



Protect

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Dark, Sports

Description: They claimed me as theirs but that didn't keep me safe from the monster that has haunted my nightmares

My father is here to break me, destroy me, until there's nothing left. I know there's no escape, no way out. Not when the only ones who know I've been kidnapped by my life-long tormenter are them, my enemies.

Or are they my lovers? Even I'm not sure anymore.

The clock is ticking. I can't hold off my father forever and hiding in my memories can only keep me tethered to sanity for so long.

Will they find me in time and make good on their promise that I'm only theirs, or will I be lost forever to this slice of hell?

Beware of the triggers! Please, do not skip the warning page.

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One

KNOX

We're too late.

I saw her leave, I watched her get to the car, and then when my phone rang and Dimitri's name flashed for the tenth time I picked it up. He was shouting, panting, and there wasn't much to make sense of.

Other than Coach is out.

That was enough for me to rush back outside, but her car was gone. No sign of her. And perhaps it was nothing, perhaps she truly went to the hospital. I wanted to believe that, almost had myself convinced of it.

Until I saw her phone, lying alone on the concrete next to her assigned parking spot.

I'd lost her. She'd slipped through my fingers, our fingers, and back into the clutches of that monster. The man we'd looked up to for so long, followed around like he was a god.

My hands shake, my blood runs cold, and I can't tear my eyes away from the empty parking spot in front of me.

Where do I even start? Where would he go? Back home?

A car door slams behind me. I turn in time to see Dimitri sprinting toward me.

No words are needed—my face says it all. He shakes his head and curses under his breath. “We have to go after him,” he says. I nod.

“But where?”

“Start at his house. See if he took her there.” He sighs. “But he won’t be that stupid.”

“Call Carpenter,” I say, fumbling for my keys. “Tell him Hope had an emergency back home and I’m going to help.”

“Knox—”

“Find out who knew. Keep an eye on that prick Jared.”

He grabs my shoulders. “Jared had a video of her and Dad—he got it the day he tried to force her...” He exhales. “The file came through an encrypted email. I don’t know who sent it.”

“Yet,” I say. “You stay here. I’m useless with computers—if anyone can trace it, it’s you.”

“Okay,” he breathes. “What about Jaxon?”

“...You tell him,” I say carefully. Jaxon isn’t a bad guy, but if you touch his playthings, grab something of his... you better not be in punching range. And Jaxon and I have had plenty of brawls, where neither of us came out as the winner.

“Great,” Dimitri mutters.

“Good luck,” I add and head to my car. I can never catch up with them, I know that. But I have to start somewhere.

Going back to where it all began.

Home.

A shudder creeps down my spine as I press the gas. This is the last place I ever expected to return: the town I fought so hard to escape, the place that never helped me, only caged me. I wouldn’t do it for anyone other than Hope. I almost laugh, a bitter, terrible laugh. I’m literally chasing Hope. Trying to tighten my grasp on her just so that way I have something good, warm, right in my life even if I don’t deserve her. Even if I’m just another monster for her.

Maybe catching her and getting time to do things right will prove I changed, or can change... for her.

I try to hold onto that thought as I fly through town, treating every yellow light as an order to hurry, but when I get to the highway with an open stretch of road in front of me, all I can do is think about what I left behind and every memory is fighting to climb out of the dark hole I put them in to fill my head. There’s no way to block them all.

The sizzle on my skin ruins the familiar smell of cigarettes. I stare at the man who’s supposed to take care of me. It has to be an accident. Of course it’s an accident. I try to move my hand, but he grabs it tighter and jerks me over his legs. He brings the cigarette down on my shoulder. I whimper beneath his punishment; pain soars through me.

“Disobedience burns. It’s the first step to hell,” he growls before lifting the cigarette so the smell of my singed skin stings my nose. He brings it down again and again,

smoking occasionally as if my skin makes it taste better, gives him a better nicotine high. I finally slap it out of his hand, but he just flicks his knife across my skin as it opens. “Take your punishment. Wear it on you, bastard!”

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I kick over his bottle of cheap moonshine and sprint to my room. I slam the door and grit my teeth. My shirt feels like it's burning across my back, digging in to each mark now dotting my skin. I bite my bottom lip to keep the screams in as I peel the shirt from my destroyed skin.

I never scream, I never cry out. He doesn't deserve to hear what he does to me.

Maybe I am defiant. Maybe it's my fault. Maybe I deserve to be punished.

I look at the burns in the mirror as tears sting my eyes.

I shake my head, snapping me back to the present. Those memories aren't for now. They're for never. They happened to someone else, a different version of me. A version of me that's dead.

I'm what's left. And part of that is thanks to Coach.

"Knox!" Coach yells.

My shoulders hike in the shower. I stayed late to avoid anyone seeing me. I don't want their pity. I don't want their questions. A football star doesn't wear scars like these—he gives them. I shouldn't have them. Period. And anyone who tries to undercut who I am because of scars... I'll deal with them. No one gets to know.

I pant, refusing to turn around. The water is cold on my skin, calming me, but not enough.

“What is all over you!” Coach demands.

I slowly turn around. Jaxon is still there. He’s staring at me. No pity in his gaze. Anger. A lot of anger—normal for him. But he walks away. He leaves me to it while Coach storms forward and inspects my body.

“Who did this to you, son?” he asks softly. “One name and it’s done. One name is all I need,” he says, not touching my shoulder, but staring at me like a real father should. With the need to protect me, take care of me, and get retribution on my behalf. I shove him out of the way and grab a towel.

“Don’t touch me.”

“Knox, I’m the coach, you answer when I ask a question,” he barks.

I flinch as I wrap a towel around my waist and tighten it. I reach for my shirt and tug it on, knowing it’s going to be soaked. I don’t care. No one was supposed to see me. I’ve hidden well for so long...

“Tell me. I can end whatever is going on. I won’t ask for more than a name. I’m not going to tell anyone else,” Coach says, his voice softening. “It’s not my business what goes on in your home unless you’re wearing it like this.”

I tremble. I don’t want to hear this. I don’t want to be parented by someone else. “Forget about it. You didn’t see anything.”

“Knox,” Coach growls.

“They’re birth marks!” I yell. “Don’t walk in on me in the shower again.”

I don’t want these memories. I don’t want any of them. I don’t want to remember

Coach inviting me over for dinner alone until he switched it up and invited Jaxon and Dimitri too so I'd accept. Then he made sure that twice a week, we came to his house. Once a week, we'd go out after games. And he took care of my home problem in a way that ensured I never had to worry again.

Coach was the only one who knew. Coach was the only one who helped instead of trusting me to take care of it. He never took ownership of it. He never asked for anything in return. I had no reason to question him. I had no reason to doubt him. I trusted him, saw him as the father every man should want to have, and Hope... god, the way he talked about her said plenty.

She never argued. She never spoke up about it in a way that mattered. Was it because I was clouded or was it because I didn't want to believe it? If Coach hadn't helped me, would I have listened? Would I have heard her out? Would I have believed her?

I'll never know. And I can't take it back. I can't go back in time with all the knowledge I have now. Just like Hope can't see past what she went through and what me and the guys added to. We're fucking stuck.

Even while I'm going almost ninety down the highway, I still feel stuck. In time, in this problem, and in my own fury. The only way to get out of it is to get to Hope. To fix this somehow. To reveal more than my scars to her.

DIMITRI

My hands wring together as I hurry over to the training field. Worry creeps higher as every second Hope slips further away. The grunts and yells from the field draw my attention and I find number 18 quickly. Jaxon slams into another player and sprints off.

Perhaps if I let him train a bit more, he'll be spent and won't lose it when I tell him.

I sigh. Who am I kidding? He's going to lose his shit either way. Even if I told him in his sleep, he'd get up, punch me for waiting to tell him, and want to charge forward. He'd fight anyone in his way.

There's no way to soften the news. I don't even want to. A part of me wants his fury aimed at Coach just so he has a focal point for all his rage—past and present, rational and irrational.

Waiting is going to cause more problems, so I wave to him after he barrels through two guys. Jaxon pauses. He's in the zone, doesn't want to stop, that's obvious. I wave him over again and he jogs to my side. He takes off his helmet, pulls out his mouthguard and pants.

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“What’s so important that you’re interrupting this?” He demands.

He’s my friend. I shouldn’t hesitate to tell him when our girl is involved, but it’s because she’s involved that I’m nervous. I can’t exactly warn the guys on the field. This is the same guy who takes a brush-off and argument with our girl as a sign of love but will also deck someone the second he thinks they’re looking at her the wrong way.

“Well, spit it out, Dimitri!” Jax orders. “I have things to do.”

“Coach took Hope,” I say simply. It just spills out of me.

Jaxon doesn’t even breathe. His eyes look like he’s contemplating how much torture he can get in before he murders the man we once worshipped. His jaw ticks and he drops his helmet, his hands curling into fists.

“Knox already went after her. We’ll do what we can, but we need to take care of things with Jared and get information on where Coach could be taking her. Knox is heading to his place, but...” I trail off. “Jax, you with me?”

He looks like he’s going rabid one second at a time, descending deeper and deeper into madness. “He can’t do that. She’s mine.”

“Jax, focus,” I snap.

He grips my shirt and jerks me against him, snarling. He looks like a beast. Not someone who plays football, not some pissed-off man, an actual monster who is

going to rip someone's throat out with his teeth.

"She's mine. She can't go. She knows that," he snarls. "Not again."

I put my hand on his. "She didn't have a choice. Knox is doing what he can to track her down. We need to help. You can't get your hands on him and get her back until we know where she is and—"

He punches the large plastic water jug. I hear the dense plastic crack as it falls over, water gushing out of it. He kicks the bench next, leaving a large, obvious dent there as he pants. No one dares come over here. None of them ask what's wrong. They just keep their eyes down. It's the best way to deal with Jaxon like this.

I don't need to voice my own rage. He's got enough for both of us.

If it would help us deal with the situation, I'd welcome it. But we have shit to do to get our girl back where she belongs.

Two

HOPE

Panting breaths and moans ring in my ears as hands wander over my heated skin. My fight is gone. I could never win against these three.

Every thrust is sharp, deeper than the one before. My legs have given out, but this hasn't stopped them.

"She feels so good," one of them says from behind me as his fingers dig into my hips. Tension and hidden pleasure tingle up my spine and my core tightens.

I shake my head as I realize what is happening. My own body betrays me until I can't stop the soft moan that spills from me.

“Knox.”

My eyes slowly flutter open to reveal the darkness I'm in. The dreams have never left me. Knox, Dimitri and Jaxon. The night they marked me as theirs plays on and on in my mind. Taunting, but soothing.

They are my anchor to sanity while I'm stuck in this nightmare. They are the ones that keep me from a fall I can never get up from.

My dad has kept me in the same room for days; not a ray of sunshine filters inside. There's not even a familiar scent. Nothing but shadows.

They move the longer I stare at them, but I'd rather see shadows crawling across walls and trying to grab me if it keeps my father away. It's a good trade in my opinion. My eyes flit to the door as if he's going to walk in just because I'm thinking about him.

He hasn't touched me; it almost seems like he's waiting for something. I'm just not sure what. Perhaps he doesn't like me enough anymore, now that I'm older. But then again, that didn't stop him from trying to get his dick in me when he was at the apartment.

I shiver at the thought; disgust and fear swirl in my stomach. Or maybe, it's just the hunger I'm feeling. Not that I can fix either thing. I can't carve out my memories any more than I can make food appear in front of me.

I slowly crawl up from the wooden flooring. My body aches with every move. My hands are coated in dried blood from when I tried to beat my way out of this room.

But the door is tougher than it looks.

My lips have dried out, and my throat feels like sandpaper. My legs wobble as I step closer to the door. With my hand stretched before me, I hold myself up until I lean against the harsh wood. I press my ear to it but can't hear anything. It's thick. Sighing, I press my cheek, then forehead, against the cool surface.

I rap my knuckles and keep my ear pressed to the door as I call out. "Dad? Are you there?" My voice is hoarse and broken. I hold my breath for any sound, but I'm met with silence. "Dad?"

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There's no doorknob on this side, nothing to wiggle or pry. There's not a window for me to escape through. Nothing but dark wood surrounds me.

My hand drops to my chest, my finger grazing over the scars from the men who I hate and... don't hate...

I sigh and glide to the floor, my back resting against the door.

How long before my wait is over, and my father gets what he wants? Or perhaps he figures out his mistake and lets me go...

A shattered laugh rips from me, my shoulders moving with the sound.

Let me go... what a joke, he won't do that. He would never.

The sounds of a door creaking open and footsteps make me hold my breath. I perk up, my body unmoving as I listen in. Some rustling, perhaps from bags. A sharp cough followed by some mumbling. The footsteps come closer and I force my body to move, to scamper away from the door.

The lock turns and the door opens with a grumble. Light shines in and my vision blurs. I squint my eyes, trying to see anything. But the door slowly closes.

I'm not alone anymore.

He's here with me.

The monster.

“Dad, just let me go...” My voice sounds so soft, so weak, almost the same as when I was younger.

“You hid from me,” he snarls, and my sight slowly adjusts back to the dark. His figure stands a few feet away from me and I shuffle further away until I hit a wall.

“I had to—you hurt me, over and over again. Dad, please...”

I don’t see it coming. My head whips to the side, my cheek throbs. His slaps might as well be punches with the thickness of his hands.

“Silence!” he bellows. “I’m done with your whining; you belong to me. Not those three!”

I keep my head down, fear spreading under my skin. “I don’t belong to you, not in that way. You’re my dad, you’re supposed to keep me safe from the monsters. You’re not supposed to become one,” I whisper, afraid to speak any louder, even if I want to scream it at him.

I can never win against him. I can never beat him.

He scoffs at my words. His weight shifts as he bends closer. His fingers wrap around my throat and I try to move away but I’m too weak as he lifts me up. The sharp wood cuts into my back and rips my shirt as he keeps me pressed against it.

“I’ll help you remember who you belong to, don’t worry.”

I try to squirm, but I know escape isn’t possible. Not if he’s here. There’s only the two of us.

And Dad always gets what he wants.

JAXON

I still see red. I can hardly breathe. Thinking of Hope with her father after everything we've learned and what I've seen... It shouldn't happen. How did it happen?

Dimitri won't answer a single question. He doesn't know. That's the common theme which makes him useless. I bite my tongue hard, trying to ground myself.

If he knew how it happened, if he knew it was going to happen, that it could happen, he would have stopped it. I would have stopped it. Knox would have beaten the shit out of Coach and left him alive for me to finish him off.

Hope doesn't belong to him like that. He doesn't get to take her. She has a life here. She has us. There's no room for him anymore. I don't know why he doesn't get it. I don't know why he thinks he has any right to touch her at all.

Because we didn't stop him before. Because she had to run and hide to escape him. Because we brought him back to her.

My anger, shame, and guilt mix into a cocktail that's nearly too strong for me to swallow. It clears the red from my eyes all the same.

I don't know where Dimitri is heading, I just remember insisting on getting in the car. I couldn't stand not doing something. Even the illusion of making progress is better than standing still. I glance around and clear my throat. "We need to go to Jared's."

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“Where do you think I’m going?” Dimitri growls.

At least he’s as pissed as I am. Makes me feel a little saner. I force a slow exhale. “Jared clearly knows something more. He has to, otherwise he wouldn’t have gotten that video.”

“I know that,” Dimitri mumbles.

We head over to the apartment and I glower at my phone as if that’ll make Knox call me any quicker with an update. I keep thinking of Jared resting too comfortably in the hospital while our girl is dealing with her father. She’d be safer with the damn devil at this point. But she’s safest with me.

With me is where she belongs!

“Hold on—” Dimitri starts as he rummages through his pocket for the key but my patience is too thin for this.

I step back, then kick open the door. The frame cracks and gives way easily. Dimitri sighs. “Can you tone it down and avoid breaking everything today?”

“I knocked,” I replied. “The door folded as easily as Jared did.”

“Yeah, we still live in this building. Take it down a notch. We’ll need a safe place for her when we get her back.”

I swallow Dimitri’s words as he heads in first.

We're going to get her back. We will. And I will kiss every injury she has. I'll make sure her father wears the same marks. I'll give him scars inside and out. Maybe, just maybe, I'll let him live. As a man who can't do anything but blink. It wouldn't be a mercy.

I'd make sure of that. He'll hurt every day until his pain is all he knows and he'll know it's because of what he's done to her and the way he used us. Long after Hope's recovered, he'll still be in agony.

