my door and double-check it's truly closed before I get changed into an oversized T-shirt and sweats. I let myself fall into my bed and wrap myself up in my blanket but can't sleep.

It's taking everything in me not to cry. I don't want to cry over this again.

I've spent too much time crying because of my father, because of the three bullies I thought I escaped. I don't want to give them that kind of power. If I were the head coach, I could put them in their place. If I were a police officer, I could take care of all of them, but I'm just a physical therapist.

Closing my eyes, I snuggle deeper into my bed.

I'm safe here. I'm safe. I'm secure. I don't move backward. I'm safe. I'm secure. I'm

safe.

At some point in the mantra, I fall asleep. I wake up to my stomach growling but don't feel like leaving my bed. My bed is safe. The apartment building isn't. Work isn't. All I have left is my own home.

My eyes water and I shake my head slowly. I try to use my pillow and blanket to make myself feel better, to wrap myself up until I can't feel anything but comfort, but I end up watching the fading light of the sunset coming in through my window as it moves across my wall.

I haven't felt this frozen in years and I have no idea how to get back the power and happiness I had just days ago.

Even with the guys from the team nearly close enough to be considered friends, I feel utterly alone. None of them know my past, and it's not like I want to relive the experience by telling someone. I don't know if any of them would believe me. I don't know if any of them would care.

I'm afraid, alone, and in bed with only myself to rely on. Nothing has changed since I was eighteen... nineteen... twenty.

My eyes close and I shake my head. This will be different. I know the law now. I can avoid my father. I have my own money, my own resources... It's different.

As much as I say it, I'm not sure I believe it. So I lie here, ignoring the fact that my phone is off and my stomach is cramping thanks to hunger.

A knock echoes on my door, and I blink a few times. Only the super has knocked, or a lost neighbor, because I always put my P.O. box down as my address unless I'm ordering from Amazon.

I pull myself out of bed, still wrapped in my blanket, and slowly open the door, holding it tightly while I wish I had a peephole.

Knox, Dimitri, and Jaxon stand there. I narrow my eyes and push harder on my door until I realize Knox has his foot there.

Shit. If they want in, they're going to get in. I have too many emotions and my voice comes out sharp and prickly. "What do you want?"

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

“We heard you were sick?” Knox says.

Jaxon raises a bag of something in agreement. I don’t trust any of them at all. I kick at Knox’s foot until he moves it.

“Get the fuck away. I’m fine,” I say and try to slam the door shut, but Jaxon stops me with one firm hand.

“Leave me the alone!” I’m done with them. I can’t handle them and my father.

Dimitri smirks. “We never will, sweetheart.”

“What do you want from me?” I demand. “What do I have to do to be done with this?”

“We just want to play with you,” Jaxon says, his dark eyes threatening to drag me in.

“Well, I would like if you left me the fuck alone!” I bite back.

Knox laughs. “That’s never going to happen. You have no idea how long it took to find you. You were even hiding from your sweet old man.”

Everything in my body and mind rebels. I’m done with this. I’m done staying quiet about my father. Let these assholes believe whatever they want, but I’m making my opinion clear. “He’s not a sweet old man. He’s a monster!”

I ignore their tugging eyebrows and slam the door before engaging both locks and

sinking down the back of it. I won't be as calm and compliant as last time. I'll fight. I'll kick, I'll scream. I'll never have to hear them say I wanted it again.

Ten

JAXON

I keep squeezing the stress ball in my hand. Knox's place is minimal, which is normal for him, but he's on the same floor as Hope, which is the only reason we're here. He has a small couch, a recliner, a wobbly coffee table with some folded mail stuffed under the problem leg. A coffee maker and microwave are the only things on the counter in his kitchen. He doesn't have pictures on the wall, no little knickknacks or mementos. Everything is put away, everything has a place, and it always belongs there. He's a stickler about that.

I glance over at him as he finishes his beer and sets the still sweating can on a coaster as if the worn, used table is worth protecting. He shakes his head, just as confused as we are. Dimitri's nursing his beer, still befuddled, and something hot and frustrated keeps teasing my nerves. I hate feeling like I've missed something, and Hope calling her father a 'monster' feels like I'm missing something huge.

"What was that about?" Knox finally asks.

He's been the most protective of our old coach. He's the one who reached out and told him that we accepted the offer here because of Hope. Coach has his problems, problems I'm surprised Knox has always been willing to ignore.

But we all have problems, so who am I to judge?

My eyes flick to Knox's basic black curtains that keep the light from coming in. I rub my jaw. I want to have an answer for him. I want to have an answer for the panic that

nearly dropped her at the field, but I don't understand.

The curtains, the warm yellow lights, the tan carpet—none of it is giving me answers, no matter how long I stare at them.

But Hope... that bite to her, the look on her face when Knox mentioned her dad, the way she called him a monster. We'd all thought she was just an eager, dirty slut, determined to get whatever she could from whoever she could.

No one at school would date her, so she looked a little closer to home and never said no when someone presented an option.

We were obviously a better option compared to the old man, but now... calling him a monster reminds me of that conversation I overheard back when I was at Dimitri's one day. His dad had said something about Hope coming to the police station and spreading lies.

We'd snorted and assumed she was just wanting more attention. That she wanted to play the victim.

Her face today, the mix of fear and rage, the humiliation, the everything I used to find attractive about her has me second-guessing some shit.

But she never told him to stop. She never screamed. She never fought. She just laid there. Right? Or is that what I wanted to see? My brain is swirling.

"We all saw the videos. She never told him to stop," I say even though it sounds more like a question, trying to remember better. Of course, the idea of an old man showing us him fucking his daughter is fucked up. Does it matter whether she was into it? Isn't it still wrong? I don't know what to believe.

“She did a few times,” Dimitri murmurs.

“Yeah, and then she moved with him.” Knox huffs and takes another sip from his drink.

Maybe I should feel sorry for her. Little Hope who always looked a little too ashamed but never said anything. Hope who was always there, who had Coach as a dad, and while Coach liked alcohol too much and his daughter a whole lot more than he should, he was a good guy to us.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

And if he was good to us...

Fuck, why is this so complicated? I don't want to dive into this. I don't want to believe that she didn't want it. I don't want to think about what it makes me if she was just silent and didn't want us. I don't want to think what it makes us if she was never willing.

I run my hand through my hair and look over at Dimitri. He doesn't look bothered at all. He doesn't look like he has any regrets. In fact, he looks pleased with himself. I arch an eyebrow, then he smirks. "Showed her my dick today."

Knox snorts. "Of course you did."

"Shame it didn't get any action. Like you said, Jax, she's different, though. She was professional, but it was like she wasn't all there," he comments.

Also, not a good sign based on shit I've seen. I take another drink of my beer, finishing it.

"More in the fridge," Knox says.

Instead, I get water. There's a bad taste in my mouth that I need to clean out. I shake my head in the kitchen. I need to focus on what I can control. The past is the past and I can't change shit about it.

But the past. That night with Hope. Her soft little moans, her whimpers, the way she took all three of us. That I can't forget. My whole body reacts to it. Nothing and no

one has ever gotten me as worked up as Hope.

I thought she was fine as hell the first time I saw her, then accepted she was off limits because she was Coach's daughter. I'd been chomping at the bit wanting her, but telling myself no. It was easier to bully her, to make her small and less desirable. Bullying was better than fucking, right? After discovering she was an eager, naughty whore, everything changed.

I fisted my cock too many times thinking of her, then having her... only getting her once... it's stayed in my mind, lingered there, steadily driving me insane.

Taking a slow breath, I peek over at Knox. He's still frustrated, but the bloodlust is gone from his eyes. Taking out guys at practice did him some good. But he's restless. I feel it, see him holding his knee so his leg doesn't bounce. I share a look with Dimitri and see he's just as horny as I expect him to be after not getting action despite getting hard. I'm in the same boat.

"You still have that video?" I finally ask Knox, lowering my voice.

Tension and desire fill the air. We all want Hope. We've wanted her nonstop. It hasn't changed. She's just been out of reach. She disappeared after our fun. She managed to slink around school where we couldn't find her, and she didn't walk when she graduated.

Being able to see her, to touch her, to get close to having her but not being able to dive into her is driving us all insane. We need to get some kind of release, some kind of satisfaction or we're going to lose our minds. Being unfocused on the field won't do anyone any good. Even if watching her isn't as good as touching her, it's something.

Knox pulls out his phone. "Of course I do."

KNOX

After the guys leave, I clean up, then just sit on my couch. I run my hand through my hair. I don't want to think at all, but definitely not about this mess.

Things with Hope have always been simple. Work her up, tease her, enjoy her reactions, drag everything out until the tension is unbearable, then have her. That's the plan I've had. Granted, I wasn't ever going to go easy on her.

She left. She left us, and after I spent so much time laying the groundwork. Sure, I was rough with her, but that's what affection is. It's rough. Plus, she was letting her dad fuck her. She kept pushing me away when I wanted her. I ached for her.

I was sure that her sweetness would balance me out and make everything bearable. Instead, she runs. She fucking runs after giving me a damn good night. Even if I didn't show it, I liked having her around.

There has always been something innocent about her, something soft and approachable, something warm, something I want to break and ruin.

That's what happened to me. I hated every second of it, but if I'm there to hold her hand through it, to collar her throat, her hair, all of it, she'll understand.

Soft and sweet isn't something I'm capable of. I've proven that with plenty of partners, but for Hope...

I snort. She shot herself in the foot by leaving us. She really thought we would give up the hunt for her? That we wouldn't drag her back? She's ours. Her dad doesn't get to have her again. I don't want his hands on her, but my hands, Jax's hands, Dimitri's hands... She belongs to us.

She can't push us away anymore. We're here to stay, and she's going to learn that we don't let go easily. None of us have forgotten, and no amount of fucking other women, building ourselves up, working out in the gym, can make us forget the best night of our lives.

We got the girl we wanted and her moans still live in my head. I can see her watery eyes as she takes all three of us, her hips lifting as she meets every thrust, can see the hesitation but ecstasy in her eyes.

She'd begged us with her gaze. She'd ached for us too, been so hot and wet and perfect. Her touches, so light and... the marks on her...

I take off my shirt now that the guys are gone and run my fingers over the scars all over my body. I take a breath and shake my head. "We're all scarred, sweetheart. Some are just more visible than others."

Not that I'm going to let her see my scars, see my past pain. She'll pity me, want to fucking take care of me, and that's not what I want. I want her to crave me, to be my eager, panting little slut. I want her moaning for me, addicted to my cock. I want her pulling me toward her, letting me take control.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

She's mine and I'll do whatever it takes to prove that, even if it means fighting people off. Even if it means she's a little uncomfortable, even if it means punishing her for disappearing on me.

Eleven

HOPE

Things seem to have settled down. My father hasn't called. The guys have kept some distance since they're focused on actual practice and have no reason to come into my physical therapy room.

Which means I get to work more thoroughly, focusing with a few of the guys who are still recovering and the second-string guys who are facing injuries along with the olderplayers.

One of the guys grunts as he works out his knee. His old ACL injury has been giving him trouble.

"Ben, if it's sore, we might need to talk to a doctor," I say softly.

He shakes his head. "No way. I'm finishing this season."

"No one's arguing that," I say with a laugh. "I want to make sure that you're able to walk without a cane afterward."

He chuckles, but that's the end of it. Since he was one of the guys around Knox the

other day, looking at his phone, I want to ask what he saw, but every time I nearly build up to it, something else comes up.

I'm sure that he would have told me by now. I'm sure that one of the guys would have made a move on me or hinted in some way. Since no one has and since there's no tension, nothing from Coach going on, I have to assume that Knox didn't show them a video of me in a compromising position.

Maybe he doesn't even have it.

Was it an empty threat? Or did he not realize that I didn't check the box? To be fair, it hasn't come up because we just got all the drug and blood tests back. I head over to Jared to check on him.

His shoulder is healing nicely, but at the same time, I'm worried about him. He's determined to push harder since Dimitri, Jaxon, and Knox have started.

I gently put my hand on his shoulder. "Jared, slow down, please. Working out properly is part of this. If you don't follow through at the right motion, you're putting extra pressure on your shoulder."

Coach Carpenter drops by and meets my eyes. "Why didn't you approve Knox?"

"You know why. It's the only box that's blank," I murmur, keeping my eyes down.

"He has to be approved or he can't play. We have a scrimmage coming up, and if I can't prove he's good to go, he's wasted on the bench."

As much as I don't want to own up to the fact that I didn't check that box and I don't want to invite Knox to do something, there's no avoiding it now.

“He can come by in an hour. Jared will be done then,” I whisper.

I force a smile, but Jared stops. “Don’t do that.”

“Hmm?”

“Don’t fake a smile for me. I don’t want that. What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Let’s work on some new stretches. No weights,” I decide.

I show him how to work his shoulder and ways he can do it at home. Once we start to wind down, I’m sure he’s clocked every single moment that I’ve looked away during the conversation. Every single time he mentions the ‘new guys’.

Jared takes a breath. “Hope.”

“Jared?” I answer.

“You know you can talk to me about things, right? I consider us friends. So if there’s something going on with the new guys, if you’re secretly dating one of them or have some history with one of them, you can tell me,” he says and winks. “I’m really good at secrets.”

And I have too many secrets.

I shake my head, resisting the urge to gag at the idea of dating one of them. “No, nothing, they were just some players from a team my dad coached.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

Knox finally comes back in to finish his checkup. He watches me, glowering at me, seeming larger and larger with every breath he takes.

He snarls at me. “You couldn’t just check a fucking box, Hope?”

I sigh. “It’s my job,” I whisper.

“Really? Because I remember when you’d just lie back and take it,” he snarls. “When you knew what it meant to be a good girl.”

I flinch at the comment, but he’s too busy playing with his shirt to notice, not that he’d care, anyway. He takes a slow breath and rolls his neck. I see a flash of something like apprehension in his eyes before he covers it with fury.

He grabs the back of my neck and the air leaves my lungs. I struggle, trying to pry myself from his touch. I know he’s pissed, but his fingers don’t hurt so I stop struggling and stare up at him. His hand is so warm, and his gaze is so intense. But it’s not anger, I realize. It’s something else.

“You keep your fucking mouth shut about everything you see and everything we talk about in here. Do you understand?”

I nod as best I can, but Knox taps my lips with his other hand. “Words, sweetheart.”

I gulp. “I promise. I understand. It’s private. I can’t talk about anything with a patient,” I whisper.

He takes a breath and releases me. He rips off his shirt, then kicks off his shorts, revealing tight blue boxers that barely cover his ass.

But it's not the boxers that grab my attention. It's the scars. So many. They're small, circular, but all over his chest, his abs, his thighs. Where there aren't burns that are obviously from a cigarette, there are scars that are from cuts and areas of discolored skin on his side, then his back.

I shudder as I see a jagged scar over his shoulder blade right by a cluster of cigarette burns. I close my eyes a moment, like I can feel his pain. There's another patch of discolored skin. It looks red, but it's not a birthmark. I know the difference.

This was a bad burn, like oil or boiling water.

I almost touch him. "Who did this, Knox?"

He grumbles something, but I can't make it out. He grits his teeth as I continue my check. I'm afraid to ask for some things, but I go through the questions about past muscular, joint, and bone injuries that are recent.