The thought makes me smile while I start working through the apartment as we have done before, but now we're looking for any connection to Coach. Dimitri takes his time, going over everything, but the lack of evidence, the lack of everything is getting on my nerves. We need answers and I might just have to break things to make sure we get it.

"Did you check his computer?" I ask and Dimitri shakes his head as he stalks closer to the coffee table to open it.

"I'm still working on whoever sent that video to Jared," he sighs. The laptop screen lights up and I peek over Dimitri's shoulder as he does a quick search.

"I have some programs running on it, but nothing yet," he says.

It doesn't seem like there's anything we didn't find before until Dimitri logs into Jared's email account with ease. We both go still as we see the new message pop up.

"Same sender as last time," Dimitri mumbles and opens the attachment.

A video pops up, one that immediately threatens to ruin me. My anger is going to consume me entirely. I can't see anything through the red haze pulsing across my gaze other than Hope, afraid, holding herself.

I dig my short nails into my palms until it hurts enough that I can think.

“Shit,” Dimitri whispers.

Hope is there surrounded by darkness. Her knees are pulled to her chest with her arms wrapped around her. She rocks herself back and forth with something dark in her eyes. She takes a slow breath and looks around before holding herself tighter.

I can hear her heavy breathing, can see the tears on her face, the bruises across her exposed skin. They’re new. Some are so new they’re obviously red and still welting up.

“I’m going to break each of his fingers,” I hiss.

“Her dad or...”

“Her father—I’m going to break every bone in his body, but Jared... if he has this, you’re right. He knows more. He has information he’s been keeping from us. We can’t have that. He owes us,” I say.

“Seems like he’s the next stop then. Jared’s going to answer every question,” Dimitri agrees darkly.

“And the hospital won’t discharge him anytime soon,” I agree.

Dimitri closes the laptop and tosses it in his bag. We leave the apartment and are at the hospital before I can fully clear the short twenty-second video from my mind. If it weren’t for Dimitri’s calmness, I wouldn’t be able to be of any use. That’s why we work: he keeps me and Knox in check, in balance.

We were always drawn to each other, taking care of each other on the field. But

Coach was the one who tied us together. Who made us brothers.

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“You boys will love dinner,” Coach promises. “Hope, get down here!”

Footsteps hurry down the hall and she walks past me. I’ve seen her at school, walking around with her head down. There have been occasional rumors about how easy she gives herself, but I’ve never been one to believe them. She whispers a hello as she rubs her arm and heads straight to the kitchen.

Coach pops open a beer and continues his talk with Knox about football, where he should focus on, and how far we all three can make it if we stick together.

Hope peeks around the corner, her raven-black hair shielding her eyes from me as she whispers, “Dinner is ready.”

“I’ll bring it in,” Coach decides. “Sit down, Hope.” He nudges her to the table.

She tucks her hair behind her ear and sits next to the head of the table. I take the seat beside her as I take her in. Sizing up her curves, her delicate face. She’s beautiful in an unassuming way. She glances at me, looks at my piercings, then away. When she rubs her knees, I notice the bruise on her arm.

She catches me staring at it and leans towards me. “Can you—”

“My little girl certainly knows how to cook when she’s focused and behaved,” Coach interrupts. “A rarity. Maybe you three coming over will inspire her to remember her manners.”

She sinks between her shoulders and nods.

I grab my plate and fill it up with mashed potatoes, sausage, and some broccoli. And as Hope remains frozen beside me, I fill up her plate too.

“Here you go,” I say and a small smile curls on her lips.

My heart beats faster as I can’t tear my eyes away from her.

“Thank you,” she says and takes a bite of her broccoli.

“Hope, leave the boys alone. They have a future to focus on,” her father says sharply, making Hope flinch beside me.

She keeps her lips sealed, the faint smile from earlier fading into nothing, and her hair falls forward.

“Hope looks pitiful, but don’t buy it. She’ll destroy her life if she keeps this up. She’ll fuck you, trap you, and use you as her meal ticket in the future if you let her,” Coach says and my brows draw tight.

But there’s nothing I can say, nothing, as this isn’t my place.

“It’s fine, Coach.” I cut into my sausage.

“What can I say? She got it from her mother,” Coach sighs with a quick shake of his head and focuses back on Knox.

As I chew on my meat, I bend slightly to my left and whisper. “My dad can be an ass too.”

That comment earns a slight laugh from her.

When Dimitri shuts the door to Jared's private room, I realize I'm looming over him in bed. He stares up at me, then cringes away.

He reaches for the call-nurse button, but I drop it to the floor. "You don't want an audience for this."

"I... I already told you—"

"Not everything, apparently," Dimitri snarls. "Not based on the new video we saw. So, you're going to fill us in completely."

Jared looks between us. "I already told you everything."

"You didn't, but you will." I grab a pillow from under his head and press it down on his face. His heart monitor goes wild, beeping loudly until Dimitri turns the alarm off. When his breathing starts to slow and weaken, I remove the pillow, then punch him, hard. His cheek splits under my hand. "And I'm going to enjoy getting every word out of you, especially if it costs you some teeth."

"I'd recommend talking," Dimitri says before he puts his foot on Jared's already damaged body.

Jared moans. His whines, his pleas are music to my ears. Dimitri and I take turns working him over. I'm more focused on the kill, but Dimitri's obviously enjoying the torture as much as I am.

"I'll tell you!" Jared finally yells. "I'll tell you everything. Just stop. Please, stop. It's a website! It has to be signed into on my computer and..." He's panting, wheezing. Definitely my fault because I broke a rib with a punch while smothering him. His eyes are bloodshot and huge. "It's in the sticky notes. All you have to do is open the program and they all pop up. Everything's there. It's there. It's all I have."

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“That better be true,” Dimitri warns, grabs the laptop from his bag, and places it on Jared.

I continue to stand over him, panting as I stare down. I pat his cheek hard enough for it to be a slap, then lean down. “You better not be lying, Jared. Ineverforget people who wrong me or my girl.”

“I’m not lying,” he groans and grabs the laptop to log in. “Here it is, but I didn’t... I only got the log-in a few weeks ago.” He slides the laptop to Dimitri, whose eyes widen slightly before he slams the laptop shut again.

“Let’s go,” he mutters and hurries out.

Three

KNOX

When I get to Coach’s house, I just stare. Not a single light on. The grass is overgrown. The whole thing looks like it’sbeen forgotten. I walk in anyway, grabbing the spare key from where he’s always kept it under a pot with a rotten plant in it.

It’s obviously empty. The layer of dust says it all. I didn’t expect him to come back here. He knew this was the first place any of us would look. I turn on the lights since the sun is going down, then trash the place as I look for anything I can use. I rip drawers out and look at the bottoms. I clear off the fridge. I destroy Coach’s room the way I wish I could destroy him.

Once the house looks like it's been ransacked and robbed, I'm left panting with no answers and nothing to use going forward. My eyes flick across the hall from Coach's room to Hope's.

Something itches under my skin. I open the door and turn on the light, pausing as I drink it in. It looks exactly the same as it used to. It's a fucking time capsule. I search her room more gently. I notice some bottles rolled under her bed, but that's the only thing out of place until I check her desk. I find a false bottom in a drawer, then unearth her diary there.

The latch on it looks like it's survived plenty of attempts to open it, but I use a pocket knife to fix that. Maybe she has answers and didn't even realize it.

Taking a breath, I start to read the first entry.

I don't know how I'm going to go to school like this. Everyone will know.

I feel different and everything hurts. I thought he was coming to tuck me in, to apologize for yelling at me, anything a normal dad would do. Then I smelled the alcohol on his breath.

Fathers aren't supposed to touch their daughters like that. Fathers don't hit them when they try to run. Fathers don't climb into their daughters' beds, shove a sock in their mouths to stop the screaming and...

Even after three showers, I don't feel clean. I stripped all the sheets off my bed. There's blood on them and I can't look at them the same way. Is this why Mom left? But why didn't she take me?

I'll find a way to make it okay. It's just one more thing he stole from me. Virginity doesn't matter, it's nothing compared to him taking away my house key so I can't

leave without permission. Nothing compared to making my friends a privilege and taking them away.

But this hurts. Closing my legs just reminds me of it all over again. He said he wanted it to hurt so I'd remember. But it's only supposed to hurt when it's bad, when it's a crime.

I flip the page as I stand from her bed. I can't read that. It drags up too much, reminds me of all the times I was sure and even she said she wanted it. I flip a few pages until I see my name. My stomach churns, but I stop to read anyway, now standing against her desk.

Knox is big and strong. His friends are strong too. They'll be big enough to get me out of here. Even if they heard the rumors... I can use that to get them alone, right? Dad can't stop it. He likes them. But he doesn't want them to know the truth.

But they can never believe what he says—that I started it. They're smarter than that. They'll help me. I just have to get them alone. They can't be as terrible as my dad.

Two days later and another entry.

Why doesn't anyone believe me? Why can't they see how he watches me? Why do they just believe him? I can't really be so terrible. I can't be asking for it. I wear as much clothing as possible. I try to be small. I try to ignore everything else around me.

He's going to be mad tonight. I don't know if the chair under my door will matter.

I take a slow breath. My hands shake until the words squirm.

Reading her diary is too much. It makes me feel wrong and dirty. It was so obvious looking back. It was obvious she was hiding away. The way she'd hide her face when

he put her on his lap. The fact she only acted on orders. He'd tell her to be happy, to remember how sweet he was to her, how he took care of her.

She saw us and saw help. She saw freedom and an end to everything she was shouldering and instead...

Mrs. Ray didn't believe me. She said to stop causing problems.

She'd said to come to her if there were problems, if I needed to talk, but she looked at me like I was trying to ruin her life by asking for her help with this. Is there just something wrong about me? Or have the rumors gotten to the teachers too? I don't even know how my dad has done it, how everyone keeps choosing his side.

Maybe if I escaped the house with shorts and a t-shirt they'd believe me. No one can argue with this many bruises. Especially in the shape of his hands. I even got a voice recording. I say no.

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I say no even when it makes him angrier.

I can try to go to the police.

I close my eyes a moment. I have to do this. I have to read everything I can so I can find her, but fuck. We were in this room. I was around Hope so often. I noticed the bruises. I noticed her shyness. Why did I make myself so blind? Was it easier to believe her dad? Was it... there's no excuse. There's no way to make this right.

The police didn't believe me either. I thought I was making progress. I brought evidence. But it didn't matter.

I should have known when I recognized the officer's last name, Kessler, as in Dimitri Kessler. Of course he'd bring me back to my dad. Of course he'd tell me to stop making trouble.

My dad's three golden boys believe everything he says. Why wouldn't their parents? The punishment was bad. Worse than 'bad.' Dad took everything from me. My phone, my computer, all the cash he found in my room.

I have nothing. No escape except in reading or in my mind. I'm stuck here until graduation. I'll have to apply to colleges at school. I won't have the money to eat lunch, so I'll make my future there. It's the only option I have.

But if he finds this diary, I know he'll do worse. Maybe he'll pull me out of school. He'll tell people I ran away to find my mom and I'll disappear. I've seen enough movies, heard enough threats. He's the one in control and everyone will help him.

There's no point in talking to anyone.

There's no point in fighting.

He'll get what he wants until I leave.

So I'll just save myself the pain... and take it.

Living matters more than being happy.

I set her diary down, my stomach twisting. There aren't words for what I feel. I'm fucked up, more than an asshole—I feel like an accomplice. Because I fucking was. I sink to the floor, dropping the diary next to me as I run my hand through my hair.

“What the fuck did we do?” I ask softly.

She was screaming for help, begging for help, trying to explain, then she just... she just muted herself, erased herself, made herself as small as possible to escape notice and the guys and I just pushed harder, cornered her, and...

I stroke the diary gently, trace some of her words, and clear my throat. The guys will never have to read this. Because this is my fault. I should have known better. I should have seen through Coach's excuses and lies. I'd heard plenty of them from my own abuser.

HOPE

I didn't shrink this time. I won't make it easy for him. The second he tried... I remembered who I am. I'm not a scared little girl anymore. I'm a scared adult, but an adult who can fight. He's an off-balance drunk with a bad knee.

Someone could say that taking a beating is worse, but it means I chose what I was going to allow. I'd rather his fists branding themselves on me than the alternative. Taking a slow breath, I try to calm my shaking.

One of my eyes is sealed shut, puffy and sore thanks to Dad. My shoulder nearly feels like it's been dislocated. The marks from his fingers on my arms burn and my legs hurt from his attempts to pry them apart. I'm sure he's hurt too.

That's the only thing keeping me going. I can hurt him now. I drove my foot into his bad knee after kicking and stomping on his thighs and he finally relented with a punch that nearly knocked me out. Nearly put me at his mercy, but failed.

He's getting older and weaker. I'm getting stronger. My body might feel broken and exhausted, but he backed off.

I don't know how much longer that will last though. I don't know how long it will take him to come up with a punishment beyond denying me food and water. How long until he makes those rewards for doing exactly what he wants?

Those are thoughts for later. I rub my legs to try to warm myself up however I can. I have to hope that Knox, Dimitri, and Jaxon are as possessive as they say. I have hope that they have really switched from Dad's side to mine. And I have to hope they can find me.

That feels stupid considering our past, but if they're my anchor, if they're the way out of this, then I have to cling to the semi-stupid dream of them storming in and getting me out. Once they do, I can go back to the team. I can talk to the guys who know me for me, who trust me, believe me. I'll escape everyone even if I have to leave this country, change my name, and start over from scratch.

Burying my face in my bruised knees, I think of all the places I've wanted to travel. I

picture myself there, safe, alone, with someone who loves me. I'll make new friends and make the life I want. I did it once. I'll do it again and I won't have to rely on anyone but myself.

Sleep teases my mind, but I'm afraid to sleep. I'm afraid he's watching, that he'll storm in the second I nod off and slip me something to knock me out so he can have what he wants. I can't put a chair under my door. I have nowhere to hide.

I crawl to the corner, hissing as every bruise is irritated.

It's not much warmer, but at least I can't hear the whistling wind. At least I can make myself comfortable enough.

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I hear my father shuffling in another room. His grunts and painful hisses draw my attention. He comes to my door, bangs on it once, and yells. “You don’t get to sleep! If you think you’re getting anything when you’re being a fucking brat...”

He doesn’t finish whatever threat is on his tongue. Instead, I hear him grunt and groan again. He’s already slurring his words. That means he’s close to passing out. Soon I won’t have to worry about his opinions or thoughts.

Plus, he has to take care of himself, right? He has to keep up some kind of ruse, which means that he has to leave some time. Then I can figure things out better. Maybe.

Who knows if I’ll get out of this room. There’s no window and the walls are strong enough that I can’t kick through them. So I’ll have to be smarter than my dad. He always called me manipulative, so I’ll have to figure out how to be exactly that.

I let my eyes close and savor the pain again. Once I get out of here, I’ll never be hurt again. I’ll make sure of it. Instead of making other people strong, I’ll do it for myself. I’ll make myself something that men fear instead of want. No one will touch me without permission. They’ll be too afraid.

A smile teases my lips at that.

Come get me, boys, I think. Celebrate thinking I’ll stay, relax, savor it, then I’ll disappear and this time no one will find me if I don’t want to be found.

Four

JAXON

Jared didn't give us much to go off, but he gave us enough. A website that requires a certain VPN, one that's on his laptop. I shake my head as I wash my hands, trying to get Dimitri's shocked expression out of my mind before he slammed the laptop shut. It doesn't work though, nothing will work.

I keep thinking about the past. It teases me in bits and pieces, driving me insane one memory at a time.

"Why isn't she here?" I ask Coach.

"Coming to games is a privilege she hasn't earned. Why do you care?" he asks.

He watches me with something frustrated and demanding, then orders me to get on the field and focus. I don't think about it a second time.

Monday at school, Hope is wearing long sleeves despite the heat. In our one shared class with Mrs. Ray, I notice her sink further into her chair to avoid Mrs. Ray's gaze.

Who am I to question Coach? He knows her better than we do. He's made it clear what she's like.

She barely talks to other people.

"Come out of your thoughts," Dimitri says.

I blink and glance over at him. "What?"

"You're scowling and you're going to break the door if you keep gripping it that hard. We have a lead," Dimitri says.

I can tell he's still pissed. He's trying to hide it, maybe because he's worried about my temper, but I know he's just as pissy as I am when it comes to this situation. Coach shouldn't have ever gotten to her a second time. We should have stopped it the first time around.

"This is our fault," I say darkly.