We continue with the check, then I caress his back, my fingers barely touching him as I stroke over his scars and skin. I slowly circle back to his front and find him staring at the wall behind me instead of at me.

His jaw shakes slightly, but he grits his teeth harder. His jaw tightens and the muscles in his throat move. I touch a curved scar over his pec. It reminds me of the one he gave me.

I slowly pull my hand back and look up at him as his eyes finally drop to mine.

"Is this why you did it to me?" I ask as I rub between my breasts, on the mark he left

that night.

He jumps up, pulls his shirt on, and straightens it over his abs. He grabs his pants and jerks them on too, hiding every bit of past pain. “Are we done?”

I open my mouth, wanting answers, wanting this chance to know him even though he’s the last person I should care about. I click my teeth shut and finally nod.

Knox doesn’t even look at me. He just storms out, leaving the door open.

My hand keeps rubbing my chest, thinking of the same mark on him. Was he... trying to do something by marking me like that? I don’t understand. I feel for him, can’t imagine the pain of each scar on his body.

But now I know why he blindfolded me that night. I also know what it’s like to have that to go home to.

Which brings back the anger. He knows what abuse feels like. He knows the kind of pain that can happen at home. He knows what it feels like to be powerless, to be hurt, to be harmed by someone who has access to you in the most intimate way.

And he still did it to me.

He still hurt me and he still ignored what was obvious. My anger and guilt and empathy all swirl around me. It all sinks deeper into my skin. I don’t know how to organize my thoughts. I want to feel bad for him. I want to care, but... but how can I when he knew the signs, he knew the pain, and he still...

“Why does this just keep getting more complicated?” I hiss into my hands.

Twelve

KNOX

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

I can't focus on practice. I feel off. And my playing shows it. I get tackled four or five times before the sense is knocked into me.

Thankfully, before I can screw up further, we're told to hit the locker rooms. I get into a shower, making sure no one else can see me.

I cross my arms on the wall and press my forehead to my arms. The hot water rolls over my body, but I can't wash away the way that Hope looked at me. Her gentle fingers on my body, the softness in her eyes.

I don't want her fucking pity. I don't want her to see me as weak because I'm not. I'm not weak. I'm not... I'm not that scared little boy. My scars are my past, and since I can't rip them off my body, they exist.

She wasn't supposed to see them. She was supposed to check that box like a good girl and if she wasn't mine, I would show the entire team the video of her taking all three of us.

I don't want to leave the shower as it is. I hate using the locker room. I hate feeling like I can't walk out and about without everyone asking me what happened.

Jaxon clears his throat. "Dude."

I move the curtain slightly and see he has a towel and my clothes for me. I turn off the shower and grab my stuff and put it on before leaving the shower.

Dimitri shakes his head. "You look like a bad ass—like some John Wick dude. You

should embrace it.”

I flip him off. “Not happening.”

“I could set you up with my tattoo artist,” Jaxon offers.

“If I wanted tats, I’d get them,” I say calmly. “End of conversation.”

“Yeah,” Dimitri says. “Anyway, let’s hit the gym tonight. The other one.”

As we start making plans to box, Jared walks over. He looks between the three of us.

“Hope’s something, isn’t she?”

“What?” I ask.

Jaxon watches Jared, waiting to see where this is going to go as he puts his piercings back in. Jared shrugs. “Coach said that she’s one of the reasons you guys joined, so I figured you’d know how great she is.”

“She’s something,” Dimitri says hesitantly.

“Her smile is amazing. She’s honestly the best person I’ve met. She said she’s not dating any of you, but I wanted to check with you guys before I make a move on her. I’ve been trying to hint to her that I like her as more than a friend, but I’m ready to take my shot.”

I nod once.

“The team comes first, though. If you’re not cool with it, any of you...” He swallows as he watches me.

He must know I'm seething. I don't want to hear about someone else wanting her. I don't want to think that now that she's here, now that she's seen me, I'm going to lose her to some fucker that I can't take out because he's my fucking teammate and...

I roll my neck and rub the sudden tension there. Think, don't act. Think, don't act. Think, don't act.

"I can ask her out, right? She isn't your girl... right? Or did I misunderstand something?" Jared asks, looking between the three of us. "Can I...?"

I'm about to lose my temper. He's not even man enough to say the fucking words. He's asking our fucking permission instead of setting up a date with her? He's not good enough for her. She deserves someone who takes action, who can give her what she needs. He doesn't check a single box.

Dimitri holds my shoulder, keeping me back. "Take your shot."

Jared flashes a big smile and heads off. Jaxon shrugs once, then finishes getting his shit. I shove Dimitri off me. "Why did you say that?"

"Why not?" Dimitri asks with a shrug.

"She's mine, you know that," I snarl. "If we lose her because of this—"

Jaxon laughs. "Ours. She's our fucked up little plaything."

"Exactly," Dimitri adds. "And she will never go for a guy like Jared. She might not want to admit it yet, but she'll realize sooner or later that she's meant for us."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

My phone buzzes and I see a message from Coach. Not Coach Carpenter, but the coach we've been waiting on. "Coach is here."

As much as I don't like everything about Hope's father, he was there when I needed him. Once he realized what my grandfather was doing to me, he beat the shit out of the old man. Coach was good to me when no one else was, when no one else cared. A man who's willing to defend me like that wouldn't hurt his own daughter. He's not a monster. He saved me.

He protected me, brought me under his wing, made sure I was eating, that I had somewhere safe to go. There's no way he can be terrible like she says. It's impossible.

"Let's go pick him up," Dimitri says. "We need to show him around."

That's exactly what we do. He's impossible to miss at the airport. He has a thick head of graying hair that he doesn't try to save. He's got broad shoulders and he's clearly been adding to his beer belly. He wears jeans and a sports jersey as if he doesn't own anything else and the letterman jacket from our old university.

He sits up front when Jax moves to the back and pats my shoulder. "My boys. It feels good to see you three again. Doesn't feel right in town without you."

"You know how things go. Once you have every mailbox memorized, it's time to get out." Dimitri chuckles.

Coach doesn't say anything to that, but the way his eyes darken, it makes me wary. It

never used to bother me, but now, my muscles tense like I'm expecting a blow. That's just because of the inspection. It's just because of what Hope saw. That's all.

"We'll show you around," I say simply.

The first stop is the stadium. He whistles as he drinks it in. I almost lead him to the physical therapy wing, but Jax pipes up talking about the food and giving me a look that says No.

"I'm always eager for food," Coach says.

Dimitri insists on showing him a stir fry place, then a Mexican spot, while saving the wings and sports bar for last. Which is where we settle in to eat. When I walk out to have a cigarette despite Coach's warning that it will slow me down, Jax comes out.

I give him a look. "There a reason you're limiting things?"

"Yeah. And you know it, or you would have ignored me," he answers, eyeing me intensely.

She called him a monster. She was terrified. That look in her eyes...It lingers in my head until I banish it by downing water until I'm sloshy and eating the hottest wings on the menu. Then we're left with the option to show him our apartment. It's a win for me. I'm not relying on my shitty family, not at anyone's mercy. I'm almost proud to show him how far we've come.

When we get in the elevator, he shifts slightly. "And Hope?"

Jaxon shakes his head once, but I handle that. "We'll bring her to you."

Dimitri grins. "A reunion."

Coach lights up and happily checks out my apartment as Jaxon gets out to get her. Her dad doesn't need to know that she lives here, that her apartment is on this floor. That's something just for us. Jaxon has reasons and I have mine. Hope is ours, not his. She's outgrown him just like we outgrew that town. Her specific location, her home, the place she likes to go to eat, that's all off limits. I'm not going to lose control.

I might not believe he's a monster, but I'm not about to give up my access to Hope. I don't want her running again. Not this time. Like Jaxon said, she's our plaything, and until she accepts that, I'm not risking a thing.

Thirteen

JAXON

There's no way that Coach is a monster. He can't be. Today proved that. He didn't ask about her until the end. It was all about us, it was just him checking in, making sure we're set, and that's how it will be with Hope. Coach helped Knox with something, and Knox has a good judge of character. So why didn't I want to involve her? Why did I hate how he lit up when she was mentioned?

That horrible, possessive glint in his eyes. I was always disgusted by his relationship with Hope. A man should know what's right and wrong, even if his daughter is eager, but all those videos he showed us, how she lay down obediently, how she'd moan...

She wasn't fighting, but I can't shake her fear and fury when she talked about him.

I stop thinking before I get wrapped up in too many questions. I exhale as I stop in front of Hope's door. She's screwed up, there's no question about that. All four of us are fucked up. I think there's a difference between us and her dad, though.

I know there's a difference. And she's messed up in a way that's different from me too. My brow furrows, and I hesitate a moment before I knock. Something like an alarm is going off in the back of my head. It's soft, easy to ignore.

I knock and a moment later, Hope answers. She's wearing short cotton pajama shorts and a crop top. The shorts are high-waisted, leaving only a sliver of skin. Fuck, she's hot. Hot without trying and in a way that makes me hard just seeing her.

"Did you get all dressed up for me?" I ask, looking her over again.

Fuck, she's not wearing a bra either. I can tell. Twice as hot.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

Hope sputters for a second, then starts to shut the door. “This is for bed! What do you want?”

“Your dad is here. He wants to see you,” I say.

Her face turns pale as her breath quickens. She sticks her head out and looks around before sinking further behind the door. Her voice comes out in a terrified, horrified whisper. “In this building?”

I nod and watch her shift on her feet. Her eyes are unfocused, like she’s trying to figure something out. This isn’t the reaction I anticipated. Maybe I thought she’d slam the door in my face, but I didn’t expect... this.

She’s frozen, unable to move, and her hand shakes slightly. She starts to curl in on herself as a little gasping sound leaves her throat. Is she seriously afraid or just an actress? She shakes her head slightly, but I’ve been sent to do something and I’m going to do it.

If something is really wrong, she’ll fight, she’ll raise her voice, she’ll do something that allows us to step in.

Her dad is twice our age. We can take him. I reach out to her. “Hope.”

She doesn’t respond at all. With a sigh, I grab her, toss her over my shoulder, and swat her ass.

She screams at me, pounds on my back and tries to kick me. “No! Jax! Put me down!

Put me down! Let me—”

I swat her ass again. “You’re going to wake the neighbors if you keep that up.”

She lets out a more breathless yell. I’m guessing it’s because my shoulder’s in her belly, but she beats my back as another door opens. Jared. Of course, it’s Jared.

“Um, what’s going on here? Hope, are you—”

“Nothing to see here, Jared,” I call back to him without looking. I don’t stop. I go right to Knox’s room, shut the door, then set Hope on her feet between me and the rest of the apartment.

Hope stares at me, her face pale, her lips pale, her hair a mess. She looks at me like I betrayed her.

Her dad moans softly, and I hear his beer bottle hit the table harder than necessary. “You always had the best scream, angel.”

I motion for her to go deeper into the apartment, then poke her side. She walks in, her eyes bouncing to Dimitri in the kitchen, then Knox who’s on the couch. She stops in front of Knox, her eyes focused on him with something that looks like hope.

Then her father grabs her wrist. Her hand is limp. She just stands there, and Coach chuckles.

“Be sweet, be polite, angel,” Coach says before tugging her onto his lap.

She says nothing as he buries his face in her neck and strokes up her bare thigh all the way to her shorts.

Her eyes zone out and her whole body goes slack, like she's not there anymore. It's like she was beamed up by aliens or some shit and they left her body behind.

I look over at Dimitri. His confused gaze goes from Coach to me. I see the same worry in his eyes. Maybe she never wanted this. He glances at her limp hand, the fact that she's just sitting there, but I shake my head slightly and he looks back. More worry deepens his features.

This isn't the first time we've seen her on his lap. Hell, he used to grope her in front of us. Maybe it's the time that's passed or a new perspective on what's right, but I swear she didn't look like that when he did it. She'd hide her face in his shoulder like she was embarrassed he was doing it in front of us. Maybe it was because we were too horny and enjoyed seeing her being touched, but now it just feels wrong.

I feel slimy and wrong. I don't want to watch him touch her.

Still, Knox just talks with Coach like nothing's happening. I don't know what they're talking about. I can't sit down. I feel restless. I want to pull her off her dad's lap, want to stop his hands from wandering closer and closer to her ass. I want to bring her back to her body.

Her lips tremble and my gaze flicks to Dimitri again. I shake my head ever so slightly, so Knox and Coach don't see, but he sets his beer down softly. He knows something's up. Something is wrong.

Coach stands, making Hope stumble off his lap. She comes back to her body as Coach pats just above her ass—only above because she manages to move ever so slightly. He grins. "I'm going to use your room, Knox. I'm sure you don't mind."

Hope looks between us, her gaze focusing on Dimitri. Coach spans her and finishes his beer, making a mess of it. He stumbles slightly but grabs Hope's ass as if it's the

only thing keeping him standing.

After one step, I move forward. “Knox.”

Knox arches an eyebrow at me. I look at Hope obviously, then back to him. He didn’t even want Jared to ask her out, but he’s okay with this?

Knox takes another sip and shrugs. “What? She doesn’t want to be ours yet, so she can still have some fun.”

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

Hope turns and looks at me as her dad pushes her to the guest room. Her eyes are watering. Her lips part, and for a moment I think she's going to say something. She's practically digging her feet into the carpet.

"Are you going to fight me again, girl?" her dad slurs. "You know how it will feel then. You know I like how pretty you look when you cry."

"Don't do this," she whispers to him, tears brimming her eyes.

She doesn't hit him, but with that threat... I can't do nothing. I can't let this play out in front of me. I can't make up for the past, can't change shit, but I sure as hell can do something now. She doesn't want him, doesn't want this, and only an asshole, an ingrate would let it happen.

The no is clear.

I hurl forward, grabbing his shoulder, and fling him back against the table. Coach hits me. "That's my piece of ass you're—"

I hit him harder, sending him tumbling over the table. "She said no."

I see red. Maybe it's years of pent-up issues. Maybe it's the fact that I should have done this the first time I saw a video of him with her. Maybe it's long overdue and I have to get it out of my system.

I'm ready to kill her dad. I slam my fist into him again, then I'm lifted off him. His face is bloody, his eye swollen shut, his lip cut, but it's not enough. I kick him as hard

as I can in the dick, and considering I used to be a kicker, I have plenty of force.

He can't even scream. He wheezes and cups his dick and balls in his hand as he curls into the fetal position. Knox hits me and Dimitri drops me.

I glower at Knox.

“What the fuck!” he demands.

“She said no. End of discussion,” I say as I pick myself up off the ground. “Think on that tonight, then tell me I was wrong.”

I spit on Knox's shirt, shake my head, and look at Dimitri. He clears his throat. “She left.”

Then I have no reason to stay.

Fourteen

DIMITRI

Were we wrong?

The thought keeps echoing in my head. Something was off. That's what Jaxon was telling me the second he brought Hope here. I didn't see her face, but Jaxon's not a soft kind of guy. Her being upset wouldn't get under his skin. It's something else.

Then his comment. The only thing he said once he ripped Coach away from Hope... “She said no.”

It breaks me. I rub my jaw. All those videos. There were so many, and we... we

never said a fucking word. My dad never took her seriously, and that seemed to mean it wasn't serious. She was just a liar, but now I'm bothered.

The way she looked at me—like I was her only shot at freedom—made my damn stomach twist. And I just sat there. I fucking sat there and watched Coach claim her soft body with his greedy hands.

Our body. Our girl.

Knox gets Hope's dad in the recliner. Coach pants. "Ice, please. Knox. My boy."

Knox just stares down at him. There's no mercy, no forgiveness, no confusion in his eyes. He's pissed, the kind of pissed that would make me sure that Knox could kill someone.

"Knox?" Hope's dad demands, opening his good eye to look at Knox.

"Did she ever like it?" Knox asks.

Her dad huffs. "Of course she did. You saw the tapes. She begged me for it."

"But she ran?" I ask, my voice punching out with more ferocity than I've ever spoken to Coach with before. "Why would she run from you if she liked it? If she begged for it? If she wanted it?"

He glowers at us, then stands up just to drop back down while clutching his crotch. Jaxon doesn't hold back when he fights. Knox learned how to pull his punches and his kicks. Jaxon has always believed if someone is worth fighting, it's because they deserve the worst agony a person can give.

And he can give a lot.

“No, she ran because of what you three did to her. I had a perfect little fuck toy and you three screwed it up!” Coach snarls. “So you’re going to fix it. I’ve had to spend seven years only hearing her voice on the phone. Seven years watching the videos.”

“Did she ever come on to you?” Knox snarls.

“You’ve seen the videos!”

“The videos of you, a grown man, fucking your daughter,” I hiss as my stomach churns at the thought. It was never right, no matter how stupid and brainwashed we were in the past. “Videos you never should have shown us.”

“She’s a whore! She’s just like her mother, ready to spread her legs for anyone, but then you three broke her! I bet you hurt her. You’re the ones who didn’t listen to her saying no. Did you even wait for the yes?” her father snarls.

“Did you?” Knox demands.

He starts to say something, but Knox takes a step forward, his hands curling into fists. It shuts up Hope’s dad long enough for Knox to speak. “Did you beat her until she said yes? Threaten her with worse if she didn’t?”

“I—”

“That’s what it sounds like.”

“A good whore knows her place,” Hope’s father says.

I wince on his behalf. His behalf and Hope’s. How the fuck did we ignore it? No. We didn’t ignore it. There’s no excuse for the kind of shit we pulled. I was sure she was legal and sure it was super ‘Alabama’ of her to want her dad, but there’s stepdad porn and... fuck, I made every possible excuse to not believe he was... The word is too terrible to say. I don’t want to think she had to deal with that for years.

So many videos.

Knox looks at me, and I realize I said those last three words aloud. They hang in the air for what feels like minutes before fading away into tense silence. Silence that is meant to be broken.

No...shattered.

Something breaks in Knox. He loses it. He grabs coach’s face and slams his head into the coffee table, breaking Coach’s nose and probably dislocating his jaw. I stand up and push Knox back.

“Don’t kill him,” I order, fighting the part of me that wants to see Coach bleed and suffer for all the fucked up shit he did to our girl.

“He deserves it,” Knox argues, struggling against me.

“Kill him and you’re in jail. If you’re in jail, the team is fucked, we’re fucked, and so is Hope because this asshole won’t be in jail,” I try to reason.

“So pretty. So much like her mom,” Coach drools. “It was so easy. A few threats, a few warnings, a few drugs every now and again.” He laughs. “Once I had one video, all I had to say was that I’d release it. And who would believe her? I was a pillar of

the community. Nothing could stop me.”

“You'd better say that to the fucking police or I will kill you,” Knox snarls. “I'll make sure you feel every second of it and bury you where no one will find you.”

And he means it. He will absolutely follow through on his threats. He learned it from the bloody asshole in front of him.

Fifteen

HOPE

Idon't know what to feel. Seeing Jaxon beat the shit out of my father. Finally having someone stand up for me... and his words. It hurts too much. So I shower and scrub my father's touch off me until I'm nearly bleeding, bile burning in the back of my throat as I fight the urge to vomit.

I can't believe he's back. I can't believe he... touched me like he still has some sort of claim on me. Perhaps he does. There will always be a part of me that fears him, that hates him so much that it brings tears to my eyes.

Why can't I just scrub away that part of me? Or cut it out of my heart and soul? I'd rather not be whole than forever suffer from that part of me.

Tainted. Broken. Weak.

Or is that actually all of me?

Once I get out of the shower, I pull on my clothes that feel as close to a shield as I can get and then take some melatonin before getting in bed.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

If I could get away with some weed gummies, I'd take them. They'd help me sleep. But apparently, having someone who will protect me from the monster who's sunk his claws into me whenever possible must be better than melatonin because I pass out.

A nightmare wakes me. One where someone, a literal monster, claws into my bed to mount me and—

I gasp as I sit up and rub my chest. "I'm safe. I'm alone. I'm..."

I look at the foot of my bed, the window there, and see a shape. I yelp and fumble for my light. I slap it and see Knox there. His jaw is tight, his dark brown hair a mess on his face. His hands are in his lap as he stares out my window.

He looks confused, but his jaw is set at the same time. Of course, because Knox isn't Knox unless he's pissed.

There's blood on his hand and splattered over his arm. Some is smeared on his face.

I rub my eyes as my heart continues to pound, every muscle in my body on edge. "Knox, is that—"

"Your father," he says, then looks at his hand, finally moving. "He's taken care of."

I move back in my bed until my back hits the headboard. I slide my hand under my pillow until my fingers curl around my phone. "What are you talking about?"

“He’s going to jail,” he says calmly.

I swallow as the thumping in my chest transfers to my skull, nearly drowning out his words. “Is he alive?”

Knox laughs once, a humorless, terrifying laugh. “If you want to thank someone for that, Dimitri deserves the credit.”

I continue watching him. I don’t know what else to do. I don’t know what to feel. My father being gone, no longer being a threat. I should feel free, but now I feel like I owe the guys something and that’s not a position I want to be in.

Plus, hurting my dad and finally doing something doesn’t make up for the shit they ignored for years. It doesn’t make up for what they did too. Besides, they probably only attacked him out of anger that someone else was touching their toy.

He clears his throat. “Your dad saved me, Hope. My grandfather used me as an ashtray. He used me to take care of all of his anger. Any issue he had was my fault. He beat me, burned me, tossed dinner on me more than once, no matter what it was. He did...” Knox shakes his head. “And I just took it. I thought if I said something, it would make me weak. He was an old man and I just...”

I stare at him as tears cloud my sight. Because my dad did the same. Of course, he didn’t burn me or cut me. He wanted me soft, but bruises... I wore those regularly, not to mention everything else.

“Your dad helped me. He beat the shit out of my grandfather and my grandfather never touched me again. He didn’t even want to be in the same room as me. I couldn’t see him as anything other than a hero,” Knox finishes.

I wipe away a stray tear. “He raped me, over and over again. He bruised me. He left

marks!” I say sharply, needing him to see my dad as I do.

Knox swallows.

“You knew it! You saw it. And even worse, you knew what it was like. You knew how it felt to be powerless. You knew what it was like when home wasn’t safe, and you did nothing to help me. Instead, you did just what he did. You, Jaxon, and Dimitri,” I say, my voice cracking. More tears fall, and I look away. “You all did the same, and beating my dad up doesn’t change it.”

He shakes his head. “No, you liked it.”

I scoff and wipe my eyes. “Yeah? I did?” I demand as disgust seeps into my voice. “You’re going to tell me how it felt for me? You’re going to tell me you read my mind and that’s why you went for it?”

He doesn’t answer.

I shake my head. “And now you broke into my apartment to be in my room again, in the dark, hiding and... How are you different?”

Knox meets my eyes, and for the first time I see how unsure he is. “You... you... I was sure that you liked it, Hope.”

“Whatever you have to tell yourself to sleep at night,” I huff. “Get out, and don’t break into my room again. That’s definitely against the law, and all it takes is one call to the police to remind you that being in the NFL won’t save you.”

I keep my eyes on him. I don’t trust him not to come closer. I don’t trust him to be any different. They had to have known all along. Some part of them knew exactly what was going on. They just didn’t want to see it.

How can I trust them after that? I looked them in the eyes and silently begged them for help over and over again, and they never listened. They never cared enough to give a damn until tonight, and I don't trust their intentions.

I just can't. Trusting them is letting all of my walls fall, and I refuse to be as vulnerable as I used to be.

He grunts, gets up, and heads towards my bedroom door. Just before he rounds the corner, he pauses and whispers, "I'm sorry."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

“More words without any meaning to it,” I grumble.

He can say those words until he’s blue in the face. It doesn’t mean he means them. So many people say things because they know that’s what the other person wants to hear.

It isn’t genuine. It’s calculated.

“I’ll prove it, Hope,” he says. “Whether you forgive me or not, I’ll prove I never meant... that I’ve become better.”

A part of me wants to believe that. I want to believe he’s gotten better, that he knows that what he did was wrong, but he won’t even admit it. He said I liked it. I just knew what would happen if I said no.

Although, based on Jax’s reaction to my dad, maybe that would have been enough.

But it doesn’t matter. They didn’t wait for the yes. And thanks to them and my dad, I’m fucked up. I know that plenty of people who’ve dealt with sexual assault find ways to cope and consensual nonconsent play is a part of that, but I can’t help but wonder who I’d be if things had been normal, if I’d never dealt with any of that.

And that’s something I’ll never get to know. It’ll always be a ‘what if’.

Even if the guys prove they’re sorry, I won’t forgive them. I don’t have to. I won’t. They can do better somewhere else, but the best thing they can do for me is leave me alone.

Before they break me even more than I already am.

Sixteen

I expect hell today at work. I expect the guys trying to get my attention, to get me to talk, but I can't. I just don't want to exist. My father being out of the picture is a step forward, but I'm bitter.

I force a smile while at work, but I don't go out of my way to make conversation. When all the guys come in to work on the machines, I keep my distance.

Jaxon glances at me every now and again, then Coach motions to his hands.

Instead of coming to me to take care of them, he goes to another physical therapist. His right hand is ripped up and I know why.

I was there for that.

Jaxon didn't let me go far. I think he hesitated before taking me there, but he did it. He's not innocent either. None of the three are.

I notice Dimitri watching me as he takes a break. He's buff, really buff, and looks exhausted and... full of remorse. When I meet his light gray eyes, the eyes that have haunted my nightmares for years, he looks away and runs his hand through his black hair.

It's an oddly quiet day.

Even with the call I got from the police station. Even though my knees bounce as I don't want to deal with a trial. It still feels like a quiet day.

After Jaxon, then Knox, my dad will probably feel safer in jail as long as he doesn't say what he's in for. So this safety, this peace, I cling to it as tight as I can.

When I come back from lunch, I find flowers in my office. The lilies and orchids are so beautiful that I gently stroke one of the blooms. A part of me hopes it's something from a friend, or a thanks from Coach Carpenter for all I've done.

The flowers are beautiful and warm, so colorful and natural and wild. I smile until I see the card.

It says Truly Sorry and is signed by all three of the guys. I glower at the flowers and wrap my hands around the stems, then throw them in the garbage.

Those assholes think that flowers are going to do anything for me? They're salt in the wound! If they can be this understanding, if they recognize all the things that are wrong now, why couldn't they have done it before?

They never asked me my opinion on things. They assumed. When I'd try to talk, they'd shut me up or tell me not to lie.

My throat bobs and my eyes burn.

The best kind of apology they can give me is leaving me alone. I don't want to hear them calling me 'sweetheart'. I don't want them watching me. I don't want them telling me they're sorry. I don't want them in my life!

It's bad enough that Knox lives on my floor. It's bad enough that Dimitri showed me his cock less than a week ago, acting like I wanted it. It's bad enough that Jaxon carried me to my dad just to let him touch me before beating him up.

It's all too little and too late.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

When I walk back out into the main therapy room, I leave my office open, making sure they see I've rejected the stupid flowers.

Knox doesn't look at me. He doesn't approach me. He doesn't do anything. Jaxon flexes his hand and shakes his head. He looks pissed and not with me.

Dimitri's eyes go to Jared, who's watching me with blatant curiosity. He could have stepped in. He could have done more than try to talk. He could have...

Apparently, I'm expecting too much from the world. I expect people to do the right thing, and every time, I'm let down. The police, the guys, my dad, my mom, Jared.

"Hey," Ben says.

I jump, and he motions to my office. I force a smile. "What's up? How's your ACL?"

"How's your head?" he asks.

I blink at him. He looks at me intently. "You don't have to tell me what's wrong, Hope. You don't have to tell me anything. But if you need something, I can help. Therapists, a new place, a way to make more money, a way to disappear somewhere else and actually be able to function... I have a lot of reach, and if you keep making that face, I'm going to assume you need it."

"Ben, I'm... functioning," I whisper, not willing to lie to him.

"If you need some backup, I'm a big guy too. Not everyone knows how slow I am,"

he says with a goofy smile. “You’re part of this team, though. If you need something, if someone’s upsetting you, scaring you, anything, all you have to do is say the word and it’s taken care of.”

“I’m okay, Ben. Or at least, I will be,” I say.

“Just say it, Hope. And I’ll help in any way I can,” he says and leaves my office.

I’m well aware of what the guys on this team can do. I saw it last night. If I would have seen it seven years ago, maybe things would be different.

Since it’s not, I’m just going to have to learn whom I can trust and kick everyone else to the curb. Because I’m in short supply when it comes to forgiveness and the only person I’m interested in forgiving is my younger self. It wasn’t her fault, none of it was, and it’s time I accept that other people failed me, that I was a victim and that I can be more as long as I love myself enough to speak up.

Seventeen

My shadows never leave me, hiding in the distance, lurking and watching. Everywhere I go, they go. But they never approach, never yell after me. In some way, they do leave me alone, they do give me space.

Perhaps this is their way to ensure my safety, but that ship has sailed a long time ago. The scars are already there, on my skin and soul. They can never take them back, erase them, or make them better.

The other guys of the team notice there’s something up as yesterday, Ben tried to show he’s willing to help in any way, or Jared and his words.

But I don’t want to rely on anyone. I know I have to do it myself. Get stronger, get

better. And yes, by taking my dad out of the equation, my three shadows did help.

I'll never say thank you. I'll never expect anything else from them but maybe, just maybe, they won't hurt me again as they now know how truly broken I am.

Unfortunately, Jaxon, Knox, and Dimitri aren't as easy to banish as shadows. I can't just fill my life with light and be done with them entirely. Jaxon comes to see me about his hand and Knox shows me his.

The bruises are bad and Jaxon has a dislocated finger. I watch both of them for a long moment. I can't turn them away and they know it. I walk them both into my office but leave the door open.

Knox looks from me to the door. "I thought there was some confidentiality here."

"And I thought I was clear," I whisper.

Both of them look at me for a moment, then Jaxon looks to Knox. "Clear about what?"

"Nothing."

"Leave. Me. Alone. We have to see each other while we work. That's it. Jaxon, your finger needs to be reset. An actual doctor can do that or—"

Before I get the word out, Knox reaches over and takes care of it. Jaxon curses, probably every curse word I've ever heard leaving his lips in one sentence, then he grits his teeth. Knox pats Jaxon's arm.

"Saved you a trip to a less interesting doctor," he comments.