"We didn't make him do a damn thing," Dimitri growls. "Don't blame yourself for his shit. We didn't tell him to take her."

"We didn't stop him either," I hiss. "We had chances back then. We could have—"

"We can't change it. And focusing on that distracts us from what we can do now. So let's do what we can. You have the info and I have the way to use it. That will give us a direction."

"Yeah," I say. As if that will change the way we all treated her.

I get her avoidance now. But she loves us. I know she does. She may not want to admit it. She might want to pretend she doesn't because of the past, but she loves us. If she wants to keep being rough on me and keep making me prove that I can love those dark pieces of her and still see how much she's grown, I'll happily do it.

"We're getting her back," I snarl. "She belongs with us. And once we have her back, I'm not letting her go. No one else gets to touch her. She'll never be unprotected."

Dimitri doesn't say anything to that. Instead, he parks and we get out of the car and head back up to Jared's apartment. No one stops us. If anyone notices, they don't say a damn thing. I don't care if it's because they're afraid of us or because they recognize Jared's a piece of shit. Either way, we're getting our answers.

We sit by the coffee table and Dimitri mutters to himself as he opens the laptop and pulls up the website. I stare at it. I don't know what else to do. It's stare or punch the screen and lose our access.

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Every heinous kink, every bit of violence that could be turned into sex appeal is here and it's in the titles as if it has to be made easy.

“Kidnapping and torture with top buyer picks,” I hiss.

“That's not Hope.”

“But she's on this fucking website! Torturing her isn't enough. He has to put her online and make money off her pain!” I yell.

Dimitri takes a slow breath and looks at me. “Justice later. Hope now. That's how I'm operating. Can you handle this or do you need to go somewhere else?”

If we'd called Coach on how twisted he was, he wouldn't think he could get away with this. If we would have recognized how shitty everything was, we wouldn't have invited him here or exposed her to him. This is our fault. It's our job to fix it. But we won't be able to fix it all.

That thought haunts me, ripples across my body until I can either break or break something else. I bite the inside of my cheek until I taste blood, then nod to Dimitri. I'm not missing out on anything else.

Hope belongs in my arms and nothing will stop me.

Dimitri takes a slow breath. He scrolls through things, eliminates the worst of things—namely kids, torture, animal, and snuff things. It limits the videos. We're looking at thousands instead of millions. I can't focus on my feelings about that.

I just keep looking for Hope. “Try her name.”

Dimitri looks at me for a long moment. “You think he’d be that stupid?”

“I do,” I agree. “Jared connected the dots.”

With that in mind, Dimitri eliminates all the filters he’s put on and puts in ‘hope.’ Plenty of videos come up with the title of ‘no hope,’ but he pauses his scrolling and hesitates. We both stare at where the cursor is. It’s Hope, much younger, definitely in high school.

My throat tightens until I’m sure I’m going to choke or pass out. He clicks on it and there she is. She moves like a zombie towards her dad. He keeps patting his lap. When she hesitates, he jerks her down and slaps her, calling her an ungrateful bitch, saying no one else will love her or want her, that she’s useless except for one thing.

“Turn it off,” I hiss.

“It might have an answer.”

“I can’t watch this. I can’t watch him touch what’s ours. She’s ours! I’d never talk to her like that. You wouldn’t say that to her,” I growl.

Now.

Another unwelcome reminder. We wouldn’t talk to her like that now.

“We were kids too, Jax,” Dimitri says.

I don’t like that he seems to know where my mind goes. But he mutes the video. He pulls up another, and once we click on the person who uploads it, we see they’re all

about Hope.

Then a new one comes through. My throat dries and I look at Dimitri. This is difficult for us. Knowing that it's worse for her, that I can't rip through the screen and get her, can't wrap myself around her and make a snuff video of her father... Knowing that threatens to shred what's left of my restraint

"I need to see her," I say when Dimitri hesitates.

He clicks on it. She's there, with her eye swollen shut, new bruises, and staring at a sponge and a basin of soapy water. There's a bottle of water that she just keeps staring at but she flips it upside down and water drips through the lid.

"Don't drink it," I whisper.

She empties it to the side and stares at the bottle before slowly looking at the soapy water.

"Living isn't an option for him," Dimitri says darkly. "If she wasn't so smart..."

"No worst-case thinking. Our girl knows what she's doing," I say, rubbing his shoulder. "She belongs with us and she knows that. She's going to keep herself safe."

As long as she can. The unspoken words hang between us.

At the end of the day, she has to do the surviving. She has to keep herself safe. She has to trust that we're going to come for her. And I'm worried that's too much to ask.

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What if she caves because it's easier? What if we lose her because it's just too much?

I can't blame her for that either.

"We're going to get you," I say as I touch the screen.

Dimitri nods. "No matter what, baby. You belong right here. We're going to make it happen."

"Soon," I say when the camera angle changes to follow Hope. "Very soon. And I'm going to make him pay for everything he does—whether you know what it is or not."

"Not just you," Dimitri hisses. "We all want to make him eat his comments and feel what he's put her through."

HOPE

"My dad is an ass too," Jaxon whispers and an unfamiliar warmth spreads through due to his kindness. Hope sprinkles inside as I see a way out.

I ignore my father's speeches, his foul words as I stuff myself full with the food Jaxon plated for me.

Perhaps I was right, and things will change because of them.

I blink away the memory and stare at the food and water my dad gave me.

He's trying to poison me, I just know it. I won't eat what he gave me. I'm not going to drink the water even though my throat is so dry that talking feels like torture. I don't have anything to say to him anyway. I stare at the soapy water. If I get to the bottom, will it still taste like soap?

Will it make me sick?

Why am I still here? Why hasn't anyone noticed I'm missing? I have a job. I have friends. I have... my three stalkers or...whatever they are. Knox hasn't left me alone even when I ordered it. Jaxon claims I'm his and looks at me with hunger and heat even when I tell him to fuck off. And Dimitri has been the unmoving mountain, steady and lurking. Why aren't they here?

A part of me is sure that they know exactly where I am because they found me even when I ran.

It's a stupid thought. A really stupid thought which proves that I need food and more than a few hours of sleep. I blink at the soapy water again. It's so tempting. I lick my bottom lip. Instead, I grab the bucket of soapy water and drag it closer. I try to hide myself as I clean up slowly. Every muscle hurts.

I'm crunchy from not having any activity.

No matter how much I dream of the life I was just stolen from, I always end up right back here.

There's no escape for long. There's no real escape from my father. The last few years might as well be the dream and this captivity my reality.

Shuddering, I finish cleaning up and change into the dress I've been left. I feel more exposed but being clean is a luxury I'm not going to waste.

I wish I could hide my clothes to keep them, but instead, I wash them in the soapy water and find a way to hang them up for later. My underwear included. I deserve to still feel like a person and that means being clean. Even if it means feeling like I'm easier access.

Fighting is the best option. I've already started finding his weaknesses. I can keep finding them. Maybe I can find ways to gross him out. What if I yell someone else's name, bring up the guys? I'll find ways to keep my dad on his toes.

I'll find ways to push him back, to keep him off me.

Closing my eyes, I take a breath and let myself drift into something else.

I stare at Knox and Dimitri across the table. There's a kindness in their eyes, beneath the stoic grumpy looks on their faces. Sometimes, I get a faint smile, something sweeter than I'm used to.

Perhaps others could want me. Others could love me.

Does my dad? Would he let anyone else love me?

I open my eyes.

No.

He'll never let anyone else love me. Because he doesn't see me as a person.

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He can't see me as a person and treat me this way.

My eyes flick to the door. The door is the only way in and out. The door is the only option. I have to go through there... no matter what I give up in the process.

Five

DIMITRI

As Jaxon checks in with Knox, I continue to go through the videos. My skin itches with every new clip I see. I can't turn on the sounds as nausea then threatens to take over. But I have to keep myself busy, keep myself in check.

If I let myself slip, like I did at the hospital, Jaxon will break everything and we'll lose our ability to find her. I don't know what Knox has found or is going to find. We need options, which means I have to keep a level head even though I'd rather charge in guns blazing, set everything on fire until we can corner our old coach and destroy him.

We still have to find him to do something.

Which means finding him is the important part and I'm sure that there is some clue he overlooked in the videos. So I start comparing the backgrounds. The new backgrounds don't match anything going back. A lot of the old ones are just her room with the windows covered and nothing personal in the background.

It makes going through the videos easy since I'm looking for any variation.

I glance towards the door, half expecting Jaxon to come back in and park himself behind me, growling and planning out violence over my shoulder until I'm tempted to dive in with him.

He's not here. It's just me and this screen.

Yet I still feel dirty.

I rub the back of my neck. "What the fuck has he put you through, baby?"

Hope can't answer. I know that. And the answers are laid out in front of me. He's never hidden what he's done to her. He just changed the angle to make us believe that she wanted it, that it was normal.

But she doesn't know she's online. She doesn't know that she's here for everyone to see. I'm sure of that. It pisses me off and even that's not enough to actually capture what I'm feeling.

Then I catch something. It's not Hope.

I narrow my eyes and enlarge the screen. That's not Hope. The hair is similar, her face is similar, but she's too old... Wait... is that her mother?

Her mother and Coach. I turn on the volume as Coach's hand wraps around her throat and he spits at her, telling her she's only good for one thing: sex. That she should be thanking him for using her. Saying she'll never be able to leave him. And then, she says that she loves the pain and loves him being in control.

I pause the video and look to the side. I get out of the chair and pace. Breathing isn't enough. I have nervous energy, frustrated energy I need to burn off because seeing her mother in that video makes everything worse somehow.

Like she knew what would happen when she left and did it anyway.

How many people have failed Hope? How many people could have put a stop to it before we were even introduced to Coach? I grit my teeth until my jaw aches and consider texting Jaxon, but this information doesn't give us anything more to go off.

So I sit back down and finish the video. I listen to what Coach is saying and try to block out anything else. There's nothing of use there. Nothing that makes sense. Just the added horror of him telling his wife he wants to fuck their daughter over and over, how tight she'd be, how submissive she'd be. How easy to handle she'd be.

Disgust and fury raise in my stomach until I head to the bathroom and throw up. I feel too much and none of what I feel is currently helping Hope.

I think of her smile, her confidence with the team, the side of her I've gotten to see since we moved out here and I watch it shattering in front of me, breaking her down until she's the easily forgettable girl that says nothing to defend herself. She's just a puppet. She's whatever others say she is and nothing at all.

The thought of her being forced into that kind of position again, broken down until she believes she's nothing gives me a taste of the anger that I know Jaxon's been fighting all day.

"We're not going to fail her. We're not going to let her disappear," I mumble.

So many other people failed her, but we won't. We have the anger, we have the drive, and we have the capability to bring her back where she belongs.

She belongs with us and that's where Hope is going to stay.

All we have to do is prove we mean it. Prove that we won't cage her, we're going to

let her keep growing and show us all she can be. We'll protect her without limiting her... at least I will. I can't speak for Jaxon, who I'm convinced isn't going to let her out of his sight again.

I splash some water on my face and take a deep breath before heading back. The nausea hasn't faded as I scroll up on the webpage and click back to the newest video, but it's over. It showed her changing and washing herself even though only glimpses were visible. Even when she's alone, she's trying to hide, but I saw that determined flair to her eyes. She's not breaking this time.

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Considering there hasn't been a video that's shown her being attacked, being assaulted, I'm going to cling to the shreds of the bright side I can think of and hope it means that she's fought him off. Maybe that's why she's so bruised. She didn't give in. She's claiming her own body and she's doing it her way without backing down.

She's stronger now. She knows her worth and what she can do. She knows she matters to other people and to us. She knows what her father's doing is wrong and unforgivable.

I just need her to keep holding on to that.

KNOX

I can't keep reading this. I shouldn't have any problem with it.

It's a fucking diary telling me the past, but every time she crosses her fingers and hopes we'll understand, then starts hating when we come around, then starts dreading it, almost as afraid of us as she was of her father threatens to break me down.

"Useless boy! You're so selfish and conniving. You think someone else can pull you out of hell!" The cigarette comes down on my stomach. "No one will. Because you're not worth it. You don't deserve it. You don't deserve anything but this."

I lift my shirt and trace the marks like I can soothe them or make them burst into flames again.

This is the first time in my life when I've felt like I deserve each and every mark on

my body. Jaxon saw it before I did. He kept Coach from fucking Hope in my apartment while I sat there like a jealous schoolboy wanting to take his turn.

Never again. I might not be able to resist her. I might want her despite everything she says, but it's because she wants me too. I feel it. I see it in the way she talks to me. Or maybe I'm just as fucked up as the man who used me as an ashtray and unable to let go even when it hurts me more.

But I'm willing to destroy my future for her.

Screw football. Screw anything else.

All of it is pointless without Hope.

And what she's going through... the shit I'm reading makes it all the clearer. My girl deserves better than this. I'll give her a new diary and let her pour herself out in it. It will be bright, full of happy stories, fun questions, and hopefully her bragging about herself rather than questioning if the world would be better without her in it.

Clearing my throat, I shake my head, trying to shake off all the negative thoughts I had about her, every assumption that Coach put in my head.

Reading her diary is doing a damn good job of correcting everything I thought I knew.

I had so much wrong and didn't question a damn bit of it.

Which means I have to do better this time.

Closing my eyes, I think back to how I watched her in class.

She's so little. I'd break her if I fucked her the way I wanted her. But maybe that's what she wants. She needs someone to show her that fucking her father is wrong, and I could handle it. I could use her, break her, ruin her and she'd look so damn pretty sobbing while my cock is buried inside her. I'd even share her with the guys. Watch a greedy, eager slut take everything she's offered and thank us for using her properly.

Some guy walks up to her, gives her a smile, and talks to her like they're friends. She answers softly, out of earshot, but the ghost of a smile on her face doesn't belong. He either doesn't know what she does and who he'd be sharing her with or he knows and is going about it in a weird way. I don't like it.

When he leans in after the bell rings and takes one of her books, I walk over and grab it from him. I toss it to the floor and look at Hope. "I'm so clumsy. Pick it up."

She looks between me and the book and slowly stoops down to pick it up even as he says she doesn't have to. I pat her head when she stands up. "You're such a good girl for me. Don't forget how much you like being good."

Her face crumples and she excuses herself, hurrying away.

I was an ass. I ruined the safety of her school life right alongside her home life even though I thought she was disgusting. I thought she was terrible. I thought she needed to be put in her place all while she'd been hoping I'd save her.

Opening my eyes, I look at her diary and stroke it. "You're still mine, Hope. I wasn't wrong about that. You're my good girl no matter how sharp and angry with me. I'll still tell you how good you are."

I hope she'll hear the words. I hope she'll feel that we're coming for her. I want her to know she's not alone. We're eager to have her back and we're going to make it happen. She did too much work last time, dealt with too much.

Now she can rely on three sets of broad shoulders to take care of her too.

Six

HOPE

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Is this love? Is this what I'm made for and is it wrong?

My breath is sharp. My heart pounds against my ribs as my eyes flick to the door and to Knox.

"Open your legs," he whispers as his thumb grazes my bottom lip.

I shake my head and try to back away, but Jaxon holds onto my arms and keeps me pressed against his chest.

Dimitri doesn't wait as he tugs at my pants, ignoring my kicks and whimpers as it only seems to spur him on.

"Don't do this, please," I plead to all three, but their touch burns into my skin, marking me.

A mark I can never scrub off my body.

There's no disgust as I think back to that night, not anymore. There's some lingering anger, but... a strange part of me is starting to get grateful for it. It's probably not the right thought, but that day I ran. I got out, I was free.

Was.

I hated the trickle of tension down my spine that day, I hated how my hips bucked when Dimitri plunged his tongue inside me. I hated how they made me come.

And then it changed—I lured Knox into taking me, fucking me against my door and it felt... so... freeing.

Again, free.

I sigh, my stomach rumbling. The only thing that keeps me sane are my thoughts about them. They are real, raw, and dirty.

They are fucked up, just like I am.

“I’m messed up,” I whisper as my hand presses on the scars on my chest. “So messed up.” A soft laugh bubbles from me and I wonder how long it’ll take before my sanity slips through my fingers.

Will it be before my dad breaks me or after?

Every time I had some hope to hold onto, it shattered. It was always too weak to truly grasp. I could never change the outcome, the way my father used me for his pleasure, his pain.

It all changed when my mother left without a word. She never said goodbye, never gave me one last hug or kiss. How could she leave me with this monster? Or was she afraid too? Did he use her, hurt her like he does with me?

I close my eyes and focus on her black hair, the soft smile she always gave me.

“It will all be okay, sweetie,” she whispers as she pats my scratched knee with a wet cloth. “You should be more careful.”

“I’m sorry, Mommy,” I say and my leg twitches as she wipes away the last bit of blood before putting a band-aid on.

“There you go, good as new.” She pushes herself off the ground and tucks my hair behind my ears. “Go get your daddy, dinner is almost ready.”

I blink away the tears as my life seemed so different, so much calmer.

The lock turning stops my trail of thoughts and I crawl back against the wall as I hold my breath.

Sunlight filters through the door and my eyes squint from the brightness.

“Come, eat,” my dad calls out, his voice strangely calm, and yet, I don’t dare to move.

He sighs sharply, annoyance lacing his breath as he walks inside. I crawl back as if I can move up the cold wall.

“No, no, I’m not hungry,” I whisper and clench my thighs shut.

“Don’t be like that, I know you need to eat something.” His voice almost sounds normal and he stands still a few feet away from me. His silhouette blocks the light from outside. He reaches out with his hand and I shake my head.

“Don’t touch me,” I sneer.

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“Hope, get up,” he grits, the slight kindness from before disappearing.

“I’m not hungry, I can stay here,” I say, my voice wavering.

Another sharp exhale and he bends down, his fingers raking through my dirty hair, and he yanks me closer. “Don’t make me mad—be good now.”

I whimper as my scalp pricks. I claw at his hand, my feet digging into the ground, but I’m not strong enough as he pulls me higher.

“You always do this, making it harder than it needs to be.” He clicks his tongue as he hauls me with him.

My knees drag over the floor. “Please, let me go!” I wail.

I’m pulled out of my dark room and tossed into the light. His grip disappears, my eyes squint, and I blink away the blur.

“Now eat. We have a busy day,” my dad says and I whip my head towards him.

My sight is still blurred, my brows crease together, and the first things that catch my eyes are the cuffs and chains on the table in the center of the room. I know they’re not for him. He would never subject himself to any kind of restraint. If he was capable of that, he never would have touched me. They’re waiting, empty and open like a threat for me.

“Busy day?” I dare to ask.

He chuckles without meeting my stare and glides a plate with food towards me.

“I’ve waited long enough, don’t you think?”

My chest constricts and as my breathing shallows, my sight restores. In panic, I look around and take in the wooden walls, the big windows and the—wait... I know where we are...

JAXON

I’ve never seen a girl eat so fast before and it draws a smile on my face. I give her a gentle nudge before I whisper. “You can have some of mine if you want.”

She blinks at me, her lips part, but it’s as if she’s lost for words. I chuckle and glide some of my mashed potatoes to her plate without a word.

“What are you doing?” Coach bellows and slaps my plate away. “She has had enough, boy!”

I linger in my own confusion. “I’m full. She can have some of mine, Coach, it’s no big deal.”

Knox and Dimitri keep their mouth shuts, both probably as confused as I am. The tension is sharp. Coach’s jaw ticks as he grinds his teeth, a stern glare to his daughter before he sighs and laughs. His laughter creeps up my spine but as Knox joins, the strain in my shoulders fades and I lean back.

“She’s not yours to take care of, Jaxon. She’s mine,” Coach warns, and I nod.

She’s his. Not mine to take care of.

She's his. Not mine to take care of.

I push back the chair and rise, drawing their attention back at me. "Need to take a piss," I mumble and walk from the table.

My hands tremble, my throat dries, and I can't explain this twist in the pit of my stomach.

"Are you okay?" Her soft voice forces me to turn. I face her as we stand in the hallway. Coach's voice carries through the entire house.

"Why do you care?" I ask as that's all that comes up in my thoughts.

Care.

I don't care.

I never cared.

I don't need it. Don't want it. She's nother.

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She's another. She's not mine.

"I don't—I'm sorry..." She trails off, and steps closer. "I'm sorry what happened with your... I shouldn't be here." She draws back and I catch her hand. Her skin is soft and warm against mine, even as she flinches and tries to pull away.

"You shouldn't touch me," she whispers.

"I thought you liked to be touched," I say to create some distance between us.

She's not her.

I don't need her sorry, I don't need her smiles or words. I need nothing.

She's not mine.

"I don't," she snaps and rips her hand free. The kindness in her eyes is fading, anger taking its place.

Good. She should hate me.

I deserve it.

"I heard you liked it rough, sweetheart," I whisper and take a strand of her raven-black hair between my fingertips.

"Why are you doing this? I thought—"

“You thought because I smiled at you, I liked you?” A laugh breaks free and I shake my head.

“You’re just like him, aren’t you?” she sneers and slaps my hand away.

“And what is he like?” I tilt my head as tears fill her eyes.

“He’s a monster. He hurts me.” Her voice cracks and with it the wall I used to push her away.

“He doesn’t,” I say sharply, as I don’t believe it. I can’t. Yes, I’ve seen how he was just now, but... he helped me, fixed me, put me back on the right track after I lost her, after I failed to protect her. And now he’s helping Knox, he can’t be...

She chuckles. “Don’t believe me. Why should you?”

I was stupid, young, and hurt by my own loss. I pushed her away when she reached out for me, when she needed help because I couldn’t help her, not when I was barely keeping myself from drowning.

Coach gave me purpose, gave me a way to cope with everything in a healthier way. So I thought. A healthier way shouldn’t have meant letting him do what he was doing to his own daughter.

“Jaxon?!” Dimitri calls out and I toss my phone aside to head into the living room.

“Yeah,” I answer and don’t dare to let my eyes drift to the laptop screen.

“Got a hold of Knox?” he asks as he rubs his neck.

I nod. “He didn’t find them; the house is abandoned. He’s trying to look for clues

there.” I take a sharp breath and continue. “Perhaps you should call your dad, maybe he knows something.”

I wait for it: the sneer, the angry look, anything.

“You’re probably right.” He sighs and my brows pinch together.

“I’m right?” That never happens.

He groans and leans back on the couch. “I’m not sure he would help though.”

“You never know.”

“He didn’t help when she asked for help,” he whispers.

Seven

DIMITRI

Jaxon glares at me as the wheels in his head work overtime. So much happened back then, so much we kept from each other as we fought our demons and took it out on Hope. I can't blame him for not knowing. I don't think she'd want me to know either.

I slide my phone out of my back pocket and search for my dad's number. I haven't spoken to him in years, and I wasn't planning on changing that but I don't see another choice. I click on his name and press the phone to my ear, waiting for him to pick up.

It surprises me that Coach didn't realize Hope went after Jaxon, but seeing he's emptying his third beer, I can't blame him. The room is probably spinning by now.

My dad told me Coach wasn't always like this, that there was a time where he had this calm over him and helped out wherever he could. In my opinion he still does—he's helping us.

Hope's mother left him, and that changed him. At least, that's what my dad said the moment he heard I went over here. He was thrilled, happy. But he just wanted me out of the house, gone.

I'm a burden.

Always have been, from the moment I came crying into this world and took the most precious person from him. My mother, his wife.

He blames me for it, always trying to keep me at a distance, pushing me away when I need a dad. It all taught me one thing: I don't need anyone to take care of me.

I'm used to the loneliness, I'm used to the guilt.

The only moments I feel more human, more alive are when I'm on the field. When I'm putting my pain onto someone else.

"Dimitri, you were a beast today on the field," Coach gushes and I nod.

"Thanks, Coach," I say and soft footsteps hurry back into the living room. I catch Hope's gaze. A flick of hurt lingers inside it and it makes me wonder what happened between her and Jaxon.

"Ah, there she is, my little angel. Come here," Coach says and pats his lap.

My brows pinch and I glance at Knox, who seems unfazed as she hesitantly takes her seat. She squirms slightly and he slaps her ass softly.

"I'm sorry for lashing out, angel, I'll make it up to you in a little bit. Go get ready," he says and nudges her off his lap and to the hallway.

Confusion rings but who am I to judge?

"What do you want?" My dad's voice cuts me back and I blink away the fuzz.

"As loving as always, Dad," I say, a fake smile curling on my lips.

He huffs and silence takes over.

"We can't find Coach." My voice wavers and softens. "Do you know where he might

be?”

“Last I heard he was going to see you three,” he mutters.

I clear my throat. “He was here, but he... he left quickly, and we can’t seem to find him. He didn’t go back home.”

“You’re a worthless piece of shit, you know that? It should’ve been you who died that day. You took her from me!”

My head whips to the side; my jaw throbs as blood drips from my lips.

“Dad,” I groan.

“Don’t call me that!” he yells, his boot slamming into my stomach and sending me tumbling to the ground.

I roll my shoulders as his words still haunt me. Reminding me I’m nothing.

“Listen, I don’t know where he is... just... fuck. Dimitri, I really didn’t need you calling me today.”

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I can't stop the words from spilling. "I'm sorry." I've said them too many times, but they never made a difference.

The line goes dead and my head drops.

Today. I didn't even realize what day it was until now. It's a day that's never been celebrated or talked about, even after I left home, so why would I bother to remember it? All it's ever meant is my dad doesn't want to be my dad, doesn't want to see me.

Today has always been a day for mourning, not for celebration. A day to stay out of the house, to avoid everyone and everything. It hasn't changed.

My birthday.

Her death day.

"Dimitri?" Jaxon asks and I shake my head.

"He won't," I mumble with a tremble in my hands. "He won't give me anything."

I'm waiting in my dad's office at the police station since I got expelled today. Got in some fight with someone I don't even know the name of, but I had to fight. I had to get my hands dirty.

I perk in my seat as I watch Hope stroll inside the police station. She's wearing a short-sleeve shirt and her skin is covered in bruises. She rubs over her arm and her lips move as she speaks to my dad. I edge closer, trying to hear. But the window

between us keeps us at a distance.

Did she fall? Did someone hurt her?

Tears roll down her cheeks, her bottom lip trembles, and an unusual sensation trickles down my spine.

I always enjoyed hurting others but this... this is different.

To see her so broken, so small. It makes this itch rise, this need to be the one who hurts her. But not in a bad way, or maybe a little. A little pain in the right way makes things better and I know how to dole that out. She'd like it. It might be bad, but not terrible.

She shifts on her feet, her thighs rubbing together, and my cock twitches in my pants. A smile tugs on my lips as I wonder if she would welcome my touch or push me away. And I'm eager to find out.

I shake my head and shame rushes through me next. It wasn't only my dad's fault for not helping her—it was mine too.

I saw her and did nothing but add oil to the fire she was fighting.

All because I saw something I wanted for the first time.

All because I chose myself over her.

And now all I see is her, nervous, glancing around with a look I now know was her pleading for help. No one would help her. No one would see it. Because of us. We'd sided with Coach and decisions have consequences. We muffled her voice, made it so no one would believe her.

“Dimitri!” Jax yells. His breath fans over my face and snaps me from my thoughts. “What do you mean he won’t give you anything? You didn’t even try! That wasn’t even a minute-long phone call!”

“He won’t help,” I say again. There’s no point in explaining why. Jaxon wouldn’t understand. “It doesn’t matter if it’s thirty minutes, he won’t do a damn thing for us.”

He shakes his head with a scoff. “You don’t know that, you barely tried. Call him again, now.”

“No,” I reply sharply. “You don’t know him. Calling more isn’t going to—”

“You’re going to let her spend more time with him when we could have help! Do you want her dad to fuck her? Do you want it online where anyone can access it and use it against her? Has losing her fucked you up that much?!”

“Don’t get in my face, Jaxon,” I warn darkly, nearly cracking my phone as my hands curl into fists. “Not today, not about this.”

“It’s your fucking father! Tell him this shit is serious! He’s a cop! He should care that Hope’s missing and you didn’t even—”

“She went to him for help and he didn’t do a fucking thing and now you think that he’s going to spring into action to help her? He trusts her dad! That hasn’t changed!”

“So you’re going to give up. You’re not going to get the police involved when it could help her because you have some daddy issues and you’re sure that he’s going to—”

“Don’t you start with me,” I warn in a dangerous hiss.

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Daddy issues is a serious phrase to throw around me. Jaxon might not know it, but I expect more from our years of friendship. I want to get Hope too. There's no bridge I wouldn't burn, but I'm not going to waste time for some illusion of a solution. My father—no matter how much I badger him—isn't going to do anything today.

“You really don't give a fuck? You could be doing more! We're supposed to be different than in high school and you're letting her stay with him again!”

“You didn't do shit either!” I yell. “When exactly did you grab her and pull her off his lap at dinner? When did you bring a video of him fucking her to the police? When did you step in and ask if she wanted her dad like he told us?”

Jaxon stews. I see all the warning signs. He's going to break me in half—or try to. He's going to grab my phone, shove it against my head while beating the shit out of me (my dad will love it), then demand answers or he'll kill me. My dad will encourage him to do it and to let him listen. Then Jax will know exactly why my dad won't help.

“How fucking dare you. You didn't do shit either and now—”

“I'm telling you this is a dead end,” I hiss, struggling to control my own temper. “He's a dead end. He won't help. He's wrapped around Coach's finger and if we say that Coach kidnapped Hope, my dad will shrug and say that she probably deserved it or is lying about it.”

He huffs. “You don't know that.”

“He didn’t do a damn thing when she told my dad what hers was doing to her. He took her back home and told her to stop spreading rumors. He laughed with her dad about her rebellion. Is that the kind of man who’s going to help us, Jax? Is that the kind of man you want me to waste time—”

“Shut up,” Jaxon snarls, taking a menacing step forward. “You always do this.”

“Do what?” I ask as I rise up to meet him.

“Talk big, then do nothing. Knox is hunting them down and we’re supposed to be giving him a fucking direction and you won’t man up and deal with your dad.”

“Jaxon.”

“You never follow through. You do just enough,” Jaxon snarls, then shoves me. “So if something happens to her, if he manages to touch her, if he lays another hand on her from this point on... it’s on you.”

“Then you figure some shit out instead of threatening people, saying you don’t want to see things, and lashing out!” I demand. “Since you have all the answers, give them to Knox!” I toss the phone to him and turn to walk away.

“Don’t you fucking walk away!”

I linger. “I don’t need you here for any of this shit. You pace, bark demands, then threaten with your fucking fists. If this is friendship or a taste of what Hope’s in for, then I hope she escapes on her own and you never see her again.”

I regret the words as soon as they’re out of my mouth, but I’m not taking them back. Not today, not right now. Instead, I head to my apartment. I can’t deal with Jaxon and fix this problem. If he wants something done, he can figure it out on his own. I’m

going to try to look at this a different way since we've spent too much time on watching the worst moments of Hope's life.

There has to be something in Coach's past that will bring us to him. There has to be something that my dad knows about, but won't share. Knox is at the house finding what he can, so now it's time I do the same by looking into his past, his investments, any properties he owns.

I'm sure Jaxon is fuming or beating the shit out of the apartment I just left, but that's his problem now. If he can't handle the fact that waiting is part of the process, then he can't handle being with Hope. Honestly, I'm not even sure if he wants her for the right reasons anymore.

Having her just to make sure her dad doesn't isn't good enough.

I sigh and wring my hands together.

Happy fucking birthday to me.

Eight

KNOX

I can't stop the tears from staining my cheeks as I finish a new passage.

My faith in a better ending is weakening and I try to hide somewhere in my mind when he pounds inside me. I could smell the alcohol, the blood. But the pain, it's almost soothing now.

Maybe I need more pain.

More pain to make it stop.

“No,” I whisper as my fingers trail over the smudges of blood on the pages.

My gaze draws back up to the date and I mumble. “A few days before she... ran.”

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I lean against the lockers, my arms crossed as I wait for Hope to close her locker and find me. My hands shake, my leg impatiently ticks as the video replays in my head, over and over again.

Dimitri was the first to believe Coach's words about Hope luring him in. He doesn't know how a bond between a father and son, or in this case daughter, should be.

Jaxon was wary but when he heard the moans spill from her, the words she whispered between thrusts, he was hooked.

And me, the first second I saw her, my cock strained in my pants. I didn't need convincing. I trust Coach with my life, my soul.

He made the burns stop, the pain. He gave me purpose and now he'll give me something else too.

Her.

The locker slams shut, and she flinches. Her eyes widen slightly as she pushes her hair behind her ears.

"What do you want?" she asks, her tone clipped but I can hear the fear beneath.

Good. Be scared. Keep me at a distance. I don't need her close to enjoy her, I don't need to be close to anyone. It will only get me hurt. Again.