“Thanks,” Jaxon hisses.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

I look between them, confused. Knox nods to me. “Now you can splint it. Or tape it. It’s not that bad.”

“Yeah. Yeah, sounds good. Make it hurt, sweetheart. I broke my hand on your dad’s face. Rub it in a bit,” Jaxon says.

Knox snorts and walks out. He’s done with whatever’s going on, but my brow furrows. I don’t get why Jaxon thanked him. Jax watches as I tape his fingers. I swallow. “What was that about?”

“What?”

“Why did you thank him for hurting you?” I ask, probably using more tape than necessary.

“They leave it out of the textbooks, but ‘mean’ is a love language. You’ve seen him with most people. All charming and gentle or utterly silent, right?” Jaxon asks.

“You’re going to bruise,” I say. “Badly. I wouldn’t recommend playing on this.”

Jaxon’s eyes snare mine, holding me in place. I don’t want to focus on him. Not like this. I don’t want to want to understand. I just want things to be what they were these last seven years. I was free. I was totally and completely...

“When someone is different with you, when they show you who they are, that’s how they connect,” he says. “Remember that.”

I sigh. “Remember what I said. I don’t want flowers, Jaxon. I don’t want you three threatening or beating my dad. No matter what, it’s going to be too little, too late,” I say with half the resolve I want to say. “There were opportunities you missed, and I will never be able to trust you three.”

He watches me for a long, intense moment. It’s like he can tell me something if he just stares deep enough into my soul, but that’s not how life works. I should know. How many times did I try to get people to understand by showing the bruises? By giving them my most hopeful eyes, by essentially spelling it out?

“Hope,” he breathes.

“I’m serious. Professional only,” I hiss.

I think that will be the end of it. He walks out. He glances back once with his brow furrowed, and something in me cracks a little. My dad lied to them too. I’m sure of it. They were young, impressionable, saw truth and authority in him, but—but I was there too. I needed help, and they pushed me further and further down.

Even if I saw that flash in Jaxon’s eyes as he picked me up. Even though I saw the indecision on his face when he set me in Knox’s apartment, even though he punctuated my ‘no’ with a fist to the face... It was too late.

Too late.

Those two words echo through my head as I clean until I hear the door close. The hair on the back of my neck tingles, and I spin to see Dimitri.

“Fuck off, I’m closed. Practice is over, you’re not injured, and—”

He closes the space between us fast. He grips my arms, then looks at my hands on his

chest, fingers spread wide as I shake. His stormy eyes drink me in, but it's new. It's like he's seeing ghosts of the past. He shakes his head and focuses on me.

"Sweetheart, look at me, really look at me right now," he orders.

I grit my teeth. I want to look away, but that feels like losing. So, I stare him down.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I didn't want to believe. That's on me, and nothing I can ever do will fix it. I get that. But whatwedid..."

"Was just as bad, and talking about it won't change it," I say. "I've been through enough. Just leave me—"

He shakes his head. "You didn't want it. You were forced into it. But you liked it," he insists, moving closer until his body is against mine. "It was wrong, dirty, terrible in plenty of ways, but we are terrible, all of us. And the only way we know how to feel is by choosing how we're broken."

I snort. "I didn't choose that."

"So you didn't choose to move your mouth over my cock. You didn't choose to watch me, to arch for the guys when they were inside you. You didn't choose to grab my ass to have more of me, to leave scratches on me from how hard your grip was?"

It twists the memory. I know I came. I know that can happen. I know... I know that things get twisted. I moaned, I sucked. I licked. I arched and at some point, I welcomed the orgasm because it was bliss itself, but...

But that doesn't fix things. I try to look away, but Dimitri turns my cheek—my cheek, not my chin. His touch is almost gentle, and I hate it because it's like I'm made of glass now, something that he has to be gentle with because my shattered self

is held together by flimsy tape.

They fucked me when I was already sharp and broken. No amount of softness will change it. I had to glue myself back together.

“You liked it,” he says gently. “And that’s not a bad thing. It started bad, worse than bad, and I know that, but don’t say that you didn’t like being filled with us, having our attention, and us.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

“I don’t think you heard me,” I say with forced control.

His thumb moves over my cheek until I swat his arm away. He looks at me. I push him—not hard, but enough that he moves back. “I threw away the flowers. I told Knox to leave me alone. I told Jax to leave me alone, and now I’m telling you. Fuck. Off.”

Eighteen

I see the way the guys look at me over the next few days. While I’m working with Jared, while he laughs with me and I pretend things are fine, when I talk with Ben, when I’m with any of the other guys, giving them smiles and attention, I feel like I’m being watched.

There’s no reason for me to look. Those three couldn’t earn my forgiveness unless they find a way to turn back time and do things right from the start. Unless they get personality transplants. No matter what Jaxon says about ‘mean’ being a love language, it’s not.

I want respect. I want to feel safe. I know what I want, and I won’t let them confuse me with ghostly half-memories of pleasure and desire. They don’t know how I hoped that while they were fucking me, they’d steal me from my dad. I could learn to like them. It wasn’t as wrong.

They let me down time and time again. Every time.

I’m done.

“Hey,” Jaxon says after three or four days of silence. I face him, and he holds up his injured fingers. “Can we check this? I feel like I’m going to be riding the bench if you don’t clear me to throw and catch.”

Professional, just like I asked for. If they actually behave, we can be... I don’t know. We can’t be friends or lovers or anything like that. Colleagues, maybe?

I nod and lead him to my office. He closes the door and instantly, I’m on edge, facing him head on. He sits down at my table and lays his hand out. Taking a slow breath, I slide on the other side.

“I noticed late, Hope. I was a stupid, self-involved kid,” he says.

I sigh, covering up the slight ache in my chest that threatens to make my voice shake. Why is he saying this to me now? “There goes being professional.”

“We have never been professional and never will be. If the past was that easy to escape, we’d all be different,” he says with a chuckle.

“Yeah, and I’d be blonde,” I say sarcastically.

“Never do that. You look best with your thick black hair,” he teases, reaching over with his good hand to tug my pony.

“Don’t touch,” I grit, fighting the slight swirl of heat low in my stomach. He has to stop touching me like this in the workplace. Actually, anywhere.

“Come on. It’s a gentle touch. That’s what little boys do when they like a girl, right?” he asks.

I’m not even going to comment on that. Does he realize how stupid that logic is?

How that excuses boys' terrible behavior? Whatever. I'm not even going to waste my breath lecturing him, and a reaction is probably what he wants, anyway.

I have to really hammer in that they're not going to get what they want from me. No matter how hard they try.

I check his fingers. "Curl."

He does, then I notice that his eyes are on my breasts. He curls his fingers, spreads them slightly, straightens them and does it again. It shouldn't be dirty, but the blatant lust in his eyes proves otherwise.

That's how he wants to move his fingers in me, I realize. My throat tightens. "Pain scale."

"A one, maybe. If that. Let me play," he says, voice going husky. "I can prove exactly how good my fingers are, Hope. I promise you'll sing your praises and check plenty of boxes."

My face heats, but I shake my head. "They're fine."

"Better than fine," he answers, sliding one of his bruised fingers into the light fist I've made on the table. He dips his finger in, curls it, and moans softly. "Let me show you how excellent my fingering ability is."

"Stop," I order, yet I can't yank my hand away from him. Why am I always so frozen around him? "I'm serious, Jaxon."

"I'm showing you how a man shows he likes a girl," he says, as if it's all innocent. "Don't tell me you don't like our banter. That you didn't miss it."

I scoff. “Banter? That’s what you want to call it?”

“Considering you’re still sitting here and not giving me new bruises, yeah, that’s what I’m going to call it, Hope,” he says, his eyes sharper and more intense.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

My chest squeezes under the weight of his gaze. He shakes his head. “I could fucking grovel. I could beg for your forgiveness. I could say I was a stupid kid, but does it change anything?”

“Maybe a real apology would. Unlike Knox breaking into my place or Dimitri cornering me,” I scoff as I fix him with a warning glare. He'd better not try anything like his friends did, but what can I expect from them? They're bound by their desire to stir up trouble.

Jaxon leans his head to the side, then takes a slow breath. “I'm sorry it happened the way it did. I'm not sorry it happened. I'm not sorry you came on my cock. I'm sorry you disappeared after. And I'm sorry I didn't beat your father's face in earlier.”

I blink at him as I try to process his words. Did he just say he wasn't sorry about some things?

“That's your apology?”

“I mean every word,” he says, his eyes dragging me deeper and deeper. “Every fucking word, Hope. So how about you tell me what you need, and if you tell me, ‘Leave me alone,’ I'm going to prove why you don't want that.”

My heart lodges in my chest. One of the biggest, strongest men I know just asked what I want. What I need. It's the bare minimum. I know that. It's nothing at all in the grand scheme of things, but the earnestness that flashes across his gaze before he hides it softens some of my sharp edges.

“I want you to listen to me, Jaxon. I want you to understand how much you hurt me. All three of you,” I whisper.

His hand strokes over mine, then he pulls me closer, until my breasts are balancing on the table. I swallow, forcing myself to continue because he needs to hear my words. He needs to hear my pain. “Every time you saw me flinch. Every time you mentioned how easy I was. Every time you saw him put me on his lap.”

Jaxon frowns as his eyes train on mine, his brow furrowing in thought. “You’d turn your face to his shoulder. We thought you were embarrassed. I know it’s not an excuse, that’s just...”

“He was my father and he was touching me like that. That’s reason enough to stop it. I was embarrassed. I was humiliated. I was hurt, and I knew if I cried or said no or fought, he would just...”

“You will never deal with him again. He will never touch you again, Hope. Never. I can’t erase what he did, but trust me. He won’t make the mistake of touching you or even thinking about touching you again,” Jaxon snarls.

I’d be stupid to think that he did it for me. It wasn’t. Maybe in small part, it was because Jaxon heard my no and acted when I couldn’t. In a bigger way, it was for him, for Dimitri, and for Knox. Because they see me as their toy, their possession.

I lean back as I remember that. Something hot laps at my stomach, anyway. As much as I shouldn’t want to be theirs... I shouldn’t be okay with their thinking that about me... but maybe there are worse things in life than having three men who now want to protect me, even if on some level, they want to hurt me too.

“Go play. I’ll check the box,” I whisper.

Jaxon stands, then pauses. “Get Jared in line. Knox looks at him like he’s the next punching bag he’ll break.”

“Maybe I like the way he looks at me,” I whisper, knowing that I’m toeing a line. A very guarded line.

Maybe I just want to see how they react.

Smirking, he shakes his head. “No, you don’t. He doesn’t notice how fake your smile is. He’s too focused on your ass. Which is very distracting, by the way.”

Jaxon walks away, whistling as if he’s never known the sting of an insult or an ounce of pain. The song he whistles is stuck in my head until after their scrimmage. I should be there, should be on the field, but I’m second up to bat, not first.

The lead athletic trainer is there. I just have to stay at my post, so I clean everything, go over my reports, make sure everything is in line until I hear some cursing.

“I don’t need a fucking emergency room. There are doctors on staff here for a reason!” Knox’s voice is beyond pissed. It’s dark and lethal. Which means he’s going to be dumped on my table.

So much for a few days of peace being my new norm.

Nineteen

KNOX

Yeah, I’m playing it up a bit, but my ankle definitely hurts. Pain pulses through my foot, curling my toe with every pulse of my heart. It throbs and feels like it’s growing by the second, and taking my shoe off was clearly a mistake. I take off my jersey, my

padding, and throw my helmet at something.

“It’s not my fault!” I yell at the athletic trainer as he tells me to be more careful.

“Sure, sure,” he says.

I want to wipe that smile off his face. I grit my teeth. It’s to see Hope. I need to see Hope, and she keeps scurrying away from me. She sure as hell won’t let Dimitri get more than a few seconds of her attention.

Hope comes out in her normal uniform, but her hair is in a braid today. God, I could wrap it around my fist so easily, tell her it’s my cock that’s hurt and it needs CPR or a good groping to make sure it’s not broken. She couldn’t refuse that, could she?

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

“I need to get back to the scrimmage,” the athletic trainer says. “He wants to get back on the field. See if that’s possible. It’s either broken or twisted. Considering his cursing.”

“Shockingly, it’s toned down,” Hope says as if I’m not there. “I’ll take care of it.”

The athletic trainer whispers something in her ear, glances at me, and she nods. “If he gets out of line, I’ll make sure he thinks twice about it.”

The guy shrugs then half-jogs, then fast-walks back toward the stadium. She glances at me and stays just out of my grasp as I glower at her. “Are you actually going to inspect my ankle or just stare at me?”

“It’s twisted and you’re playing it up. Your toes keep curling. You keep moving it.”

“It hurts like a bitch,” I pant.

We watch one another for a long while. I swear I see the spark of violence in her eyes for a second. Like she could get away with breaking my ankle, but she’s too sweet for that. Hope always has been and always will be. She’s proven that. I don’t get how she’s still this meek, still this restrained. After all she’s been through, she should be ready to get some payback and I’m right here.

She yelled at me, but nothing else. She has some words at her disposal, but she doesn’t fight. She doesn’t punch. She just... tenderly checks my ankle. Every brush of her fingers across my bruised ankle makes my dick hard.

It shouldn't. It does hurt, but when she turns my ankle slightly, I forget to wince and find her eyes on me. I stare her down, daring her to say a word. Nothing comes out.

"You're just bruised, Knox. Not even twisted," she hisses. "Why are you out of the scrimmage?"

"It'll give them false hope when they play us for a game that matters," I say, then hop off the bed and stand in front of her, closing off her exits. "Plus, it gets me this."

"It doesn't get you—"

"I get you alone," I growl.

She swallows, glances around, then takes one step back, then another, and another until she's in her office. I stick my bad foot out when she starts to close the door, and she hisses out something furious.

I push the door open, then close it behind me. "Hope, you are going to hear me out."

"I'm not going to! You're an asshole, you—"

I catch her hand before she can decide whether to hit me or push me away. I force her arm behind her lower back so she's flush against me. I stare down at her, giving her no escape

She pants as she stares up at me. Her mouth opens and closes like she can't decide what words to use. "I know what you're waiting for."

"For you to disappear," she hisses.

"This again?" I groan. "You can punish me and punish yourself. You can live in the

past. But it's not going to change shit. I'm not sorry for pushing your limits and taking what I wanted from you. I'm not a guy who does things the soft way. I'm not a guy who waits until you beg... unless we're talking about whether you come."

She swallows. "You can't just—"

"I'm not going to soften myself or my words for you. I don't know how to do that lovey-dovey crap. It's all fake, anyway. People saying what they want the other person to hear while hiding what they really want. I don't hide, Hope," I snarl.

She keeps watching me, then swallows sharply. She shudders and tries to free herself from my hold. I lower her arm until my fingers are grazing her ass. Such a nice ass. And her tits rubbing against my chest are perfect. I'm already getting harder by the second as I imagine fucking her on every counter and wall of this room. Her moans would echo. I'd teach her bruises and aggression are affection in our own twisted, amazing way.

"I'm not sorry that we fucked. I'm not sorry that I want to own you like that again, to claim your perfect pussy and make it mine," I snarl.

She trembles, and I reach up with my free hand to undo the buttons on her shirt, lower and lower until her cleavage is there. She squirms, but I lower my face until she can't move without the threat of me biting or kissing her. I don't know which is more damning.