"I wonder if you'll moan that sweet for me," I tease and edge nearer.

She blinks up at me, a blush painting her cheeks. “What are you talking about?”

I tilt my head, my fingers brushing over her chin. “Oh, sweetheart. I’ve seen the videos and I can’t wait to make one myself.”

She slaps my hand and backs away. A smile curls on my lips and I grab her arm, push her against the lockers, and cage her between my body and the metal behind her. “You’re a filthy little thing, aren’t you?”

Slowly, I drag the zipper of her sweater down.

“Don’t do this, please,” she whispers.

“Don’t worry, I know how you like it and Coach won’t mind sharing,” I muse.

Her bottom lip quivers. “Knox.”

I groan. “Say my name again, come on.” My hand dips underneath her sweater to the hem of her shirt. “I want you to moan my name—can you do that for me?”

She shakes her head, her lips tightly pressed together, and a low chuckle rolls from me.

“I’ll wait,” I whisper and pull back slightly. “We don’t want to make Dimitri and Jaxon jealous.”

I never realized how much pain someone could inflict without a touch. I never realized the power of words and actions. I was young, stupid, following a man I worshipped.

She didn’t need my hands to hurt her as my words held enough power to push her this

far, to push glass against her skin, to draw blood.

And we only made it worse after that, as if her own cuts weren't enough. No, we had to carve ourselves into her body—her skin.

Everyone around me turns into him, turns into a monster. They all want the same.

They start with smiles and kindness, only for it to be replaced with...

Pain.

JAXON

I haven't spoken to Dimitri since our... moment. I get his dad let him carry a burden that wasn't meant for him. But we all have our crosses to bear.

I met his dad once and since then, I've stayed away. I don't want to relive that day, the day he brought the news. Told me what happened to her.

I lost... her.

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“She wasn’t mine to protect,” I repeat the lie that offers me some peace and quiet.

It doesn’t calm the lingering sting of fighting with Dimitri. I’m left with nothing to do—something I can’t stand. I need action. I need to be moving forward. I need Hope in a way that defies all kinds of logic. It’s a base need, once I should have recognized earlier.

Instead, I have a fucking career to keep for some reason that I can’t find in my head anymore. Maybe a concussion will do me good. Maybe I’ll have a chance to get my hands on Dimitri like I should have before he walked out. I’ll hold him down, force him to explain why he hasn’t tried again, why he didn’t give me his dad’s number, why he didn’t offer any other police contact instead.

He fucking shut down when we can’t afford to.

“You look amped for practice,” one of the guys says.

I almost snort. I’m not amped for anything but getting Hope back where she’s meant to be. In my arms.

Jaxon, please.

That’s the only way to get rid of these hints and shreds of memories I don’t want. All the ways I’ve hurt her. All the ways I’ve failed her, the things I have to fix, but can’t. Since doing nothing and wallowing isn’t an option, I get changed into my practice uniform and get on the field.

We sprint, only supposed to do a set number of laps at an even pace, but I need to exhaust myself. I need to prove to myself and to others that I'm capable of more. So I run myself ragged. I throw myself into every practice tackle, every play, and every sprint like it's life changing, like it could save a life or end someone else.

In the middle of a play, I see Coach rather than my teammate. I see the man who's taken the most important part of me, ripped it out, and laughed while driving off. When I run in, I'm pretty sure I'm yelling through my mouth guard. I know the tackle is dirty and wrong, it's too intense, but it's me who ends up dazed on my back.

My shoulder feels off, pain tingling and buzzing up my neck until I'm not sure whether I'm supposed to move or not. I just blink at the too-sunny sky.

"Fuck, man, don't pull that when we're not in a game. We need you in one piece," one of the guys says while offering me a hand.

I slap it away. I don't want or deserve their kindness. Fuck them all. If they treated me like the asshole I am, maybe I...

Shaking my head, I join in running another play and another until I see Dimitri on the sideline talking to Coach Carpenter. I can't make out the words, but it's obviously a tense conversation. I narrow my eyes, sure if I stare just long enough, I can make out what's going on.

Dimitri's not talking with his hands either. That means it's doubly serious. Just as I stand up, determined to fuck practice and figure out what the hell our next move is, someone collides into me. It's a clean tackle but still knocks the wind out of me. I wheeze on my back, the blue, cloudless sky mocking me as it swims across my vision.

"Pay attention, man," another teammate says. "You never go down."

No, because I'm the one who initiates every tackle and if I don't, then I don't drop. I'd rather drag three players with me across the field out of spite alone than let any of them have the bragging rights of dropping me on my ass.

It takes a solid three seconds for me to suck in a full breath while one of the guys hauls me up. I hear someone mumble that Hope should be here to check me out, which pisses me off more.

Sheshouldbe here. She should be walking me back to the clinic, checking out my chest, and letting me touch her, letting me cup her beautiful face and telling me that it's a strictly professional place while I scoff and kiss her. It would piss her off, but that fire, that fury, her spark... it proves she loves me. Because she doesn't cower from me anymore. She fights. It's a fucking compliment.

Rather than returning to practice like I should, I walk over to Coach and Dimitri, jogging once I can handle the breathlessness that's lingering in my chest.

"What's going on?" I demand.

Carpenter and Dimitri both look at me. Dimitri clears his throat. "Knox and Dad... it's not going well. We need to head upthere and meet with Knox, get him focused and make sure we're all back by the next game," Dimitri says.

"Dad?" I ask, almost huffing.

There's something gleaming and warning in Dimitri's eyes. He half looks ready to deck me if I say something wrong.

"If it's that serious, you guys had better go. We need all of you here, especially with Hope M.I.A. I don't want to take any chances by not having all my players," Coach Carpenter agrees.

No sharpness, no orders, none of it. Because he's a good man—an actual responsible coach. The kind of man we should want to have around. A proper leader. My hands curl into a fist.

“Dad and...” Fuck. “And Knox. Yeah, not a good combination. We should go. Bye, Coach,” I say.

Dimitri and I walk towards the locker rooms and he punches my shoulder. “The fuck was that? Go with what I suggest right away.”

“You call our ex-coach ‘dad’ again and I might end up punching you a whole lot harder than you just punched me,” I warn.

I get changed and we head to the apartment. I throw enough clothes in a bag to cover me and Hopewhen we find her. I double check for a phone charger and make sure I have all my shit. As I do my final pat-down, I turn and see Dimitri there with his bag, waiting.

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I give him a long look. “Did you pack everything?”

“Yes.”

I check his bag too and snort. “You forgot your good luck charm. I don’t like our odds without it.”

Dimitri rolls his eyes, clearly not in the mood for an attempt to fix our fucking problem. “It’s not a good luck charm, it’s a fucking knuckle buster.”

“Sounds like common sense rather than good luck considering what we’re about to get into,” I hint.

Sighing, he gives in with a nod. He dips into his room, grabs it, flashes it to me like I won’t believe him if I don’t see it, then we head to the car.

“Does Knox actually have news?” I ask.

“Ask him when we get there. If he doesn’t, I do.”

“And you’re not sharing, why?” I demand. “You already know—”

“I know you’re overeager and a fucking mess right now. Try a goddamn apology or—”

I grit my teeth, replaying his words to me. If this is friendship or a taste of what Hope’s in for, then I hope she escapes on her own and you never see her again.

He's the one who owes me an apology, but that sounds like something that we can hash out on the ride there. Once we get what we need to find Hope, there can't be any problems between us, can't be any distractions.

"You're going to fucking hate being in this car with me," I warn.

"As if I expected otherwise," Dimitri snorts as he gets us on the road and checks the GPS to make sure we're on the way to Hope's old house.

Nine

KNOX

Hope's diary weighs heavy in my hand as it stares back at me.

I'm not stupid enough to think that a book has any feelings or intention, but this one feels evil. I hate realizing howfucking awful I was. Every page I open to is another horror story that I didn't need to know. It's another step into Hope's brain, which is clearly a place she has never wanted me to access.

"It's fucking wrong," I whisper.

Honestly, I feel like I need a shower. I need to scrub my eyes and my mind of all of this. But she handled it. She handled it, her father, and us three making her life hell. All this book is doing is showing me exactly how fucking stupid I was the entire time.

I thought I was so fucking smart.

I thought I had the world figured out.

Don't get close to anyone except Coach. Coach was always right. Coach was a good man. Everyone else was a threat. Everyone else would hurt me.

I was fucking stupid.

Worse, I was willfully blind. I should never have believed that she wanted him. I never should have believed a single word out of his beer-soaked mouth. But I did because he was good to me. He made the pain stop. He protected me. He made me better. Because of him, I got out of high school, got out of the hell that I was forced to call home. I was able to make a life all because of Coach.

How can that be the same man who would do horrible things to his daughter?

A part of me didn't want to believe it.

That same part of me was convinced this was some kind of creative writing experiment, but I'd seen the truth now and there was no going back. I couldn't close my eyes against it. Then I just saw more. More of the horrors spelled out in Hope's neat handwriting.

"The answer is in here," I tell myself. "I have to find it."

So I open the book again. I'm in summer, which is obviously the worst because there's no escape, but since I've worked back towards the front, I've been finding out more about her mom.

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Her parents argued, her mom always gave in, always got quiet first. Hope would cover her ears, listen to music—her mother always made sure she had good-quality headphones.

Dad said we needed time out of town. That being cooped up in our neighborhood was causing their fights. So we came to the cabin up north. Dad always feels better when he's fishing. I think he likes knowing he's capable, or the fresh air really is good for him. Mom and I enjoy it too.

It's nice up here. I see squirrels and deer. This morning, Mom showed me how to get close without scaring them. We were able to roll them some apples and I hope they'll come closer tomorrow. Dad's been out at the water all day, so he'll come home with fish for us.

Maybe we can have smores like we used to, sit around the fire, and Dad will tell stories about how fast and hard he fell for Mom. They'll remember what's important, like in the romcoms Mom and I watch when Dad's coaching. Then we'll be happy.

No one will have to pretend.

A cabin? He never mentioned a cabin.

I flip to the next page.

It's not working this time. He's so angry and I don't get why, but Mom is angry too. They sent me on a hike. I love the nature preserve. There are rivers and mountains. The lake feels so good. I dove into it after stripping down to just my underwear. It felt

good. No one else is around for miles. Just us.

But Mom and Dad are really terrible today. I tried to go back home and they both yelled at me to go enjoy nature. Mom didn't even smile. She always smiles after she yells, like a silent apology. Dad says she should apologize more.

She shouldn't. But I don't understand how two people can be married and still have all this anger. If they don't like each other, why don't they just... break up?

Even now, they're still arguing while I write this. I spent hours outside. I climbed trees like I haven't since I was a kid. I swam. I tried to find otters. I even tried to name all the birds I saw. But being alone makes everything a lot less fun.

Dad's really loud. The cabin walls aren't thick so I hear him calling her useless. I hear him telling her to try harder. That he never should have let her get this wild. So many things that don't make sense. Mom isn't wild. She doesn't go out and party like some people's moms do. She doesn't even have friends over!

She's quiet now. So quiet. I don't like it. But it will be better in the morning. I've heard that holding anger in is worse. So if they get it all out tonight, we can go on a hike tomorrow, roast food over a fire, and everything will be good. Dad always says nature is good for a person. It helps remind them of what's important.

She's so different in this section. Like she has hope, like she believes that things will be good.

One more page.

I hate the cabin. I hate the entire nature preserve. There's nothing good about mountains or streams or trees. Mom left. She left without saying anything. She didn't even smile. She didn't hug me. She didn't promise she was coming back and so Dad

isn't waiting.

He says that she went to one of the neighbors. There are only three cabins on Dirt Lane Road—a really stupid name for a road in my opinion. Mom has never walked that far except on a treadmill or with me. Why would she leave?

Maybe she's mad too—the quiet kind of angry. Or maybe she decided that she couldn't be with us anymore. That Dad is too angry and I don't protect her. That I look too much like him somehow even though everyone says I look like her.

I know Dad searched for her. I saw him coming back to the cabin this morning. His boots were covered in mud and dirt. He was sweaty and he looked like he'd cried.

So I won't bring her up. She knows where we live. She'll come back if she wants to, to get her clothes, to get everything she loves so much. Hopefully, she'll get me too.

A road!

I almost kiss the page in thanks. Hope gave me a road name. And on the next one, there's even a drawing. She has drawn Xs over certain houses. I'm sure that she checked them or her father said he had. There's a lake, a river, a fucking map.

"You're so smart," I praise her even though she can't hear me. "We're going to get you. I promise you that."

A car idles out front, echoing in the quiet of the early afternoon. I get up from Hope's bed, keeping her diary behind me until I get to the door and see Dimitri and Jax approaching. They aren't talking or looking at each other, which tells me some shit hit the fan, but that can wait.

I open the door. "We have a map and a road."

Dimitri stares at me. “A cabin?”

“Yeah. Wait—how did you know?” I demand.

“He claimed it on a tax return. He didn’t list a road name, just a city, county, and zip code,” Dimitri answers.

“I have the road and Hope left us a map,” I inform.

Jax is utterly quiet until he looks at Dimitri. “Finally ready to try again?”

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“Don’t fucking bring it up, Jaxon.”

“You’re his son. He’ll make time to see you. Forget your fucking problems with him. You’re an adult and you could tackle him if needed. Just make it happen or I promise you that your shit will be so rocked that—”

“Cut the threats,” I order. “Dimitri, we don’t need your dad specifically. Any officer will work.”

“Yeah, I have a feeling my dad is not going to give us a choice,” Dimitri says.

Even though Dimitri clearly has shit going on, Jax just turns and starts walking back to the car. I pat Dimitri’s shoulder. “You have us.”

“Yeah,” he answers.

It doesn’t change what we have to do. We all get in the silent, stuffy car and ride to the police station.

DIMITRI

I hate the sounds, smells, and general feeling of the police station. People yelling, fax machines and printers working, the sound of cuffs jingling and perps complaining. It’s all noise I could get over if one specific person wasn’t involved.

Okay, maybe two.

The second Johnny, (a cop my age who idolizes my dad) sees me, he beams.
“Dimitri. I’ll get Officer Kessler for you.”

There’s no point in saying it’s not necessary. There’s no point in fighting it. I’m on my dad’s turf and he’s in control.

That means dealing with him.

“Could have done it over the phone,” Jax hisses. “While we head there.”

“Shut it,” Knox warns.

“We don’t even fucking need them. We have the address, let’s go.”

“Then he could call the cops and get us in trouble,” Knox reminds.

Shockingly, Knox has been the voice of reason. I don’t like the role reversal, but as long as Jaxon doesn’t get thrown in jail and cause us more problems, I don’t care enough to get involved.

A few minutes later, my dad’s in front of us. He adjusts his belt, lifting his pants as he stares at me. He’s still chewing the same gum—the kind that helps a person stop smoking with just a hint of nicotine. It makes no sense since he never smoked, but I know better than to say a word about it.

“What’re you doing here?” Dad asks, looking only at me.

“We have something to report,” I say dryly.

“About that damn girl again?” He snorts.

Jax pushes forward. “Go ahead and ignore citizens reporting a fucking crime. See how well that goes for you.”

Knox grabs Jaxon’s arm. “We have evidence.”

He snorts. “We’re not a public spectacle. Let’s go.” He nods his head back to his office. “That girl is so tangled in trouble... Thought she’d turned her life around. Guess a zebra can’t change its stripes.”

Once we’re in the room, Knox’s air of pleasantness is gone. “You could have stopped this earlier.”

“Bullshit. Kids always see the worst in their parents, especially at that age. What’s the issue?” Dad dismisses, pushing more gum into his mouth.

“He kidnapped her. She didn’t go with him willingly. He found her, took her, and he’s holding her hostage,” I list.

He doesn’t believe me. I see it in his eyes. He just keeps chomping his gum. “Who’s he?”

“Her father!” Jaxon’s face is red. He slams his fist on my father’s desk, then grips his name plate. He doesn’t look away from my dad’s bored face. “Her father kidnapped her. She’s an adult. You can’t sweep this under the rug by saying she’s a minor in the care of her father. We know where she is. So get off your fat ass and let’s get her.”

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“I could arrest you for threatening an officer.”

“I’ll get out,” Jaxon says darkly.

The moment blisters. I’ve never seen someone attack my father head on like this, at least not with me right here.

“Or we could casually bring up that you could have stopped this years ago. That you knowingly put a minor in a dangerous situation,” Knox says calmly while picking at his nails. He lifts her diary. “Plenty of evidence right here.”

Dad looks at it. When Knox opens it, he pulls out some photos. “Look at this. She took photos of her own bruises. I bet I could find the bloody clothes she brought you too.”

“Kids need to be kept in line. She had no hard evidence. And that man is a pillar of this community. Kept you three from ending up inside one of these cells.” My dad looks at Jaxon. “For now.”

“You have a chance to free her from her abuser right now,” Knox says. “To do the right thing. I’d recommend taking it.”

“It’s more than a recommendation,” Jaxon growls.

“It’s your job,” I agree.

Finally, my dad’s gaze slides to me. “Is that so?”

“Or we can go to another precinct and let them know all of this,” I say darkly. “I’m not fucking around. Hope is in danger. She’s been beaten, she could be raped, or worse. It’s all on video if you think you need that.”

He’s quiet for a long moment, as if balancing the options in front of him. None of us have the patience for that.

“Do something, like you should have done years ago,” I say, then I know exactly what button to press. “Or would you want Mom to remember you like this?”

He sneers at me and stands up. “You don’t mention her. Not now, not ever. You’re not my fucking son and you don’t get to—”

“Be a concerned citizen who’s trying to stop a worse crime from occurring?” I demand, shoving Jax out of the way. “Because that’s what I’m doing and trust me, if we walk out of here without help, your career is over. A few entries of this diary released and you’re done.”

“You listen to me, boy,” he starts.

“No, you listen. You fucked up. She came to you, I know she did, and you handed her back on a fucking platter to that monster. You knew what he was doing to her, you knew, and you looked the other way!” I yell, my control slipping.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about!” he defends.

“I do, I saw you two, I was there. She begged you, cried, showed you the bruises and still you brought her back to him. What the hell is wrong with you!”

“Back off!” His breath comes out sharp. “Leave it be, Dimitri. There’s nothing you can do, nothing I could do.”

“Then why are you even a fucking cop? You have a chance to fix it. You have a chance to make things right. Are you going to let it pass all over again?” I demanded.

“Don’t you tell me what I’m going to do or not going to do. But back the fuck off and—”

“Jax, don’t,” Knox warns as if he’s expecting Jaxon to lose his temper.

But he’s warning the wrong man. I throw myself over the desk and execute the kind of tackle that would make a coach cum. I slam my father into the filing cabinet behind him. I bring my fist down on his face next, then drive it into his side. I feel his gun and rip it out of the holster.

“Your job! You love that, don’t you? More than you could love your son or anything else! Have an ounce of fucking morals! Uphold the fucking law!” Every sentence is punctuated with a punch to his face or stomach. “Shunning me won’t bringherback!”

He tries to say something, but I shove his mace canister in his mouth. “So do your fucking job! Be the man you keep thinking you are! Stop being a fucking shit stain on society!”

I lose myself in the attack. I punch him until my knuckles are aching and I’m sure at least one finger is broken. I scream at him until I lose track of what I’m saying because the words don’t matter. He ignored me, belittled me, put me through hell all for something I couldn’t control, but he doesn’t get to do that to Hope.

No one gets to do it to Hope.

Hitting him is like hitting my past self and making both of them pay for letting Hope down when she needed help. She was screaming for it, taking risks to get it, putting herself in danger for the glimmering, minute chance that she might get free.

A hand on my shoulder stops me. I pant, still straddling the man that was once my father, but calling him that felt hollow and wrong. He was a shriveled, small, terrible man who didn't have what it took to be a father or a decent human being. Now his mushy, pulpy face ruined by my fists showed it.

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“I hope you choke on your gum and you choke on your teeth while you think about all the people you let down because someone else mattered more,” I snarl, grabbing his gun off the floor and putting it in the back of my pants. I drag my shirt down over it. “Maybe then you’ll realize exactly what you’re going to lose when we get Hope back.”

Ten

JAXON

The silence is like needle pricks to my skin as we head to Dirt Lane Road. Knox’s focus is unwavering as he drives while Dimitri keeps checking his knuckles. Honestly, I didn’t expect that out of him. Sure, I told him to do something and I was ready to beat the crap out of his dad with his own nameplate, but Dimitri apparently had a lot of pent-up shit.

I shift in my seat and clear my throat. “Sorry, man,” I finally say while keeping the map Hope drew open on my lap.

“Sorry for what I said,” he snorts. “I was pissed and should have walked away.”

I hum. “I wouldn’t have let you. It was fair. Better you gave me some words than the beating you gave your dad,” I say. “He deserved it, by the way.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Dimitri mutters.

“The GPS will get us to the road in an hour,” Knox informs.

We've been driving for an hour and a half already. We stopped at Hope's old house to clean up and change clothes, but I still feel disgusting. Nothing about this sits right with me. We need to get to her.

Right now, there isn't anything to say.

We already filled Knox in on what we found—including her mother, the videos, and everything else. He told us about the diary but had obviously left things out. That was the new trend, only sharing the necessary, hiding the unnecessary and terrible.

Has anything fucking changed since school?

Leaning my head back, I think of Hope smiling, her laughing with the guys on the team, looking so confident and assured, not flinching away anytime someone raises a voice. Plenty has changed. Hope isn't going to be fighting alone anymore. She isn't going to have to cross her fingers and pray that someone's going to believe her, listen to her, free her.

We're on our way. She'll be ours by tonight. She'll see how important she is to us. We left everything for her, everything we've worked hard to achieve. We won't choose anyone's side except hers. We won't doubt her again.

"Do you think they'll still be there?" Dimitri finally asks, breaking the tense silence.

"He thinks he's safe there," Knox says with the kind of conviction that hints at more.

If he's that sure, it's because he's either known someone like Coach, been in a similar position, or knows way more about Coach than I want to believe. I take a slow breath and nod. "He has no reason to leave and trying to transport her when she doesn't hesitate to fight is more dangerous... for him."

“Shame she hasn’t killed him yet,” Dimitri whispers.

Knox’s hands tighten on the steering wheel.

I don’t blame Dimitri for the thought, but it’s too dark for Hope. I don’t know if I could do it. I don’t know if she could. Hell, I’m ready for a fight and I know Dimitri is too based on what he just did to his father, but could any of us really kill Coach?

For Hope, I could, I think, surer of that than anything. For Hope, I could do a million terrible things and never regret a single one if it made her safe.

Knox hit the gas, the roar of the engine being the only sound that fills the car.

I just hope we aren’t too late.

HOPE

I stare at my empty plate. It wasn’t enough to sate the hunger, but I had to eat. My dad sits across from me, his gaze shifting around the room, his leg impatiently tapping. I wonder what he’ll do next.

I fought him off once, but now that he has the shackles on me, I can only go so far from the table. I can’t even reach the chair myself.

“You have more energy now,” he comments with a nod, almost seeming proud he took care of me.

I glance at my thumb and recall all the movies I watched, how easy it looked for someone to dislocate their thumb and slide out of the cuffs. I don’t think it matters. I can’t even try with him watching me.

My eyes land on the knife next to his plate. Could I get it? Would I know what to do with it?

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His gaze flicks to the corner and I follow until I see it. A camera on the tripod, looming in the shadows like a fucking person.

“What...” I swallow. “Why is there a camera?”

He looks from it to me, then sighs. “I’m not the only one who likes the way you fuck. You should know that. Why do you think Knox, Jaxon, and Dimitri got involved?”

My throat tightens and the bit of food in my stomach rolls. “Y-you record it?”

He hums with a nod. “And publish it. You make me a great deal of money, Hope. Of course, you wouldn’t if you weren’t so sweet. Your mother was better. People liked how she screamed and yelled, how she’d break and do exactly as she was told. They liked giving me ideas too. Funny how hobbies can become income.”

I’m going to be sick.

“Y-you... you did that with Mom?” I whisper, not sure he can even hear me.

He drops his fork and stands, rounds the table until he’s behind me. His fingers gently stroke through my hair and I flinch. I try to move away from him, but the shackles keep me in place.

“That was the deal,” he replies, no hint of kindness there. “And when she forgot that... well...”

His hands curls through my hair, he grips tightly and jerks back. I gasp as the chair

moves back. My arms are stretched in front of me and I whimper as I try to pull away.

“What deal?” I ask.

He shoves me forward and a scream rips from me. He presses my face on the cold, empty plate and tears the chair away. The smell of potatoes and beef invade my nose as tears well in my eyes.

“I don’t think that’s what you really want to know,” he answers and pats my hips as he steps closer. I can feel the roughness of his jeans graze against the flimsy fabric of my dress and nausea rises higher. “She doesn’t matter anymore—you do. Right here, so soft. They tried to take you from me, Hope. And you were going to let them, weren’t you?”

My heart beats rapidly against my chest, my body trembles. I can’t move, I can’t run. I claw at the wooden table; my legs kick back but I can’t seem to hit him as he keeps himself close.

I stammer as the panic spreads. “Tell me—tell me about Mom. We... we haven’t talked about her in a long time,” I say, trying to distract him. “Don’t you have any good memories of her? Like when we’d go to the cabin and go fishing?”

Please, someone hear me. Please, someone watching... help me.

His other hand bundles up my dress, pushing it over my hips until the brisk air tickles over my bare skin.

“Look at that,” he muses. “Just as pretty as I remembered.”

I shake my head. “Please, please, don’t do this. Let me go, I won’t tell anyone, I

swear.”

My pleas don’t get a reaction. They never did.

I move my body, or I try to, at least, but he pushes my head harder against the plate until I hear the crack.

“Beg harder,” he sneers as his hand scrapes over my lower back.

My body heaves, my insides curl, and I clench my eyes shut. I don’t want to see him; I don’t want to hear him as he takes a part of me.

I have to believe it doesn’t matter, that he’ll never fully have me, or break me.

I’m stronger than I was all those years ago. I have to be. My eyes flutter open, tears clouding my sight.

“Let me go,” I grit and kick down. My dirty feet slam onto his boots. My shoulders move just enough for his grip on my hair to falter slightly. The broken plate scratches my skin and blood drips down, staining the shattered white platter.

I can’t stop, I have to fight, I have to try—

My breath falls silent, my body goes rigid, and sobs tear from me as he forces himself inside me.

“Not that much fight in you, huh?” the monster behind me mocks with a groan.

I have to escape.

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Those four words repeat in my mind, over and over as he moves and speaks, but the words don't register as I find my escape. Locking the present away.

I have to escape.

"Let me take care of you, sweetheart," Jaxon whispers in my ear. "Be mine. I promise I'll never let you go."

I snifle. My eyelids are shut tight as tears fall on the empty plate. With every thrust, the table scratches on the wooden floor, the sound almost drowning the groans and grunts from behind me.

I nod my head into the memory, changing it by giving into what happened that day, seeing it as the escape I needed then, and now.

I said no that day, but now...

"Okay," I whisper, changing the past and accepting who it made me into. Accepting who they are to me, who I want them to be.

I'm tied to them as they are to me.

"Good girl," Jaxon whispers and his hand snakes around me, grazes over my perked nipples. "Open your legs, let Dimitri have a taste."

I know I fought that day; I know they ripped my legs open, bruised my skin but it has to be different, it has to be. I have to make it better.

I part my legs and watch as Dimitri crawls between them. His tongue sweeps over his bottom lip as he grips my thighs to keep them open.

The warmth of his tongue forces my lips to part as my core quivers. First, he flicks over my clit, earning a buck from my hips, then he moves lower and teases my pussy.

“Doesn’t that feel good?” Jaxon asks, his voice low and husky.

A moan spills but I need something else. I need the roughness, the pain. Everything that they can give me. Everything that keeps me away from my current nightmare.

Dimitri’s fingers dig into my skin, harder, rougher until I whimper from it. My teary stare flicks up and I watch as Knox rests against the door, waiting like the predator he is.

The monster.

My monster.

Pleasure spikes as he steps closer, his bare chest glinting in the soft light above us. He crouches down, the burn scars on his back staring back at me. Dimitri flicks his tongue over my clit, again and again until I’m panting in Jaxon’s hold.

Knox’s fingers graze over my wet upper thigh and move around Dimitri’s play before thrusting two fingers inside me.

I arch my back and moan as Knox pumps his fingers in and out, curling them to hit that sensitive spot inside me. Dimitri sucks hard on my clit, making my legs tremble.

“That’s it, let go for us,” Jaxon growls in my ear. His hands roughly knead my breasts, pinching and rolling my perked nipples between his fingers.

Pleasure coils tighter and tighter in my core as the three men work my body. I'm climbing higher, the sensations overwhelming me, pushing out all thoughts of where I am and what's happening beyond this room. There's only Jaxon, Knox, and Dimitri. Only their hands and mouths on me, bringing me to the brink.

"Come for us, Hope," Knox commands darkly. "Now."

His deep voice sends me over the edge. My pussy clenches around his thrusting fingers as my orgasm crashes through me. I cry out, my body shaking and writhing against their strong holds. Wave after wave of intense pleasure washes over me, blanking my mind in blissful oblivion.

As I float down from the twisted memory, slowly coming back to myself, reality seeps in again—the cold, hard table beneath me, the shackles on my wrists, the cruel man violating me. Tears escape my eyes.

Sharp breaths ring in my ear and I try to move again. My restrained hands can't go too far, but as my sight sharpens, I see it. The knife.

My fingers crawl up the wooden surface, closer to the handle, even as the shackles won't give me much room. I reach with everything I've got.

I can still feel him inside me, but my focus lies ahead.

Almost.

Another deep thrust, the table rattles, and the knife rolls slightly. My fingers graze over the handle and with another push, I wrap them around the wooden base and tuck it between my hands.

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My heart stammers, adrenaline courses through me. One way or another, I'll get out of here. I'll heal from this. And the monster behind me will pay for everything he's done. That thought, that determination, is the only thing that will keep me sane, keep me fighting.

I won't let him break me. I'm stronger than he knows. I just have to hold on a little longer and wait for the right time.

The sound of a vibrating phone makes him stop and he steps back. I glance over my shoulder, trailing him with my eyes.

He curses something and picks up the phone. "What?" he barks, and I automatically flinch.

"What? You told them? You're fucking worthless." He slams the phone and it crashes against the wall.

He shakes his head and stomps towards me, his pants still open, his boxers hanging low.

"Don't," I plead and lean back as he grabs my chin.

"You think you're done? You think you'll deserve anything better than this?" With his touch leaving my chin, his other hand slams into my jaw.

"Do you think they want you?"

The taste of copper fills my mouth and he punches me again against my cheekbone.

“You’re a filthy whore!” He spits in my face, his fingers claw at my mouth as he tries to pry it open, and with his other hand, he pushes down his pants.

I keep my lips clenched shut, move as much as I can away from him. He closes in and his scent invades me. I grip the knifetighter and with the little motion I have, I cut him. He hisses and reels back.

“Stay away from me,” I grit, and his tense brows soften as laughter spills from him.

“Or you’re going to nick me with that tiny knife of yours, stupid girl?”

I swallow as he rounds me. “You can’t catch me here, dirty slut.” With his hand in a fist, he slams against my thighs and I cry out in pain.

He does it again and my legs give out, leaving me hanging on to the shackles.

“You think I was hurting you before?” He chuckles. “You have no idea how much pain I can give you. If I can’t have you, no one can.”

His hand curls around my neck and squeezes.

Hard and relentless.

Eleven

DIMITRI

I rub the dried blood from my knuckles but it has stained my skin. Just like her blood. A stain I can never wash, get rid of. I should want to get rid of it, but I can’t.

Knox was the first to do it and I didn't stop him.

I stare down at her, her body bare and bruised. Jaxon holds her down as the blade rests heavy in my hand.

I crouch down and rest on my knees. She thrashes and sobs, pleading with us.

"Please, no, don't do this!"

Her cries don't hit me in the way they should and I press the razor-sharp top to her delicate skin. She writhes beneath me, but Jaxon's grip is unwavering. The knife parts her flesh like butter. Blood wells up, crimson and glistening, as I etch a "D" into her chest. She screams, the sound bouncing off the walls. The pain in her voice sends a thrill straight down and I can feel myself becoming hard again. I've never felt so powerful, so in control.

"Perfect," Knox whispers and a sly smile tilts on my lips.

Jaxon groans and I hand him the knife. He takes it eagerly, licking his lips as he presses the point to her skin. His strokes are less precise, more jagged as he carves a "J" next to my initial. Hope's skin is slick with blood and sweat.

"Hold still, sweetheart. You're ours now," he growls and wipes away some of the blood to get a better look.