"Be a good girl. For me, Hope. Because you know you like my aggression even when you hate it. Because you saw your father's blood on my hands and for one second, you wished I'd killed him for you," I growl.

Her eyes dilate and she swallows. "You guys really fucked me up."

I make a low sound in my throat and caress the scar I left between her perfect tits. They're fuller now. My fingers trail over the top curve of her breast until I see her nipple harden. Her teeth click together, and I smirk.

“Do you want to do it back, Hope?” I ask in a sultry whisper. “Do you want to make me yours, to play pretend and control me like that? Want to add a scar to my skin?”

Her eyes war with mine. I see a mix of emotion there, emotions I wish I couldn't identify. Finally, she takes a slow breath and steps into me. It's so out of character that my hand loosens on her wrist. In a move so fast I don't expect it, she slaps my hand from her skin and manages to break free of my hold and buttons up her shirt.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

“I’m not forgiving you. No matter how many flowers you all send, no matter how you try to apologize to me, no matter....”

She trails off, and I smirk. “You feel it too, don’t you? You belong to us.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she argues, but her blush gives her away.

“Uh-huh. Because you’re not as fucked up as we are,” I say, stopping her hand before she can finish her buttons.

She trembles. She’s so fucking soft. She’s so perfect to ruin. She’s malleable, always so damn sweet, and I want to break her. I want her moaning for me, under me, chanting my name unless her mouth is filled with a cock. I want her giving in so entirely and completely that she can’t hide from the truth.

“You did like what we did. On some level. I know it. I know pleasure when I see it, and yours started when Dimitri asked you if you wanted to choke on his cock and prove how sweet your mouth can be.”

I remember every moment and I see the confusion, embarrassment, and something else on her face. She shakes her head slowly. “I didn’t.”

“I don’t like liars,” I say darkly, then take a step back. “Ask your dad.”

I leave her there, trembling, thinking that over. If I can’t forget the one night I got to have her, then she won’t forget that she wants more. She had us all in one hole each. That’s it. One position, and there are so many more for us to try. There are so many

options, and by the time she's ready to beg for all of them, she'll already be tangled up in us.

Twenty

HOPE

I can't help but think about what Knox said. It's impossible not to think about it. It keeps playing in my head. Of course, so do the good parts of that night. The things I shoved way down because if I enjoyed all three of them using me like that, what does that make me?

No. I shake it off and take a few deep breaths. I managed to last this morning after giving Knox the all clear. I'd forgotten to do it last night. I'd actually left early since I was worried that he'd come back, or that Jaxon and Dimitri would find me and corner me. Jaxon is the only one who's made a real effort. I have a feeling the flowers were his idea. He notices things like that. He's the only one who's asked what I wanted.

"Warning," Jaxon says before coming into my office.

I turn to look at him. Dimitri shoves him. "What the hell is that about?"

"She knows," Jaxon says. "There are plenty of options, plenty of... methods to make something obvious."

"Yeah, I'll say it. Hey, he wants to fuck you," Dimitri says. He lowers his voice and turns his gaze on me. It's intense, hot, ripples across my body. "And he's not the only one, sweetheart."

I swallow and look between them. "This is—"

“Professional space. You wear that word like it’s armor, but the fun thing about armor,” Dimitri says, “is that it can be peeled off, bit by bit.”

“Boundaries are important to me. Here especially,” I say slowly. I want them to understand. Maybe logic will get through to them. “I worked hard to be here. It’s mine. This is my victory. I want to keep it. I don’t want... I don’t want to lose it. I earned it.”

Jaxon nods. “The guys say you’re damn good. We don’t want to take it from you.”

“Hell no. We just want to add some very necessary perks,” Dimitri purrs. “God, I’d even buy you dinner just to let you eat while I devour you under the table, never letting you come until you beg.”

I shudder and look around, not sure exactly what to do with that information. “I, um... I...”

“Knox got alone time with you last night,” Dimitri says suddenly.

Jaxon’s eyes flare at that reveal. I step back again. The guys both look at me. Dimitri speaks. “He’s not capable of being in the same room as you without doing something. We like to stay even. Fill us in.”

“He talked to me. Almost gave me an apology. He grabbed my wrist and...” The rest of the words fall away. He did touch me. He was clearly thinking about doing more, but if I tell Jaxon and Dimitri that, I have a feeling they’ll want to do at least that. And they won’t stop.

“And?” Dimitri asks.

“Don’t keep us on our toes,” Jaxon says as his hand lingers against my side.

I push them both away from me, or I try to. They don't move. I shake my head. "No. No. If either of you touches me, then you won't stop. I know you. My words won't matter. The whole team will hear and everything will be gone. Everything will be gone. You already let my dad come back."

Jaxon freezes. His hand falls away. Dimitri's eyes darken and he shakes his head. "You don't want to say no to us."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

“Right now, it’s no. It’s no,” I breathe.

The guys both take deep breaths. Heat rolls off them. I know they’re ready to go. I know how much they want to continue forward, but instead, Coach Carpenter calls the team. Jaxon is the first one to take a step back.

“She said no, Dimitri. Coach called,” he says.

When Dimitri keeps watching me with confusion, Jaxon pulls him away. But he looks at me and winks. “Home isn’t professional.”

“Not even close, Sweetheart. Home... I have plenty of ideas for home,” Dimitri answers.

My blood burns with that promise. It’s a wrong response. I know that. I shouldn’t want them like this. The basic courtesy they’re showing me shouldn’t matter, but it does. Their restraint matters. They are a part of me. And since they’re not staying in my past, I don’t know what hope I have for keeping myself in line in the future.

“I have good news, Jared,” I say two days after Dimitri and Jaxon nearly got their hands on me.

“What’s that?”

“You’re cleared! You’re good to go back. I told you that finesse would make the difference, and it has,” I say brightly. “You’re good to play.”

He grins. "I'm glad to hear it."

But he looks at me a little differently. He looks at me like he wants to say something, wants to do something, but there's something else in his eyes, a wild glint that has me worried. I lick my bottom lip, then gently wave my hand in front of his face.

"Jared? Are you still with me?"

"With you," he says, then snaps back. "Yeah. Of course. This is great news."

I smile. "You'll get to spend your days with the guys instead of with me. That's a step up," I say brightly.

"A step up," he repeats, then shakes his head. "You smell better than they do."

I laugh, a real laugh. It feels good. Really good. I pat his chest. "I'm proud of you, really. You worked hard, and it's paying off. I can't wait to see you on the field."

"It'll be great," he says. "But I will miss my time with you."

"I'll still be here, making sure no one hurts themselves in the gym. You'll see me plenty," I assure him. "Now get out there and have some fun."

As he walks away, I catch Jaxon watching me. Dimitri is spotting Knox, but Knox's gaze is locked on me as well. I adjust my shirt, feeling self-conscious, and try to go about my day.

The day runs smoothly and goes by pretty quickly. I clean up, glance around, and make sure everyone is out. Then I close up and start walking through the building, heading to my car outside.

And it seems my shadow is still here.

A cigarette rests between his lips as his intense gaze lands on me. Green, hot, and overwhelming. He flicks his cigarette into the road.

“I think you could use an escort home,” he says.

“Funny enough, I’ve survived plenty long without you,” I say, but only half the venom I intend comes out. “And you have a weak ankle.”

“Oh, sweetheart, nothing about me is weak. You know that better than most, no matter what you saw,” he corrects, slinging his arm over my shoulder. His thumb grazes the side of my breast. “But I know one of us is never enough to satisfy you for long, is it?”

I scoff and try to rip away from him but nearly choke on that when I see Dimitri and Jaxon waiting at the corner. They fall into step without stopping their conversation about who’s got the best odds of scoring more. Dimitri drapes his arm around my waist, and Jaxon walks backward so that he gets to look at me.

I’m frozen in their touch and move with them as confusion settles within.

“Undo a few buttons, Knox. I think she looks a little hot,” Jaxon says while staring at my tits, then lifts his gaze to look at me. “You are always hot, but that blush...”

“We can’t have you dying of heat stroke,” Dimitri agrees.

“Nope. That view and that pretty mark between her tits is for us and only us,” Knox says.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

I look up at him. “The... the video?” I force myself to ask. “Are you going to show it?”

He grinds his teeth. “Our team needs their eyeballs in their heads.”

“And that video...” Dimitri trails off.

Jaxon nods, though. “Tell her, Knox.”

“Tell her yourself, asshat,” he quips back.

Jaxon chuckles. “Just so happens that video was deleted. Knox must have let his thumb slip while jerking off.”

Knox flips him off without moving his hand from my breast. His thumb keeps making passes that have my nipples hardening. Dimitri rubs my hip. “Next time we make a video, you’re approving the angles and begging for a copy.”

“Not that you’ll need it,” Jaxon said. “Three guys with high libidos are a lot to keep up with.”

My legs pause. Knox nearly trips over himself, and Dimitri walks forward a few steps before he realizes I’ve fallen behind. All three of them stare at me. Jaxon smirks at me, obviously proud of himself for bringing it up. Knox is watching me warily, and Dimitri arches an eyebrow.

“Are you going to beg already, sweetheart?” Dimitri asks.

“You really deleted it?” I ask, looking between them.

“Felt wrong considering the context,” Jaxon says.

“Means I need to replace it, and now that you’re here, that seems like it’s a matter of time,” Knox says, tightening his grip on me and hauling me forward. “Very soon.”

I shake my head. “Never.”

Twenty-one

“Don’t,” Knox warns. “The more you try to fight this, the happier I’m going to be to tie you up.”

I shudder as I look through the three guys. They’re rough with each other, they banter, tease, push each other’s buttons. They’re sharp, but there’s something warm between them, and being part of what they share in common feels good. Especially when they’re not picking on me, shoving me, or hurting me.

Maybe there’s something right about Knox’s cruel, aggressive words. The past is the past. Unchangeable. But the future... there are options there, and whether I want these three to be a factor or not, it doesn’t seem like they’re ready to let go of those options.

“What are you doing?” I ask as my brows furrow.

“What do you mean, sweetheart?”

I shake my head as I hold up my hand. “Stop calling me sweetheart. I’m not yours. We shouldn’t... I know we will always be tied together in some way, but...”

“Hope, don’t lie. Don’t make us,” Dimitri says.

My hands ball into fists. “There it is! If I keep saying no, you’re going to do it anyway, aren’t you?”

He huffs and steps closer. “You can never get rid of us. Get that into your head!”

There’s a truth in that, I know there is. I also know I want to keep saying no, I want to keep pushing them away because who am I if I give in?

How will the little girl of my past react seeing that I gave in to the men who used me, who claimed me in ways that I can barely wrap my head around? It wouldn’t be right.

But since when is anything in my liferight?

I grit my teeth. “I forgot my phone,” I say and turn to head back inside. I need air. I need to breathe. Anything that keeps the distance between me and them.

I hate it when they’re mean to me, but I hate it almost more when they’re being nice to me. It’s confusing and fucking me up because I can’t possibly be nice back, right? I shouldn’t even grace them with a smile.

“Don’t take too long,” Knox warns me, suspicion glinting in his eyes as I look over my shoulder at him.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

My stomach twists into knots as their gazes pinpoint on me, trailing my every move. I wish I hated having all their eyes on me, but underneath the nervousness, there's a tremor of excitement that thrums through my soul. How messed up am I?

"Just give me a minute," I say with a strained voice, hoping they comply. I just need a moment to myself because my mind is a cluster of conflicting thoughts and feelings. If I can just sort through them, maybe I'll know the right thing to do.

Or maybe there's no right thing.

When they nod, I turn and hurry off to go inside, leaving them out on the sidewalk for who knows how long they'll stay.

My steps are the only sounds I hear when I round the corner to my office. The training room is dark, other than the lights above the doors showing the exits. I push open the door and breathe in relief when I see my phone waiting for me on my desk.

As my fingers curl around my phone, the door behind me closes. The sound of the lock turning in place sends goosebumps over my back.

Of course, they're here. What else did I expect from giving orders to men who believe they own me?

Is this it? Is this the moment where their patience is gone and they take what they want, what they believe they deserve?

Should I stop them? Or should I give in? Letting them use me as a deep and dark part

inside me... wants them to.

Warm hands run over my arm as my body tenses beneath the touch. The tension swirls lower, and I want to loathe what it makes me feel, how my core reacts in a way it shouldn't. Even the gentle fanning of his warm breath against the back of my neck makes my heart pound.

"Don't do this," I say, but even I don't believe the words, the lie.

Perhaps it's okay to have this need for lack of control. Perhaps there is control in that. Or am I just crazier than I thought I was?

He steps closer, his body morphing against mine, and the tension inside me builds. But it isn't the one that forms my pleasure. No, it is one that tells me that the body that's pressed against my back isn't one of my tormenters but another.

I can never forget how their bodies feel, even after all these years. Even with how much they have grown, I'll always know how they feel as they are carved into me.

I try to move away, but my desk in front of me blocks my movement. The soft touch on my arms strengthens almost painfully, and then a warm breath teases over my ear.

"This is how you want it, right?"

The voice should bring some relief, some hope. But as I feel his hard cock pressing against my ass, I wonder if he would stop.

"Jared, what are you doing?" I say while I try to worm out of his grip that only seems to tighten with every breath I take.

"Doing what you want, right?" he questions, but there isn't any doubt in the sounds

that roll from him. He's doing exactly what he wants.

"I don't want this," I grit as panic pounds through my veins and seizes my heart in a vise grip. "Let me fucking go!"

I manage to turn, or maybe he's letting me. The lines are blurring and so is the grip on my own choices.

"I tried to be nice. I was always nice, Hope, and then these three come and just grabbed you," he starts, and with his right hand he tries to tuck my pants down, but my thighs remain strained together, not wanting him to have even an inch.

"They don't just grab me," I counter, but I know that isn't completely true as I remember how it must have looked when Jaxon took me to Dimitri's room.

"I've seen enough, Hope, to know what you want from me. I believe my own eyes before I trust what comes out of your mouth," he grits and forces my legs open with his knee.

I whimper as my hips strain, trying to push back as best as I can, but I'll never be a match for a man as strong as Jared.

Is this what my life is supposed to be? A life where men part my legs with force because they want to? But when I start dating and ask for it, they look at me like I'm crazy. So, does that mean that moments like this are all I get?

I clench my jaw shut as I don't want to believe my own thought, don't want to hide in the safety of my mind like I did with my father.

It should be my choice to do this when I want!

So, I slam my fists on his chest, I scream at the top of my lungs until there isn't enough air inside me to make another sound. I push, I pull on his hair, ripping out a few strands and clawing his scalp hard enough to make my nails hurt.

But all it does is give him space as the strength on my hips and thighs weaken and he slots his leg between mine, rubbing it against my crotch while he rips my shirt open, revealing the carving on my skin.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

There's a pause in both of us as he stares at it, his lips moving as he tries to read it.

And then, a strong hand grips his shoulder and flings him off me like he weighs nothing.

My vision is hazy as the tears brim my eyes, but I know who it is.

Warm, callused hands cup my cheeks and dark eyes stare into mine. Eyes that haunted me for so long but now bring me relief. I hardly believe my own emotions, but every cell in my body yearns for him to pull me into his arms, to shield me from unexpected danger.