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The letters gleam red against her pale skin, a permanent reminder that she belongs to us. No one can ever take her away now.

The marks will scar, a permanent brand of our ownership.

No matter what happens, no matter who tries to come between us, Hope will always belong to us now. We've made sure of that.

"We were wrong," I mumble as I pull myself back. "We shouldn't have... marked her. What were we thinking?"

Jaxon scoffs and shakes his head. "No, it was a good thing."

I roll my neck, almost too exhausted to even ask why. "Why's that?"

"So she knows she's ours and we protect what's ours," Jaxon interjects.

"Protect?" I mock. "We never protected her."

"Dimitri, can we not?" Knox says as he stares back at me through the mirror.

"We will, I will." Jaxon nods and mumbles something under his breath. Even with all these years, I still can't fully grasp these two.

But I do know we're as fucked up as Coach is.

"We're here," Knox says and I sit up.

This is it. There's no going back without her.

"Where?" Jaxon snaps.

Knox turns off the engine and sighs. "We have to walk the last part, come on."

I stuff the map in my back pocket and get out of the car, slamming the door shut. Jaxon and Knox grab their bags from the trunk as I survey our surroundings. Dense pine forest stretches out before us, the air heavy with the scent of sap and earth.

Jaxon is practically vibrating with pent-up energy beside me. Knox scans the tree line, his jaw set in determination. We're all on edge, fueled by desperation and fury.

"Which way?" Jaxon asks gruffly, shouldering his pack.

I pull out the map Hope drew, trying to orientate us. "Seeing we're following a map she drew as a kid, I think the safest bet is following the path," I say, nodding toward a narrow trail snaking into the shadowy woods.

"Come on," Knox says and takes the lead into the slim path. Branches snag at our clothes as we push deeper into the forest. I keep checking the map, making sure I didn't miss anything. The further we go, the more overgrown the path becomes.

"You sure this is the right way?" Jaxon grumbles after a while, swatting at a cloud of mosquitoes. "Feels like we're going in circles."

"It's the only way that matches the map and the path here," I insist, but doubt niggles at the back of my mind. What if we got it wrong? What if Coach moved her somewhere else?

Knox must sense my unease. He claps a hand on my shoulder as we pause to catch

our breath. “We’ll find her,” he says firmly.

I swallow hard and nod, folding up the map. “Those cabins can’t be much further.”

The sun sinks behind the mountains. A coldness fills the air. I halt on the spot as Jaxon throws out an arm. He puts a finger to his lips then points through the trees. There, maybe fifty yards ahead, is a cabin. A single light glows in the window. My breath catches. This is it.

We drop into a crouch, scoping around. No vehicles, no signs of movement. Coach likely thinks he’s completely isolated out here, that no one could ever find them.

He’s wrong.

We creep closer, staying low and sticking to the shadows. My heart pounds against my ribs as we approach the wooden cabin. Jaxon motions for us to split up and I nod, pulse racing. Knox circles around back while Jax and I flank the front door.

I peer through the smudged glass window, trying to make out shapes. A flicker of movement catches my eye and my breath hitches. It’s Hope. She’s shackled to a table, her clothes in tatters with her father’s hand around her throat. His grip is so tight that I can make out the veins across the back of his hand. Rage boils up inside me at the sight, my vision flashing red. That sick fuck.

Jaxon trembles with rage beside me and I put my hand on his arm, forcing him to look at me. I pry at the doorknob and sigh, it’s locked. Tearing my eyes from the scene inside, I give Jaxon one more nod and brace myself as I ram my shoulder into the door once, twice, until it splinters inward with a crack. Jaxon is through in a second, his good luck charm shining on his knuckles.

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“Hope!” he calls frantically and runs over to her, shaking her limp form.

I follow close on his heels, panting. I glance around, but there’s no sign of Coach. Sounds of a scuffle from the back lure me closer. Knox.

A part of me wants to go help him. I could picture myself fucking Coach up as badly as I did my dad... If Knox gave me any opening to do that. I nearly take another step towards the back until I hear the panic in Jaxon’s voice.

“No, no,” he mumbles. “Dimitri, I don’t think she’s breathing.”

“What?” is all I can say as I push him aside and hold Hope’s face in my hands.

Her jaw and cheekbone are purple, cuts and blood on her other cheek. My eyes drop to the bruises around her neck. They’re red and purple, in the shape of Coach’s hands, ringing around her throat like the worst collar I’ve ever seen.

“No,” I breathe.

“Move!” Jaxon barks and slams the table in half to break the shackles free. It takes three tries and I hear the table splintering under the force of each blow before the shackles give up. “Not again,” he whispers and lays Hope on her back on the ground.

I’m too stunned to move.

Her dress is ripped to pieces and our three initials are all I can see.

Ours to protect...

Jaxon presses his head to her chest and I wait for him to speak up. My lungs scream for air, telling me I'm holding my breath. All that matters is Hope surviving, her being okay. We got here. We came. We can't have been too late.

His tense shoulders drop and he leans back. "He didn't... She's, ehm..."

"Spit it out!"

He shudders and brushes his fingers through her hair as if she's made of paper, as if he'll hurt her if he's too rough. "He didn't kill her, we got here..."

In all these years, I've never seen Jaxon break or cry. Or show any other emotion that doesn't fit his twisted self. I hate seeing his watery eyes. I hate seeing him shaking, I hate all of it. This isn't him and the fact that it's right in front of me doesn't convince me that this isn't a nightmare.

Until I look at Hope and see her so savagely beaten. Not even my nightmares are this warped. This is real. We're falling apart.

"I didn't lose her," he whispers so soft, so weak.

KNOX

My mind is a mess; uncertainty keeps nagging at me. I know what is right, I know what is wrong. But I live in the grey area.

I'm too slow, too confused as I rest against the back door of the cabin, staring at Coach. Half of me wants to throw myself at him and show him every ounce of agony he caused Hope. The other part of me...

“You can’t do it?” Coach laughs and my brows tighten together.

This isn’t a victory for him. Can’t he see how fucked up this is? Did my small beating not prove to him I’m capable of plenty? How many times do we have to show him that he’s not the man we used to know? How many different ways does he need this shit explained to him?

But none of that comes out of my mouth because there’s one thing more obvious than any other.

“You saved me,” I state as I know that’s true. “But you hurt her.”

We all did. We pushed her to the brink. She cut herself because of me.

“And yet, here you stand, doing nothing,” he mocks.

I blink at him. “I can’t let you go.”

“Then fight me,” he dares.

I push myself off the wooden surface and wander toward him. My strides aren’t big and powerful. Even though I know he’s the bad guy, he made me.

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With a sharp breath, I lunge, tackling Coach to the ground. We grapple and roll, trading blows. His fist cracks against my jaw, snapping my head back. I taste blood. Snarling, I hammer punches into his ribs, his face. Anywhere I can reach receives a blow. There's no conflict in any punch. There's a need to make him see what's obvious to me. He dared me. He invited this. Every crack of bone, every grunt and groan under me. Every yelp he tries to quiet... he's earned it.

Coach bucks beneath me, trying to throw me off. He's strong, but I have youth and rage on my side. I slam my knee into his groin and he grunts in pain.

"You sick fuck," I hiss through gritted teeth.

He smiles up at me, his teeth red from blood rolling from his split lip. "Just like you."

My chest heaves, my throat dry as I give one final punch against his temple and knock him out. I don't want to hear him. I don't want his comments, his reminders, any of it. He needs to shut up. He needs to let me think rather than act on instinct.

"I can't let you go," I whisper again and roll off him.

I grab some rope out of my bag and drag Coach's unconscious body to the nearest tree and tie him up. Each knot drags the rope through my fingers, burning my palm. It's good. It's grounding. Every trace of pain is, just like knowing that he can't escape.

He can't gnaw through the rope. He can't run and hide like the coward he is. He doesn't get the police on his side now and he sure as hell doesn't get to escape the

consequences we're going to deliver.

I stagger back, knuckles throbbing. It's up to Hope what we do with him.

"Knox?" Dimitri calls out and I turn away from the man I looked up to for so many years.

"Is she okay?" I run up to Dimitri and my stomach churns as I see the look on his face.

No. Whatever he's about to say, whatever details he's going to give me, they'll all boil down to the fact she's not okay. We took too long. In some way or another—hell, maybe too many ways to count at this point—we've failed her. I just hope we still have time to make it right. I cling to it while Dimitri works on choosing his words.

He meets my eyes and answers carefully, "She's coming to, slowly."

My brows twitch and I follow him inside.

We walk past a small room, one without any windows. I peek inside and take a breath. A small bed, a bucket, and nothing else. It's hardly fit for an animal, a goldfish, a fucking plant. "He kept her here," I note.

Dimitri nudges my shoulder. "She stayed there for most of the time."

I nod as my insides twist. They told me about the video, I've seen a glimpse of it, but to see the room... it tears something inside me. not wanting to think about what happened in there. I give the room one more look and walk with him as he rounds the corner to the living room. Jaxon sits on the floor, with Hope in his lap. Purple bruises paint her neck and face. They look like they're still getting darker too. Only getting

worse to reveal the full extent of what he put her through.

My throat tightens. “I went too easy on him,” I mumble.

Hope stirs slightly, squirming and panting. She’s awake. She’s conscious. Fuck, that’s a good sign. I exhale slowly and step forward. She cringes, trying to curl in on herself. She’s not shaking, she’s crying. God, just weeks ago, she was standing up for herself, she was smiling and laughing with men double her size. She was confident and whole and...

“Hope, sweetheart, it’s us,” Jaxon rasps, fighting to keep his voice steady. “It’s Jaxon, Dimitri, and Knox. We’re here. You’re safe now.”

I inch closer, hands up and open. My next step makes the wood below me squeak and Hope looks my way. She lashes out weakly and it breaks my fucking heart to see her like this—broken, battered, terrified. She looks like a cornered animal. Ready to lash out, to defend herself in any possible way to ensure she lives.

“No one is ever going to hurt you again,” I swear. “Especially not him.” I take another careful step, holding her gaze.

She pauses, takes a breath, and looks at me, really looks at me. I can tell she doesn’t believe me. Her eyes snap over my shoulder and then she glances at Dimitri, and she is clearly trying to determine how she can escape, if she should escape, and what’s going on. She’s alive. Alive is what matters. Everything else we can fix.

At least, that’s what I try to convince myself of.

“Let’s get you out of here,” Dimitri says, and she frantically shakes her head.

“It’s okay, sweetheart, let’s get you cleaned up first. Let us take care of you, please,”

Jaxon pleads, and she hesitantly peeks up at him.

She's shivering, eyes and cheeks soaked with her tears. That doesn't hide how lost she looks, how broken. She's raw, vulnerable, frayed at the edges, but I know we can take care of her. That's all we want to do. It's all any of us care about. We came to save her, to claim her, to protect her. That's what ownership means.

Let us in, Hope.

Let us protect you.

Twelve

HOPE

Theysaved me.

Theysavedme.

They savedme.

Three words with too much weight for me to bear. I wanted them to come, but deep down, I never thought it would happen. But they did. They came.

For me.

The realization is difficult. Complex.

I can't let them go. I can't even let Jaxon's freaking shirt loose, but he doesn't seem to mind. I'm glued to him, afraid if I even let the cotton fabric slip, I'll be back with my father. It's stupid. I know it's stupid. I know this is real. It's different from the fantasies I've had about them. That doesn't mean it's good.

But safety, I need it. I can't live without it anymore.

Even if it is with... them.

"What the..." Knox mutters and walks to the corner of the room.

"Camera," I whisper, not sure they can even hear it. My throat aches, talking burns.

Every breath is agony that I cling to. The fact it hurts means I'm alive.

Dimitri clears his throat. "We found a... website. He was recording his... also with your mom."

I swallow and whimper from the soreness in my throat. "I know, he told me before he..." My gaze drifts to the table and I sigh. "I think he... he did something to her."

The sound of a crash behind me makes me flinch and I turn in Jaxon's hold, watching how Knox stomps down on the camera, shattering it to tiny bits. He rubs his boot down and scoffs. "It was still recording."

"Sick fuck," Jaxon breathes.

"What's this?" Knox asks as he holds up a black cord that runs to the kitchen. Dimitri moves quickly, following it, and comes back with a laptop.

"It was a live feed," he grits and tosses the laptop on the remnants of the dining table. Again, I wince from the impact and the deafening sound. I try to blink away the tension that curls up in my stomach.

"Did you see it?" I whisper and Dimitri meets my eyes. A storm brews in his own and he swallows thickly.

I already know the answer. "Someone called... him... he knew you were coming," I add and Jaxon tightens his grip on me.

"Where's his phone?" Knox asks and scans around.

Dimitri groans. "It was probably my dad, he was the only one who knew." He shrugs and wrings his hands together.

I notice his hands then. The blood on his shirt. I blink a few times and focus on it. It's a better thing to think about. Better than wondering what they saw. Better than thinking about what happened at this table, how naked I am, how... no. Just Dimitri's hands. How he's going to be able to play with them like that.

"You got hurt," I mumble as I stare at the cuts and bruises on his knuckles.

"Oh sweetheart, you should've seen him. It was beautiful," Jaxon gushes while earning an eyeroll from Dimitri.

"Oh," is all I manage to say as Knox strolls past Dimitri with a phone in his hands.

"Is this your dad's number?" Knox asks as he holds my dad's phone in front of Dimitri. Dimitri's brows crease, his lips move as he reads the numbers, then he shakes his head.

"No, it's not even the right area code."

"Then who called him?" Jaxon asks, and my mind spins from it all, drowning their conversation.

"I want to get cleaned up," I whisper and silence drops.

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“Okay,” Knox says. “We brought some extra clothes—”

Jaxon shakes his head. “I brought some extra clothes.”

“Same thing,” Dimitri mutters with a sigh and Jaxon pushes himself off the dirty ground. I clinch to him, still afraid to let him go.

“How do you want to do this, sweetheart?” Jaxon smiles and tucks my hair behind my ears. “I’m more than happy to shower with—”

“No,” I say in panic. “I don’t want that. I need to...”

“We’ll stay outside the door,” Knox interjects. “He won’t get to you.”

“You promise?”

Jaxon gently rubs my back. He’s different, softer. It’s confusing. He moves with me slowly, guiding every step. My feet touch the floor, but I don’t have to put any weight down. My eyes flick to Dimitri, looking for an answer, but he looks to Knox. Knox isn’t soft. He isn’t gentle, he’s resolute. There’s nothing hesitant in his face.

“You’re safe now, Hope. Whether we’re with you or not in the bathroom,” Knox says evenly.

I just nod and let Jaxon half walk, half carry me to the bathroom. He sets me down on the toilet and keeps lightly touching me. He lifts my chin and his jaw tightens. I think I hear him bite down on a curse word, but he doesn’t ask if it hurts. He doesn’t ask

what happened. He doesn't ask me a damn thing.

Since talking at all hurts, no matter how determined I am to do exactly that, I'm thankful. He's making it easy. Dimitri turns on the shower and looks back at me. He asks if I want it warm and when I nod, he adjusts the water, checking it. Knox lingers by the door, continually glancing back into the rest of the cabin.

Is my dad still around?

Is he going to storm in here and rip me away from them again?

Is he going to pick up where he left off in front of them just to prove he can?

"You're freaking her out. Knock it off, Knox," Jaxon orders before focusing back on me. "He's not touching you again. I don't care if he manages to get back in here. I won't let him."

"He has his lucky charm," Dimitri teases.

My brow furrows, but Jaxon holds up his hand, showing me brass knuckles.

"You still have it," I whisper.

"Why would I ever get rid of it?" he whispers back.

I don't dare to sink back in a replay of the past. For now, I have to stay here, be aware of what happens and be safe.

"Come on," Dimitri says and holds out his hand. "We won't look."

I almost scoff as the torn fabric lays on my bruised skin. Carefully, I take his bloody

hand and let him lead me to the hot stream of water.

Jaxon stays close, too close, and then I realize I'm still holding onto his shirt.

"It's okay," Jaxon says.

The water is warm and slides across my body. Hesitantly, my hold on him fades and I focus on the comfort of the water as if it can wash all the horror away. All the hurt, all the tears.

I hear them shuffling out of the bathroom and I peel the tattered remains of my dress from my skin, tossing it to the side. The fake safety doesn't linger. My father's voice echoes in my mind.

He'd set up the camera, rip the curtain away, then—

"Stay!" I yell.