"Knox," I whisper, and his touch vanishes, but his voice quickly fills the void.

"You touched her?" Knox's voice echoes in the room.

I blink away the blur and try to close the shirt Jared ripped apart, my chest quickly rising and falling with anxious breaths.

Jared tosses up his hands quickly. "Nothing happened, man."

Knox's gaze finds me again, a question lingers, and I swallow hard, knowing all too well what my answer will unleash.

My fingers tighten around my broken shirt and I shake my head.

That's all he needs before his face whips back to Jared and his fist slams into Jared's

jaw.

Jared grunts in pain and flails backward, not expecting the blast to his face. By the time he steadies himself, Knox drives a punch into his stomach, making him wheeze as the air leaves his lungs.

With a furious shout, Knox strikes him in the face again, knocking Jared onto the ground before lunging at him with his fist raised once more.

I flinch with every pound, with every toss of Jared's body.

"Please stop," I whisper as Jared's body fades away beneath Knox's.

I edge closer, reaching with my hand for Knox's right shoulder, hoping he will stop. But even as my touch grazes over his skin, even as I hold down his shoulder, he doesn't even feel me.

All he feels is his own rage, his need to destroy who hurt what's his. He probably doesn't even feel the blood splattering on his knuckles or his face.

Dimitri, Jaxon, they can stop him.

Before he kills Jared.

I rush out of my office and run through the dimly lit hallways, only hearing my own rapid breathing and the sharp, quick sounds of my sneakers hitting the floor. Air breezes up through the gap in my ripped shirt, blowing over my bare skin and making a chill race up my spine.

In a time when I'm so exposed, I don't feel like that. Strangely, I feel more protected than ever before.

Just as I round the corner, I catch Dimitri standing in the lobby on his phone.

“Knox!” I yell out with tears brimming my eyes. “You have to stop him!”

Dimitri’s head snaps up and Jaxon comes in sight. With one glance at me, they run up to me, but I keep backing as I try to catch my breath.

“What happened? Who did this?” Jaxon is the first to ask as he pinches the fabric of my shirt between his fingertips.

“He’s going to kill him,” I breathe out, and they both look over my shoulder before they take off in the direction I was coming from.

The adrenaline fades, and even though I try to keep up with the guys, I wonder if they can stop Knox. Jared could already be dead for all I know. Because Knox is the definition of vicious when it comes to a fight, and the others know that.

There’s this scary silence when I finally make it back to my office and I carefully step inside. My desk is broken in half, my laptop smashed to bits, and there isn’t a single piece of furniture that has survived.

Goosebumps trail over my arms as I stare at Knox. His eyes are on me. Blood coats his cheek and hands. He’s holding Jared down by his recovered shoulder, and all that comes from Jared are soft whimpers as blood drips from his lips to the ground.

His eyes are swollen shut and there’s no strength left in his body. He coughs, and blood flecks his bottom lip and chin. All the work I’ve done to rehabilitate him is all gone. All for nothing because he decided that he could make me his.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

“Let him go, Knox,” I plead, and Jaxon and Dimitri step closer to Knox. Just because he has stopped now doesn’t mean he won’t get another wave of rage and continue.

“What happened?” Dimitri asks Knox.

And Knox answers. “He touched her. She didn’t want it.”

“Okay,” Jaxon says so simply and turns to me, grabbing my arms and pushing me out of the room.

“Jaxon, don’t,” I say, but as the door closes, a cry that hits my bones echoes.

I know I shouldn’t care what happens to Jared, but still, a sob breaks free from me. I don’t want anyone to get hurt, not in the way they can. Why does so much pain surround me?

“I’m not yours to protect,” I say.

Jaxon pushes me at arm’s length. “When do you get this? You’re ours.” He rips my hands aside, letting my shirt fall open, and presses his finger to my chest. “We’re carved into your soul and skin. And there’s no way we’ll ever let you go again.”

I rip myself free and shake my head. It isn’t right. I shouldn’t be marked, and I shouldn’t find a tiny flicker of comfort in knowing that they’re bound to me. If they hadn’t been here tonight... I don’t even want to think about what would’ve happened. Jared is obviously more unpredictable than I ever could’ve imagined.

“Just...” He sighs and takes off his jacket, tosses it around me, and closes up the front before he wipes away the tears from my cheeks, his fingertips lingering on my flushed skin for a second longer. “Go home, Hope. Don’t worry about this.”

My lips part to stop him, to say anything, but it’s already too late as he disappears into my office.

I grip his jacket tighter, daring to breathe in his cologne that lingers on the leather patches on my shoulders. It warms my stomach, scaring off the goosebumps on my skin as it encompasses me.

But what I don’t dare to think about is...

What does this mean? Does this change anything, to watch the ones who haunted my dreams turn into the ones who protect me?

In the most twisted way.

Twenty-two

I couldn’t close my eyes, too scared of the shadows in my room. I stayed at the front door, leaning against the wall, listening to when they came home. Or if I would hear Jared.

But nothing.

Not a whisper, not a creak or a sigh.

They never came home, or they stayed at a different floor.

I have no answers about what happened last night after Jaxon told me to go home,

and all I can think about is how beaten and broken Jared looked on the floor. I don't see them letting him just walk out of there, but what else can they do that won't end up with them arrested?

And it's not like I can say anything. Will anyone believe me? Will Jared lie and claim he didn't try to force himself on me?

I could lose my job. I could lose... everything.

Everything but the men who barely ever let me out of their sight.

Why is everything so messed up?

I clench my eyes shut while I sit in my parked car in front of work. I have to go back in. I have to show my face, but what will I find?

A soft knock on my window makes me flinch, and my eyes fly open.

Dimitri stares at me, his expression blank. He nudges the door, but it won't open.

I slowly unlock the door and let him open it for me. He doesn't wait, and the cool morning air crawls inside the car. My body tenses as I gaze up at him, the sun rays gleaming behind his head and almost forming a halo. How ironic.

"I'll walk you in," he says, and I swallow.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

“What happened to Jared?” I ask as I hop out of my car. Before I can even turn, Dimitri already holds my back and has the car door closed.

“Nothing to worry about, sweetheart,” he says, a cocky grin plastered on his face.

He walks ahead, and I’m not sure what else I can ask as I’m sure I won’t get a full answer.

Every staff member we pass, every player doesn’t look twice as there’s nothing wrong, or at least nothing they know about.

“What about my office?” I ask as I step up to Dimitri.

He says nothing until we reach my door. His hand clutches the handle before he meets my gaze with his light grey ones. “What about it?” He opens the door with a swing, and I peek inside.

The ravage I saw last night is... gone.

Everything seems to be replaced, even my laptop.

Shock renders me speechless at first as I blink my eyes a few times, making sure that I’m not imagining things. How is this possible? Everything was broken. How did they pull this off in a night?

“Wait,” I start, but Dimitri tosses my bag on my desk and almost leaves.

“Dimitri, please,” I say as I reach out and grab his arm, an electric current passing between us. I quickly release him and pull my hand back, my fingertips tingling from where I touched his warm skin.

“We leave after practice,” is all he says and truly leaves me in my office.

There isn’t a drop of blood anywhere. It’s spotless. It even smells clean.

How the hell did they do this?

Without lingering too long, I set everything up and check my laptop to make sure everything is on there.

“How did they do this?” I whisper as I scroll through my calendar. Everything is there, every appointment. Even the pictures of my work trip are still there.

I scroll through the pictures, slowing on the ones with Jared. My stomach lurches at the sight, and memories of last night crawl over my body like ants, making me squirm in discomfort.

How could he do what he did? He was always so... nice.

At this point, I should have a sixth sense for guys who don’t like being told no, who don’t listen to anything else but their own desires. How did I not see this coming?

A knock on my door makes my heart stop. I look up toward the doorway, expecting to see one of the guys or even Jared, but it’s none of them.

“Hope? Do you have a minute?” Head Coach Carpenter asks.

I close out of everything on my computer and nod, forcing my eyes not to widen in

concern. “Of course.”

Tension crawls through my body, fearing what he’s here for. Perhaps he knows what the guys did. Perhaps they found Jared’s body.

He walks inside, standing by my desk at the same spot Jared tried... I blink away the memories and focus on Coach’s worried glance.

“Jared,” he sighs. “His shoulder.” He shakes his head.

His shoulder was good until... “What? Did something happen?”

It seems I’m going with it and keeping my mouth shut about last night.

He rakes his fingers through his dark grey hair. “He got in a brawl last night at one of the pubs. His shoulder is... destroyed.”

I blink, forcing myself to act surprised. I saw the state that Jared was in last night. Destroyed is probably an understatement. “Destroyed?”

He nods. “He’s in surgery now, but we’re sending him back home to recover.” He straightens slowly. “You did good, Hope. But we can’t protect them from being stupid boys off the field.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

I muster a smile. “I hope he gets better. He’s a good player.”

The words leave a foul taste in my mouth as they used to be the truth, but now, with what he tried, I can never look at him the same. He will always be the person I thought I could trust and who ended up stabbing me in the back. I don’t even want to be in the same building as him anymore.

I guess Knox did me a favor by making sure Jared can’t play football this season.

“I don’t think he will. I’ve been on the phone the entire morning, and they think he’ll never play again.”

My shoulders slump as relief tremors deep in my chest. Right next to my guilt. I shouldn’t wish for anyone’s downfall, but how many people have tried to cause my own? “Oh...”

He turns and looks around. “Did you... redecorate?” he asks with a furrowed brow.

I tilt my head. “Does it look like I did?” I joke.

He laughs. “No, still the same but also different somehow.”

I clear my throat. “I was in a cleaning mode yesterday, that’s all,” I lie.

At least I disposed of some garbage last night. Well, the guys did for me.

He hums. “Well, it looks nice.”

He smiles down at me and with a last nod, he leaves the office.

I dare to breathe when he takes the last step out of my office. I never lied to him like this. Yes, I kept secrets from my past. Yes, I didn't tell him what I truly thought about the nightmares he brought on the team.

But this feels different.

But not... wrong.

DIMITRI

I did what was needed and brought her inside, not giving in to her questions, and hurried back to the apartment complex.

We failed. We let someone else touch her. Touch what is ours. And now I have to leave her alone again.

Because this isn't over.

We broke her all those years ago, tore her apart, and the scars are still there. But we have to put her together, fix her in the image we want. She only needs to give us a tiny opening. Just a sliver of something.

Patience is running out. It slips away, uncontrollable and wild.

I knock two times on Jared's apartment door, the one next to Hope's, and Jaxon opens up. I slip inside and lock the door again.

"Find any more?" I ask Jaxon.

He nods. “Knox is losing it.”

“Fuck,” I mumble and step past him.

We’re so blind. We were blind when it came to her father, and we were blind when it came to our teammate, her neighbor.

We’re so hyper-focused on her that it’s putting her in danger. When will we learn to look around her too? At her surroundings. At the people she keeps closest. At ourselves.

If we keep fucking up, we’re really going to lose her.

I step into the spare bedroom and a chill races up my spine as I stare at the wall.

Pictures of Hope. Sleeping, showering, when she’s pleasuring herself, getting dressed, staring out the window, cooking.

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

There are so many. Too many.

Pictures. Videos. I want to burn every scrap of them all if they contain Hope in them. They're too damning. Too dangerous.

Besides, a camera can't capture how beautiful she truly is. How her smile radiates bright enough to light up a room. How her eyes glow their captivating hue.

Pictures and videos are a disgrace when it comes to showing her off.

"They don't look like pictures," Knox murmurs as he goes through a pile of them.

Bile rises up my throat. "How so?"

"How could he take pictures of her taking a shower?" He tosses a pile my way, and they scatter to the floor.

There are so many, too many.

My brows drag together as I stare at them, analyzing the angles...

"The angles are the same, or at least, there are only two, right?" I look at Jaxon as I point at the pictures Knox tossed on the floor, hoping he sees it too.

"And these." Knox gets up from the bed and hands me a few from Hope's bedroom.

"Same, right? Same angles. This couldn't be a camera."

“Oh, fuck,” Jaxon breathes. “It was. It has to be.”

His words hit me. “He put cameras in her apartment.”

Knox pushes us aside and rushes out.

Jaxon and I run after him, just in time to see that Knox has a key to Hope’s door.

“Hey, since when?” I ask.

Knox stares at me briefly and shrugs. “Day one.” He opens the door, and we follow.

The apartment is spotless. A fresh and flowery scent lingers in the air. As much as I want to take in the space and imagine her in every room, we’re on a mission to uncover what some sick fuck did to her private space.

“Check everywhere,” Knox snaps.

We don’t speak as we scour through her apartment, trying to put everything back how we found it.

Every book, every cabinet, everything gets moved, and my heart skips a beat when a tiny camera stares back at me from between the fake flowers on her bookshelf.

Anger fires through me as I imagine everything this camera captured. Her reading a book snuggled up on the couch. Her laughing as she watched one of her favorite movies. Her crying after we pushed things too far.

Jared didn’t deserve to see any of those things. He didn’t deserve to be in her presence, much less lay a finger on her.

“Found one,” Jaxon bellows.

“Me too!” I sigh as I work to get the camera from its hiding place.

“They are wireless,” I note. “So he had to keep them charged.” The thought wraps around me, thinking about how many times he has been in here without her knowing.

How did he know when to enter? Did he sneak in here at night when she was asleep? He must’ve been watching her and tracking her habits for at least weeks.

A loud crash comes from her bedroom, and I roll my eyes.

“Stop breaking shit!” Jaxon yells and walks into Hope’s bedroom.

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

That thick fuckhead always has to break stuff. Look what he did to Hope's office. It took freaking hours to replace everything and a lot of favors.

But we had to do it. Not just because we didn't want people being suspicious, but also because Hope deserves better than broken pieces and destruction. It's the least we can do to cleanup the mess so that she didn't have to worry about it on top of everything else.

It's become clear to us that we need to correct some things and change others if we want her to willingly let us close.

I walk after Jaxon just in time to see one of the wall paintings fling across the room.

But that isn't what makes anger boil inside me.

Four.

Four fucking cameras lie on her bed.

"All from here?" I ask with an eerie calmness in my voice.

"No," Knox grits and tosses one more on the bed. "Five."

"We should've killed him," I say as my fingernails dig into my palms.

"You," Knox starts, "shouldn't have stopped me." He points his finger at Jaxon, and I step between them.

They are both taller, but that won't matter. I can stand my ground and they know that. Right now, they really don't want to push me because all I can think about is smashing Jared's face in for violating Hope in more ways than one.

"Fuck off, both of you," I say. "Find the cameras and clean this mess up." I stare at Knox before adding. "Don't break her stuff. She likes her stuff."

The tension in his face softens and he stiffly nods before stalking off to pick up the wall painting that he threw across the room.

Jaxon drags his fingers through his hair, sighing through gritted teeth. "If we hadn't caught him last night, he would've gotten away with all of this. He would've kept watching her."

"Sick bastard," I mutter, picturing his creepy ass watching her on his computer screen with all the lights out. Did he jack off watching her? Did he picture it was him when he watched her touch herself?

Fury churns in my stomach as my fingers flex. We didn't teach him a good enough lesson, but as much as I want to beat him down again, we have plenty of work to do here. A wrecked apartment is going to freak her out, and I'm not adding to her stress.

Fuck. I wish I could have her in my arms. I wish I could kiss and fuck away her pain. If she lets me get close.

It took us all day and patience to find the cameras and fix the wreckage Knox created. But I'm sure she'll notice. She's too smart to not notice that things aren't exactly in the same place she left them.

"We have to tell her about this," I say to the guys, and they both nod.

“We’ll show her tonight,” Jaxon says and lifts up the bag filled with the tiny cameras.

“We have to check his apartment more. I don’t think we have everything,” Knox adds, and I can’t disagree with him.

This obsession... there must be more.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket, and I slide it out, staring at the screen as it lights up and Hope’s message appears.

Are you ready to go?

A smile tugs on the corner of my lip. “Our sweetheart is ready to go home. I’ll go get her.”

“We’ll wait in Jared’s apartment,” Jaxon says, and an approving grunt comes from Knox.

I nod and stride out of her apartment, ready to have her back by my side. I just wish I didn’t have such bad news to deliver to her.

Twenty-three

JAXON

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

I keep fidgeting with my lip piercing as I pace in Jared's living room. I'm too wired up to keep looking for weird fucking shit.

Knox is crazy, though. He's trashing Jared's bedroom, ripping it to shreds in search of something.

I don't know what else he'll find, but I'm not naïve to act like there's nothing to be found. Jared is sicker than anyone probably ever thought he was. If he has cameras and pictures, he has something else.

"Knox, are you done?" I bellow as I stare at my phone, unable to stop checking and fidgeting with impatience. Dimitri could be back with Hope any minute, and she shouldn't come back and see Knox on a rampage. Again.

"Back off, Jaxon. I just know there's more."

"One of your voices telling you that?"

He whips his head out of Jared's bedroom. "I don't hear voices, dimwit!"

I cock my head. "You sure? Cause what else is telling you to fuck up the bedroom?"

He narrows his eyes at me. "Just a hunch," he mumbles and disappears again.

I sigh and turn as I hear the front door opening.

"Dimitri, just tell me why we're going into Jared's apartment," Hope says, annoyance

tugging on her voice.

I can't stop the smile that spreads on my lips at that sound, finally stopping my damn fidgeting. She puts me at ease yet excites me at the same time. No other person on the planet has that effect on me.

"Having a loving banter again, sweetheart," I say and catch her angered stare, but not a sound leaves her.

"Come, sit," Dimitri says as he points to the couch, and my lip tugs up.

"Sit, in this house of that perv—"

"There's nothing wrong with the couch," Dimitri says with a loaded sigh.

"Definitely something wrong with the owner of that couch," I mumble.

Hope rests back and crosses her arms, looking around anywhere but at me.

"Don't feel bad about Jared," I say as I step closer to her, able to see the guilt weighing her down. She should be angry or happy that he was punished, but I know that she has a bleeding heart. She cares about others, even if they've treated her wrong.

It's one of the things that I love about her, but it makes me nervous too. That's the chink in her armor. That's how people are able to screw her over.

"He shouldn't have done what he did, I know. But you destroyed him," she says, and her shoulders slump. "I didn't ask for that."

"We should have killed him," Dimitri says and hands me a drink.

She straightens while her jaw clenches. Fuck, she always looks so pretty when she's angry and frustrated.

My hand slips lower and I casually adjust myself. Her gaze drops, and Dimitri nudges me.

"What?" I shrug. He knows how she affects me. How she affects us all.

"Knox?" Dimitri calls out. "She's here."

"And why am I here?" Hope asks impatiently, and Knox's heavy footsteps come in from behind me.

"We want to show you something," Knox says and disappears into the spare bedroom.

Hope's gaze follows him, but she stays rooted on the couch. "Perhaps I don't want to see it."

Dimitri steps closer to her and holds out his hand. "You want to, I promise."

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

She narrows her gaze at him and stands up without taking his hand. She moves past him without a touch.

I grin at him and follow after her. “Did you really think she would take your hand?” I taunt as I nudge him back.

“Was worth a shot,” he grumbles.

Knox stands in front of the wall plastered with all the different pictures of Hope, and she slowly stands beside him.

I watch as her lips part, her eyes widen. She edges back and shakes her head as she covers her mouth with her hand, a shaky exhale breaking from her lips.

She hits the bed and slumps down. “No,” she breathes. “This can’t be.”

Seeing her in such a devastated state makes my skin crawl with unease. I want to fix her, but I don’t know how. All I know how to do is get rid of the problem and make sure that it never happens again. That it never hurts her again.

“We found the cameras,” I say and point at the bag. “Dimitri is still working on Jared’s computer.”

“This does explain why he tried to... yesterday,” Dimitri says, but Knox shakes his head. “No, it doesn’t,” he says.

“What do you mean?” Hope asks.

“He was clearly obsessed with you, but what changed that he made his move yesterday?” Knox says.

Hope shifts. “He said that he was doing what I wanted,” she says softly.

“Wanted?” I ask as I take a step closer to her, needing to understand her.

“He saw me with you and assumed that I was into being... taken, grabbed, fucked.” She jumps up and starts ripping the pictures off the wall.

None of us stop her as she destroys every picture, every bit of proof of what he did.

She’s panting as she goes through the pictures on the floor, the pictures of her naked, exposed, vulnerable. She rips them into pieces, tears sparkling in her eyes as she tears through all of them. She winces through the cuts on her fingertips, refusing to stop until shreds of paper litter the floor around her feet.

“Hope...” I say as I try to reach for her to get her to stop and take a damn breath.

“This isn’t your problem. It’s mine,” she says and rummages through the bag of cameras.

Knox chuckles, breaking the tension in the room.

“You’re ours,” he says so simply, and she scoffs.

“I’m not!” she sneers.

That’s where she’s so wrong.

I tilt my head. “Ours to hurt.”

“Ours to destroy,” Dimitri adds.

Knox crouches down, his fingers hooking under her chin, and forces her to stare back at him. “And we protect what is ours,” Knox says.

She tears her face from his touch. “No!”

Knox grabs her arms and lifts her to her feet. He pulls her with him as she tries to break free.

My hands itch to take over, to touch her, to go back to that moment we had all those years ago. I know it was wrong, but fuck, did it feel good. She hates us for controlling her body, but we also controlled her pleasure. Her pain.

We made her feel.

“Look at this,” Knox snaps and opens up her buttons of her work shirt, pulling it down to expose her chest.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

“You can hide from everyone in the world, but not from us. We are yours, Hope, just as much as you are ours!”

Tears brim her eyes as Knox traces the carved lines in her chest. The crooked initials we put there that night. My mouth waters as I rub the tattoos on my chest. I thought she would notice once she saw me without clothes. The initials tattooed there are her initials.

Because I am marked as hers like she is marked as mine.

“I never wanted them,” she cries, but Knox won’t release her, forcing her to stare at them, at us.

“It’s a promise, one that says you can never get rid of us,” Dimitri says.

“It doesn’t matter where you go, Hope. We’ll always find you,” I say and stand on her other side, skimming my fingers over her heated skin. “Give in, sweetheart. Accept what you are.”

“I—I—I can’t,” she whispers.

“We won’t let you fall,” Dimitri says and gently wipes away a stray tear.

“You’ve hurt me,” she whimpers.

“And it will never be enough,” Knox grunts. “Say it, Hope. No more lies.”

“Look how perfect,” I start and catch her gaze through the mirror. Her breath hitches as my mouth turns up into a knowing grin. “The tears, the panting, broken, destroyed, and we want to see even more.”

“We’ve played nice, but our patience is thinning. We’ll take what belongs to us.” Knox groans.

Twenty-four

HOPE

I can still feel their touch on me and it’s erasing all the boundaries, all the bad.

I should be freaked out by what Jared did, and I am. But not mostly at what he tried, more from the cameras in my place.

When did he do all that? And why?

He watched me do... everything.

How could he watch me at night and then come into work the next day smiling at me like everything was fine? Like he wasn’t stalking me! He lied to my face so much, but even when I think back to all of our old conversations, I can’t spot any red flags that could’ve warned me of his true intentions.

He tricked me that well. He tricked everyone.

A chill races up my spine and I shake my head. The disgust lingers in the back of my throat. Should I search for more or trust the guys that they’ve got everything?

My breath catches as I realize the meaning of that. Trust.

Shit, since when did we get there?

Was it when they stood between me and my dad, when Knox pulled Jared off me, or when they protected me further?

Perhaps they changed on some level, matured. They will always remain the asses I know, but it has been all talk.

A touch here, a touch there, but nothing that comes close to that night.

Are they waiting? Waiting for me to say... yes?

I wait for the same disgust I felt earlier, but it stays hidden. I barely know how I feel because everything is so confusing. So unexpected. I thought they would take what they wanted by now like the others, but all they have done is get close to me.

So close.

All that replays in my head is the way I fit between them, their tall, broad bodies glued to my side and somehow, their touch was soft but also demanding. Or a warning of what's to come.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

Regardless, it excited me, and that scared me enough to push away from them and demand that they leave. I thought they would resist, but they filed out one after the other, leaving me alone in an apartment that doesn't even feel like home anymore.

Do I even belong anywhere? Or truly with anyone?

I never got close to anyone after I left my dad, not even having a single friend. Nothing other than my work, because I wanted safety above everything else.

And maybe... just maybe... they have become the thing that completes it all.

The nightmares, the ones that have haunt me for so long can be... my dark, twisted protectors.

I scoff. From what, exactly?

My dad's in jail. Jared is still in the hospital. From what do I need protection?

With that thought, I still hang a big towel over the glass door of my shower before I step in.

The water starts cold, cascading down my body. As if the chill can wash away all the bad thoughts, bad memories and traumas.

My dark, raven hair clings to my shoulders before I lather it in shampoo. The scent of fresh flowers wraps around me as a safety blanket and my fingers linger on my scalp.

I never changed my shampoo or lotions, always keeping the same scent on my skin.

“Always smelling so sweet.” Knox’s voice echoes in my head.

Shit.

I always kept him close, never changed. If I truly wanted them away from me, I would’ve changed everything. I would’ve disappeared and separated myself from everything that reminded me of them.

They still probably would’ve found me, but it would’ve been a harder challenge at least.

I rinse my body and hair and turn off the shower before I grab the towel over the glass and bind it around me.

With a shake of my hand through my hair, I start to blow dry it. Just a little bit before I go to bed. I will fix it tomorrow morning.

When it’s no more than damp, I stare at my lotion and decide to leave it for once, as a silent stand against Knox. Even if he probably doesn’t even remember it anymore.

The sun has already been replaced by the moon once I get into bed. And I hope my dreams will give me much-needed clarity as the fear is still there but faded, the fog of it is lifted.

It’s no longer there to keep me from saying something I shouldn’t.

Saying yes.

KNOX

The blood on my hands is gone, but the marks still try to stare back at me in the dark.
Hands that fought their way through life, but never could I stand up to my granddad.
Not until Coach.

Am I strong? Or am I weak, just pretending to be tough?

A soft whimper draws my attention, and I stare through the darkness to the covered
body squirming under the covers.

Hope.

Sweet, soft Hope. Broken by the cards she got in life and ruined by me.

By Dimitri.

By Jaxon.

But what she did was worse.

Page 49

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

Even if she didn't mean to. She got us trapped in her little web, and we can't seem to break free.

Perhaps we shouldn't have come here. Maybe we should've stayed away.

But the thought of another touching what bears my mark makes something unspeakable rise inside me. A rawness, an anger that even scares me.

The only thing that puts me at ease is having her close to me. That way, I can watch her. Keep her safe. Be there when she needs me.

And she will need me. She'll need all of us because this world is fucked up and people will want to hurt her or take advantage of her. She may paint us as villains in her mind, but there are people out there who will do far worse to her than we did.

And they'll do it without an ounce of love in their hearts.

It's a stark contrast on what I thought this was between us. Can I even call it love? Or is it more a twisted claim that I, we, believe is the same?

She might have hated us for so long, and I can't blame her. Her dad made her life a living hell and we only added wood to the fire.

But everything has changed now.

Hope moves around again, and it almost sounds like a soft moan that leaves her.

I lean forward in the chair, my elbows resting on my thighs as I watch her.

The moonlight filters through the drapes and casts a light hue over her face. Just enough to see how her plump lips part, how her chest rises, how her blanket crawls lower as she kicks.

Her restlessness peaks and she jumps up, clutching her chest, right where the marks on her skin are.

It takes her a beat before she catches me.

“For fuck’s sake, Knox!” She tosses her pillow my way. “Get out!”

The corner of my lip tilts up and I hold onto her pillow. Inhaling the fresh sent of flowers.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say and lean back.

She shifts, sitting up on her knees, and tosses her arms in the air. “What do you want from me? Go away and leave me alone!”

Her voice is harsh and sharp, but it misses a certain bite.

I fling the pillow back, but she’s too late to catch it and falls back. She mumbles, curses as she scampers up again.

I push off the chair and stand by the side of her bed just before she finds her bearings again.

Her breath catches and my eyes linger on her breasts.

She huffs and crosses her arms, trying to shield her bare body from me.

“Are you naked?” I muse.

“No,” she sighs. “Not fully.”

A sound of defeat and her back relaxes slightly.

“Show me,” I say, and her eyes snap back at me, brows knitting together.

“No,” she says. “Hell no!”

Her hand lands on my chest, trying to push me back, but there’s not even an inch of movement from me.

“You don’t want me to go,” I taunt. “You like when I watch you. Not Jared. Not some other prick who can’t make you feel even an ounce of the pleasure that you know I can make you feel.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

“Are you fucking deaf, Knox?” she fumes, and the tiny bit of bite is back.

“Show me first,” I say.

And defiance shines in her eyes. A slight twitch in her lips. “Make me,” she grits.

My cock hardens. “Oh, daring little thing.”

The bit of defiance fades and realization hits her. But’s it’s too late.

Once you’ve invited the monster in, there’s no getting rid of it.

“Knox, no,” she says carefully as she inches back, and I grab her wrist, pulling her arms to her sides to watch how the moonlight grazes over her bare breasts.

My initials stare back at me, calling me.

“Fuck, sweetheart. I’m going to have so much fun.”

She moves her legs from under her, trying to kick at me, but I can’t stop the laugh as I crawl over her, my body burying hers, and it doesn’t matter what she tries, there’s no escape.

“Knox!” she screams and thrashes beneath me, but it only hardens me further.

“Are you going to run, Hope?” That question makes her pause, and I lean up to peel my top from me and remove the loose-fitted shorts.

And she does precisely what she needs. She runs.

She bolts for the door, gliding over the wooden floor. But as she fumbles with the lock, I grip her hip and press her against the door with my body. The flowery smell of her hair washes over me as I push my nose into the soft strands.

“Hmm, you weren’t lying that you weren’t naked,” I hum. “Nice G-string.”

I hook my finger under the flimsy fabric and pull it to the side. She keeps moving, and my hold becomes rougher until she whimpers in pain, her legs going limp as I thrust my finger inside her.

“No, you definitely don’t want this,” I joke as I pull my finger out and force it inside her mouth. “Taste how wet you are, sweetheart.”

She clenches her lips shut, but with some prying and pinching of her cheeks, she opens up.

She bites down as I enter, pain simmering into pleasure deep within me. “Yes, hurt me. Harder!”

Her tongue curves around my finger. I can’t tell if it’s on purpose or if she’s trying to speak, but it makes my cock throb all the same. Fuck, I need to be inside her. I need her to feel me, feel how much she belongs to me.

With my one hand on her jaw, my finger in her tight mouth, I push her hips back with my other hand, just enough for my cock to line against her pussy.

“Please, sweetheart, do scream for me,” I taunt and thrust inside her.

Her jaw loosens as a cry breaks free.

“Stop it, please,” she whimpers, and I pull out a bit, leaving only the head in.

“Never,” I grit and thrust hard inside. Another whimper, another shake of her head. But I feel it. How her pussy clenches around my cock, begging me to do more, fuck her until she can’t even move.

And I do. I’m relentless with her body, taking what I want.

I step back, pulling her hips with me, giving me the needed space to fully take her.

Her back arches, and I press my palm in the bend, watching her beautiful body contort just for me. She’s a damn work of art.

She holds herself up against the door, panting, whimpering as her pussy tightens its grip around my cock.

I thrust through the tightness as my hand snakes up her spine and tangles in her raven black hair.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

A harsh tug up, and I hear it. The first full moan.

God, that sound. It nearly makes me spill inside her right then and there, but I grit my teeth through the spike of pleasure, determined to make her fall apart first.

“Do that again, sweetheart. Make that sound again,” I grunt.

“No!” she grits, venom lacing the single word.

With my other hand, I linger on her ass cheek. “Remember how Dimitri took your ass?”

She tries to move away from me as my fingers glide around her ass, applying pressure until I feel her body tremble.

She pushes herself from the door, and I stumble. She takes the moment to crawl away from me, and I hurl up and wrap my arms around her, tossing her on her back as she kicks and punches me.

She lands a few hits, but my focus won't change. Not even when she grazes a few over my jaw.

“Look who got some fight in her,” I say and grab her thighs, ripping them apart and pulling her against me. My cock's inside her before she can throw another punch.

My fingers dig deeper into her thighs, and I hope they leave a mark. She should be used to my marks at this point.

“You need to accept who you are,” I grunt, and my thrusts turn rapid.

I lift one of her legs over my shoulder and hit her deeper. She gasps and her head falls back.

Her fingers claw at my arms, her body trying to twist and move. All of her movement just makes her squeeze my cock even more, driving me even crazier as we shuttle toward the point of no return.

“Fuck,” I groan as my cock tenses.

With every thrust, a delicious sound comes from her, but she doesn’t look at me, pretending I’m not the one fucking her. That won’t do.

I grab her chin and direct her face forward so that she has to look at me, making her eyes narrow and her teeth grit in defiance. “You can’t escape from me, sweetheart. I’m the one fucking you, making you mine. And I can feel you squeezing my cock, just begging to come.”

Hope tries to shake her head, but I hold her still with a vise grip. When she tries closing her eyes to shut me out, I snap my hips, making them fly open as an uncontrollable gasp rips from her. Her walls clamp down on me even more, getting so tight that it’s almost hard to thrust into her.

I make it work, though. She still hasn’t come for me yet.

With my left hand, I crawl between us and rub my thumb over her clit. Her body twitches and my lips curve.

“Say you like it,” I tease.

“Never,” she says, but the slight moan around the word makes me keep moving.

I can’t hold on any longer and tilt my hips, hitting that sweet spot. She covers her mouth with her hands, but it’s already too late.

She spills over me, her orgasm crashing through her as her back curves off the ground. I push through the tremors in her pussy until I can still deep inside her, feeling how my cum fills her.

Hope pants heavily, trying to catch her breath as a deep red flush covers her cheeks. She shudders a little from the aftershocks of her orgasm, a look of embarrassment flooding her face.

My body slumps. All the buildup tension is gone, and I pull out but keep her legs apart, just to watch how pretty she looks used and fucked by me.

“This is what you’re good for, sweetheart,” I whisper as I admire the view. A work of art. A masterpiece.

She moves, and I let her, not wanting to get punched in the face since her glare is back. “Just get the fuck out of here,” she sneers.

“Careful now. Your lies are getting old.” I chuckle and get up from the floor to get dressed.

She slowly gets off the floor, staggering on her feet. Her hair’s a mess and cum drips down her thighs. She touches her fingertips to the mess on her skin, her teeth briefly pressing into her bottom lip as her brow furrows. I can’t read her expression, and I doubt her thoughts are any clearer.

Is she confused? Disgusted? Turned on?

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

I wish she would just talk to me instead of tossing me out or running away every chance that she gets, but if she wants to make this a guessing game, I'll play along. I'm always down for games.

With my loose shorts on and shirt in hand, I grab her face, tilting it so her lips are there for the taking.

“It will be our little secret, Hope. We don't want to make Dimitri and Jaxon jealous.”

She whimpers as I pull her closer by her face and take her lips with mine. Her lips are warm and soft against mine, but her teeth are sharp as she tries to bite.

I grin. “Fucking perfect.”

Twenty-five

DIMITRI

I decided to skip today and stay in Jared's apartment as I can't seem to get his files unlocked.

Knox didn't even bother to ask as it looked like he was somewhere else with his thoughts. And Jaxon, well he tried to go with Hope to the stadium, but she only scolded him and drove off before he even got a chance to get in.

And all he did was fucking smile and look at me.

“That’s love,” he said.

The more she fights him, the better he thinks it is. And perhaps he’s right. What do I know?

Hope is... complex. She’s more complicated than people take her for at face value, but we know her. We know everything about her. The worst parts of her life. The best parts. What she loves. What she fears.

That scares her, but it just further proves that we’re right for her. We know how to care for her in a way that’s unique to her. To her needs and desires. They’re far different from anyone else’s, and instead of being disgusted with herself, she should be more open-minded.

She should want happiness for herself in any way that it comes.

I take another sip from my coffee and stare at the screen as it’s filled with codes and warnings.

It all takes too long for my liking and I’m not the best to hack into someone’s computer. Okay, I can, but not when it’s this sealed up. Jared knew he had incriminating things on his computer, so he made sure it was a bitch to get into.

After my coffee has turned cold, I give up on the files and try again with Jared’s email account.

He’s still in the hospital and he doesn’t have access there to a computer. We also have his phone here. He has no way of hiding anything from me, and still, he manages to do so.

The numbers and letters on the black screen slow and I try again, putting in the

command and...

“Fuck yes,” I cheer and stare as his email account unlocks.

I scroll through the emails and all seem to be safe.

“What are you hiding?” I mumble.

Why would you put so much security on your laptop if you have nothing to hide?

My gaze lingers on a coded email address with an attachment from a few days ago.

Check this out. She’s your neighbor, right?

I roll my shoulders and open the attachment. Another screen opens and it appears to be a video.

I click one and within the first clip, cold sweat breaks out.

“No,” I breathe.

“Come on, little girl, show Daddy how much you like it.” Coach’s voice comes through the speakers.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

My stomach rolls as I see Coach and Hope.

It's a video Coach showed us plenty of times before, proving to us that she liked it, wanted it.

Her small body comes into frame. Her face is hidden by her black hair as she crawls on his lap.

I slam the laptop shut as bile starts to rise, my eyes squeezing shut as I try to scrub the video from my mind. Coach should've never showed us that video when we were stupid, impressionable young men. He should've never taken the video. He should've never touched his own daughter!

My hands shake as I grab my phone and dial Jaxon's number. After a few beats, I hang up and try Knox. But it's the same.

I look at the clock and curse. "They are on the field."

So, I do the next thing. I call the police station.

After a few seconds, my call gets answered, but that doesn't call back the tension that tightens around my throat.

"Maplewood Hollow's Police Station."

"Hi, Dimitri Kessler. I—" I pause, wondering for a moment what I should say without sounding too off. I don't want to draw any attention to me or the guys. Not

with what we did to Jared. “Is Mr. Miller taking visitors?”

Okay, that sounded bad. But what the hell else am I supposed to say? I have to do something.

“Ehm... let me check for you, dear.”

I hear the keypad, the noises in the background making my knee bounce in impatience.

“Mr. Kessler?”

“Yes?”

“You just missed him. He got released yesterday.”

I jump up, coffee spilling to the floor and my mug clattering by my feet. “Released? How could he be released?”

She clears her throat. “Insufficient evidence. We had nothing to hold him on.”

“Nothing? We handed him to you on a fucking platter!” I shout into the phone as fury bursts within me. I hear her take a breath to reply, but I don’t want to hear another word or excuse.

I hurl the phone through the room, panting as I feel like I’m suffocating.

He got out.

Not enough evidence.

Fuck.

Hope.

HOPE

A sense of peace, calm. All what I shouldn't be feeling after what happened last night. But I can't blame him. I can only blame myself as I taunted him, dared him.

But I wanted it. I wanted him to take me like he wanted. I wanted to break, to fall apart.

Even if I talked about it first or gave him permission. It wouldn't be the same. It would be fake. I needed this type of control.

And damn, did it feel good.

Too good.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

I know I'm crazy, sick. How can I not be with how my dad treated me? I should feel shame or be mad, and perhaps on some level, I am.

But the peace wins.

I made a choice for myself, and I'm... okay with that. In a world as twisted and unpredictable as this one is, I have to be grateful for the fleeting moments I have even a sliver of control. Last night was one of those fleeting moments.

Perhaps, there will be another one soon.

"Are you okay?" Ben's voice cuts through my thoughts.

I smile at him as I sit behind my desk, straightening up with an air of motivation hovering around me. Today is a new day, and I'm going to make the most of it. That's all I can do with every day that comes at me. It's better than getting stuck in the past. "I'm fine, Ben. I promise."

He leans against my desk, just enough so my vision to the training room is blocked.

"Did... something happen?" he whispers. "Between you and Jared?"

My brows nudge together as I wonder how he got that idea. The guys didn't leave a sliver of evidence in my room to the point of my thinking that I imagined that night.

"No, why?"

He shrugs. "I know he was... interested in you, and now he got into a fight at a pub

he never went to. It just feels off.”

My blood runs ice cold as I hold his gaze, my thoughts ricocheting throughout my brain as I try to think of a response. No one can know what went down that night.

And I can’t believe it... but I feel like I have to protect the guys like they protected me.

“Maybe you shouldn’t try to put two unrelated situations together,” I say with a small laugh, trying to lighten the tension settling in the air around us.

“Unrelated?” He chuckles. “I know he went to see you that day, after work.”

Wait. What all did he tell people? “He went to see me?”

Caution, patience. With all Jared did, the cameras, I have to be careful.

“Yeah, he even asked the new guys because he thought something was going on there, and they said go for it, so he wanted to ask you out.”

Oh, his trying to grope and rape me was just trying to ask me out. How stupid of me that I didn’t read between the lines.

“He didn’t ask me out, Ben. Really, he didn’t,” I insist as my expression becomes more serious, my disappointment threatening to seep into my words and onto my face.

He pushes off the desk. “Okay, sorry for asking. It all just felt... weird.”

I muster a smile. “It’s okay.”

He lingers. “Just... be careful with those three.”

It’s already too late for that.

I nod. “I will.”

He mimics my nod and turns to leave. He rounds the corner, and my gaze catches Knox staring at me from a distance. His expression is enough warning to send goosebumps over my skin.

I can’t peel my eyes away as I can almost feel his warm breath on my skin again, can feel the bruises he left on my thighs and hips as he marked his territory.

How raw and pure every touch and thrust was.

Even when I tried to scrub his presence from my skin, I can still feel him inside me.

My skin heats and I squirm in my seat, a gentle pulsing sensation between my thighs as I imagine last night. How he spread my legs. How he bent me over. Every little detail.

A grin tugs on his features as he realizes the effect he has on me.

Page 55

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

I thought I was screwed before, but now, seeing this, feeling all this, I know there's truly no going back. No more hiding. No more running.

As I'm his.

I'm theirs.

They've made that crystal clear to me, and I've spent so long fighting them about that, refusing to admit out loud that we're bound in ways that I'll never experience with anyone else. It's almost a relief to admit it, even if it makes my nerves heighten.

What does that mean for me? For us?

My phone buzzes on my desk and I come out of my haze.

A single message pops up.

It's from Coach Carpenter.

Hope, can you meet me at the hospital? Jared's getting discharged.

My breath staggers, and I swallow before I respond.

Of course, Coach. See you in a bit.

I grab my car keys and head out without a glance at my shadows. I just want to get this over with and never see Jared again.

And it's better that he leaves, 'cause I think the guys would rather see him dead with all they found in his apartment.

I fumble with my keys and unlock my car. My hand clutches the handle, and the horror movie theme song blares from my phone.

My car keys drop to the floor, and I forget to breathe, my vision threatening to blur as I stare down at the caller ID.

How can he call me again? That's impossible.

With an unsure breath, shaking hands, I grab my phone. But I'm frozen, staring at the screen that says Dad.

No. He's locked up. I thought... I thought it was over with.

"Aren't you going to pick up?"

I still can't move as I stare at the car window, seeing him in the reflection as he slowly approaches me with a cruel grin on his face.

"You're not here," I whisper as tears brim my eyes.

I was free. Safe.

"Did you really think some bars could keep me?" He laughs, and I slowly turn with a glance to the ground.

My car keys lie beside my feet, but will I be quick enough?

"It's time to go, Hope. You stayed away far too long," he says, not a slur in his voice.

“Just let it be, Dad. Let me move on, please,” I beg him, despite knowing that my pleas fall on deaf ears. He will never leave me alone, never let me live my life in peace.

He just sees me as a doll to torture.

He scoffs. “You’re mine, and I’m not letting you be here with them. You’re coming home, where you belong.”

“Come on, Dad. Mom wouldn’t want this.” I try to get through to him, hoping there is still a grain of humanity inside him.

“Mom?” His laughter gets louder. “What does she look like? Do you even remember her?”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:00 am

I blink as hazy memories cloud my mind, but they're so unclear that I can barely make out any details. "She has black hair, like I do. We--We..."

"So much you don't know, Hope." He steps closer, reaches for my face, and I can't dare myself to move. "But I'll teach you. Like I've done before."

Tears roll down. "Please, don't. I won't tell anyone you're out. I won't tell anyone what you did."

"No one cares, Hope. They let me out." His touch is cold to my skin. "Grab your keys. We're going."

I gulp and crouch down, grabbing the keys. But as I try to move up, he presses his hand on the top of my head.

"Look at me," he says sharply.

With a deep breath, I tilt my head up and stare up at him. His hand grazes lower, trailing over my cheek to my lips. My stomach churns, pushing bile up into my throat and making me so nauseous that it threatens to make me dizzy.

"There is where you belong." He forces my mouth open. "On your knees."

His hand curls lower, wrapping around my throat, and he lifts me to my feet. He tears the keys from my hand and opens the back door.

"Be good now," he whispers and tosses me in.

With a cry, I hit the seat on my chest, knocking the breath out of my lungs. A weak gasp breaks from me as I hear the door shut behind me, trapping me inside. I can't move to fight my way out, anyway.

My body is cold. Fear has shut me down as I want to hide deep inside my mind like I've done so many times before.

With every blink, there's a difference.

The car starts.

Blink.

We're driving.

Blink.

Night falls.

Blink.

The car stops.

My nightmare is back.

It was never Dimitri, never Knox or Jaxon.

It was always him.

The man who calls himself my dad.