I regret it right away. My voice is weak and hoarse, my throat in agony, but worst of all, I'm trusting three guys who hurt me too. I shudder and wrap my arms around myself as if they're going to do exactly what I'm worried about.

No sound greets me for a moment. Just silence and the constant pattering of the shower on the tub floor.

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“How do you want to do this?” Dimitri finally asks.

“I need to get your clothes, Hope,” Jaxon calls. “I’ll be right back. Knox is here. He won’t close the door.”

I want to ask about my father. I want to know if he’s alive, but based on what Knox said about doing worse, he must be. I shudder despite the warm water, then reach down and make it hot enough to melt my skin, to burn away my father’s touch.

“You don’t want us in there, so Dimitri and I will stay right by the door,” Knox says.

I shake my head. I can’t wash myself. I can’t close my eyes. I can’t turn my back to the curtain. I need to see them.

“Hope?” Dimitri asks.

“C-closer,” I whisper.

I see Dimitri’s shadow, but that just makes it worse. I grab the curtain and cling to it as I open it. Knox looks at me, his gaze steady on my face. “Whatever you need, we’ll do. All you have to do is say it.”

“Um...” I don’t know what to ask for without sounding pathetic. I close my eyes. “I... I need to see you, but... turn around?”

Neither of them respond for a moment, then Knox turns around and Dimitri does the same. I open the curtain further and hear Knox tell Jaxon to bring the clothes but to

stay facing the doorway and not the shower. I still can't close my eyes.

I need to see them to know they're still here. I need to hear them. I need to know I'm not alone, back in that room, still lost in something like a hallucination or fantasy.

Using my nails, I scrub my skin, applying more soap than necessary. I slide down to the tub to wash my hair and the rest of myself, then just sit there for a long moment.

"He's alive, yeah?" Jaxon asks.

"Yeah," Knox answers.

"Why?" Jaxon pushes.

"Shut up, Jax. Not the time," Dimitri growls.

"It is the time. This is too much. You knew exactly what I was going to do when we started this. He hurt her. Again. And again. And again," Jaxon snarls. "We're fixing it and finishing it."

"Later," Knox says.

"What the fuck is up with you? I figured you'd rip him to shreds. Now you're being—"

"Not. Now," Knox snarls right back.

I turn off the water, but don't get up. I hide myself behind the curtain and see Dimitri start to turn before catching himself. Three large men. The three men I hated, hated to like, hated to care about are all waiting for me. It's warped and wrong. They make demands. They take whatever opportunity they're given.

I sniffle and shiver in my own nakedness. I've never felt so raw in my life. I didn't think it was possible after everything. But breaking down and sobbing in front of these three... "I'm done."

"Can I turn around to bring your clothes?" Jaxon asks.

I nod, realize they can't see me and that nodding is almost more painful than speaking, and croak out a yes. Jaxon glances back, then walks to me. He puts the clothes on the sink then turns back around. Dimitri gives me some space so I can step out of the shower, towel off, and change into a shirt that's not mine and sweats that I have to roll multiple times just so they come close to fitting. "I thought you said you brought clothes for me."

"I did," Jaxon says.

"But these are yours," I comment.

"Yeah, so?" he asks. "They're clothes, they cover you, and I didn't go through your drawers."

I almost scoff, but I do like how covered I feel. This isn't sexy. It's not revealing. I'm clean, I'm warm, I smell Jaxon's cologne on the shirt and it's definitely better than what they could have brought or what I had here. I adjust the shirt and put my hand on Dimitri's arm.

He softens under my touch.

"I'm dressed," I finally announce.

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Jaxon turns first. He wraps himself around me, ignoring how I stiffen, then rubs my back tenderly. I find my fingers winding into his shirt again. I tremor and try to silence my sniffles against the inside of his shoulder.

I won't cry.

I won't cry.

My tears would give my dad too much power. I won't give him any more than he's taken from me.

Thirteen

JAXON

Dimitri is staying outside, watching Coach. I refused the first shift. I meant what I said to Hope. He's not touching her again and if I had my way, he'd be bleeding out and Dimitri would be digging a shallow grave for him. Three feet is perfect for coverage and for plants to grow. It'll hide him better.

Hope refused to go back into the bedroom, which is understandable, so she's curled up in a ball on the couch under a blanket, her face against the back of the couch. I keep one hand on her ankle so she knows I'm here. If she doesn't want to be alone, I won't let her be. She won't be able to question it.

Knox rubs the back of his neck, then looks at his knuckles. He massages them around the open wounds and bruises coming in. He kept saying it wasn't the time to talk

earlier and I don't know if Hope is asleep, but I can't wait anymore.

"I need answers, Knox," I say quietly.

Hope squirms slightly and I rub her ankle. Knox stares at her for a long moment and leans back against the wall he's been sitting against. "I tied him to a tree after beating the shit out of him. I should have kicked him in the dick more, made it fucking useless, seen if I could actually bust a ball."

It doesn't answer the question of why he's still alive, which pisses me off. That requires an answer considering all he's done to Hope. He hurt her. He abused her. He raped her. He took her from us. He destroyed her life a second time.

"He can't be trusted while alive," I say.

Knox eyes drop to the floor. "You made yourself clear."

"The only way he's not a threat to her is if he's dead," I argue. "You really want to go the legal route with this?"

"I don't want any of this," he snaps.

"Yeah, neither does she. We're supposed to protect her and—"

"I know!" He raises his voice.

Hope tightens herself into a smaller ball. I rest back and sigh. "Are we too loud for you?"

No answer. I start to move away from her, so I can have a real conversation with Knox, but she reaches out to me. Her voice is a weak croak. I'm sure it hurts for her

to talk. With how badly bruised she is, I can't imagine breathing is any easier. "Don't leave me alone."

Knox's nostrils flair and he looks away. After a moment of hesitation, he reaches into his bag, pulls something out, and slides it over to me. I don't recognize it, but after I open it, I realize it's her diary. I skim a few pages and immediately throw it back at him.

"More of a reason for him to be dead," I hiss.

He shakes his head. "That's the point, Jaxon. I read all of that. All of it and more. I know you—"

"I saw plenty," I hiss.

Hope doesn't stir at that. I hope she's finding sleep. I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose. I don't need to think about the videos I saw. It's just going to piss me off, lead to me going outside and taking care of Coach. I try to calm my breathing.

Not for Coach. He doesn't deserve mercy. Hope does.

It's too much for her.

In too short a time.

Too much has happened and a person can only be pushed so far. Knox is proof of that.

I need to keep my cool and stay in control for Hope.

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“Alright. I don’t like it, but I know you have a plan.” I wait for him to nod. When he does, I sigh. “I’m going to try to get some sleep.”

“No worries. I’ll wake you when Dimitri comes in,” he answers. “Not too long until morning.”

I rub Hope’s ankle. “Everything always looks better in the morning.”

It has to.

I breathe out and close my eyes, my hand still resting on Hope’s ankle.

My body is stiff and I groan as I sense Hope move beside me. My eyes slowly open and I realize Dimitri is sleeping on the floor. Knox must be outside. I don’t know how he’s still awake and functioning. I glance back at her and see exactly how bad her bruises are. Her eye is swollen shut; her jaw has a lump. There’s a cut across her cheek and nose, there’s a scab on her lip, and her throat is terrible.

How am I supposed to keep my cool when I can see every fucking finger from Coach’s hand around her throat? She sits up, opens her mouth, then touches her throat as she wheezes. I rub her ankle. “I’m going to get you ice. Knox is outside watching your dad. Dimitri is right there.”

She watches me, not responding. I go to the freezer and see plenty of meat. I sift through it, looking for ice and find nothing. All the way in the back of the freezer, I find peas that are definitely not fit for eating. They’re so covered in frost and ice that I’m sure they’ve been there for years, thawing and freezing over and over. I wrap

them in a towel and walk back to Hope.

“On your throat,” I say as she watches me through one squinted eye and one regular.

“We’ll take care of the rest of your face too, okay?”

She blinks at me and reaches out for the ice. She quickly pulls it away, like she’s afraid I’ll grab her and haul her up. She presses the ice to her throat and sighs slightly. I blink slowly. Whatever sleep I got was shit, but I need to relieve Knox. He needs somefucking sleep or he’s going to be twice as hard to deal with. I’m at my wit’s end and he needs to be sane to talk some sense into me.

DIMITRI

Knox is walking in when I wake up. Hope watches him move like he’s a threat she’s not sure how to plan for. He sits near her on the couch, leans over to rest his head on the arm of the couch and closes his eyes. “Give me like two hours and I’ll be good.”

I don’t have it in me to argue. I’m exhausted. I push myself up and slowly approach Hope. She looks from Knox to me, but slowly deflates. She moves the wrapped pack from her neck to her face and swallows.

“You need some water, don’t you? Don’t talk, just blink twice if it’s a yes,” I say.

Instead she looks towards the back of the cabin. Something’s on her mind. I won’t push her for answers even if I want to.

Normally I would. I’d sass her or tease her, maybe even push her buttons to piss her off until she tells me. Not today. Not after everything.

Finally, she stares back at me and blinks twice. I nod and get us both water. I check for food when she finishes her first glass of water and start on making her eggs

and bacon. I'm sure we all need to eat, but after what I saw on the live stream, I know she hasn't trusted food enough to eat much of anything.

As I cook, I keep bringing her water. She'll have everything she wants and I'm going to prove I can give it to her. Right now, I'll be gentle. Right now, I'll cater to her however she'll let me. I finish breakfast and feed Hope first.

"You have to eat. I know it might hurt, but you need your strength," I say gently. "Can you try for me? The eggs should be easy."

She takes a few bites, but I hear her stomach gurgle and take the rest of her plate when she pushes it towards me. I eat slowly while trying not to watch Hope too intensely. I want to categorize every injury she's dealing with. The welts around her throat look bad. Really bad, actually.

We should be taking her to a hospital and making sure that her windpipe isn't crushed and there's no severe damage that could fuck her up for the long run. Based on her 'good eye' being bloodshot and red, I have a feeling it's going to take her a long time to be able to speak without pain.

She closes her eyes before swallowing every time, like she's preparing for pain. She moves the towel she's holding to her face and looks away from me. I hate how she's hiding from me. Hiding everything she's feeling, flinching when I get too close. All of it.

But I don't leave her side. I sit in front of her on the couch and hope she'll find her way to me.

All she has to do is offer a little trust.

Give me the benefit of the doubt one more time.

Not that I'm going to ask for it. I'm not going to ask her a damn thing. Not about what happened in the hours before we got here. Not about how she's feeling. Nothing that will require her to speak or explain.

I let Knox sleep beyond two hours. I should wake him up. I should go back outside to take over watching Coach. But Hope has started to move. She unfolded herself from the ball she's stayed in. She rested her calf against me while putting her feet on the floor ten minutes ago.

Now she's sitting next to me. I don't want to scare her and it's still a fifty-fifty chance that she's going to pull away or lean into me if I move. When she shifts slightly, I brush my hand over hers. She jumps slightly, dropping the towel.

It opens up to reveal thawed peas that need to go back into the freezer to help her.

"You don't have to hide from me, Hope," I whisper. "I came here—we all came here to do more than drag you back. We wanted to protect you, to save you. That's all we're trying to do. I thought Jaxon was going to punch or kill his way to you."

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She pauses, then slowly touches my busted knuckles. When I meet her eyes, I see the question written on her face.

“My dad,” I answer. “I... made him second-guess ignoring his job.” It’s a simplified answer, but true enough. “I wish I could go back in time and do the same to my past self. He failed you. I failed you. It never should have gotten this far.”

She slowly leans her head on my shoulder. It’s hesitant and she’s tense, but she’s trying. I kiss the top of her head after deciding it’s worth the risk. She gently rubs my wrist instead of my hand. I don’t know if it means we’ll be okay. I don’t know if it means anything, but it makes me feel fucking good.

“What the fuck?!” Jaxon’s yell is sharp, Knox jumps up, and Hope cringes into me as she whimpers.

I rub her back, wrapping an arm around her. “It’s okay.”

Jaxon storms in a second later, panting, barely holding himself together. He looks back outside and grits his teeth. “If I’m out there another second, I’m going to kill him.”

“What happened?” Knox demands, sleep thickening his voice.

“That fucker is either in jail for life, or we’re burying him far away from his wife,” Jaxon answers.

Hope whimpers and hides her face in my neck. Knox and I share a look. I shrug.

“What do you mean? Hope’s mom left.”

“Not by choice she didn’t,” Jaxon snarls.

Fourteen

HOPE

This isn’t how this is supposed to go. That was supposed to be a lie. It has to be a lie. She left. She found happiness somewhere and just couldn’t come get me. They had a fight and she left in the middle of the night... from the cabin... without the car... in a place with no taxis.

The more I try to justify it and stick to that story, the more it falls apart.

He had to be lying.

He couldn’t have killed her.

He...

Tears roll over my eyelashes before I can stop them and if I move, they’ll all know. Dimitri stiffens and tightens his hold on me. He doesn’t ask me to move. He doesn’t do anything but sit there, his heart thudding in my ear, steady, strong, and only slightly fast.

“Explain,” Knox grunts.

“He said he killed her. I brought up the video I saw of her, asked if she left because she knew that he was a twisted fuck, then he said she never left the property. That she’s always been here. That she’s proof ghosts don’t exist,” Jaxon snarls.

I hear and feel him pacing. It's making me nauseous. It's making it hard to keep my eyes closed, hard to exist. I take an unsteady breath and take in Dimitri's scent. I grip his shirt and his hand harder. I want to fold myself up and disappear. Or wring out every bad memory that's filling my brain.

Why isn't that an option?

Why do I keep expecting to hear a door open and find my dad looming there, watching me with hunger and violence?

Dimitri is right here. Jaxon and Knox are talking. It's stupid!

"Easy," Dimitri says.

"Stop. Don't tell me to calm down. He's a fucking killer. That's who your father is defending. That's who's been..." He trails off.

Even with him this mad, I know I'm the reason he's quiet. It was the same thing last night. Knox had to tell him to knock it off, but whenever I flinched, Jaxon would calm. He's trying. He's trying to control himself for me.

That's not right.

It doesn't make sense. They've never been that focused on me. Ever. At least not like that.

They take what they want and ignore how it makes me feel, twisting and warping it into whatever they want it to be.

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When the silence draws out, I slowly look up. Jaxon is fuming. He's put his hands on top of his head. He stares at the ceiling for a long moment. Knox keeps looking between Jaxon and me. Finally, he says something.

"He could be lying. He's fucking with us. All of us in different ways. Dimitri?"

"Didn't say much to me," he reports. "Was mostly passed out thanks to you. When he came to, he asked if I'd visited my dad and how that went."

Knox rolls out his neck.

"He said he buried her below the white tree. I don't know what that means. All the trees here are brown and green," Jason says slowly.

No.

I don't realize I've said the word until all of them look at me.

"A white tree. Her favorite tree. Nicest thing he ever did for her," Jaxon continues while watching me.

A whimper leaves my throat and Knox perks. "Who's watching him?"

They all look towards the back and Dimitri stands, ready to take over, but all I can think about is the tree with the white flowers. The flowers she would weave into my hair. The tree I carved "Mom and Hope forever" into, proud that I spelled it all right.

I don't know that I'm running until I feel the ground under my feet and the burn in my throat as I pant. I have to get to it. I have to find her. If it's a lie, I'll know.

If it's true...

It can't be true...

Mom had a temper when he'd yell, but she was good. She was kind. She was soft and welcoming and gentle.

I see my carved message first, higher than when I carved it, and drop to my knees.

My fingers rip through the weeds, through the layers of fallen leaves and light dirt and seeds until I get to wetter earth. I keep going. I hear someone yelling my name. I hear the crunching of twigs and leaves under boots, but I don't care. I can't stop.

No. No. She can't be here. If she's not here, she's safe. I can imagine her happy. She found love, but my dad kept her from me. He wouldn't let her get close. Then I tried to disappear. She just hasn't been able to find me and I wouldn't know her name because she was hiding from him. Someone rescued her. A neighbor saw her and took her away. Someone...

"Hope, stop. You have to stop," Knox insists.

As he tries to pull me away, my fingers brush something hard and smooth and everything in me starts to collapse.

KNOX

Hope is crazed. When I touch her shoulder, she nearly claws me. She digs hard and fast as she sobs. Dimitri reaches for her, then freezes. Hope lets out a cry and wail

that breaks. Her whole body sags as I pull her into my arms and away from the half-skull that's peeking out of the dirt.

She shakes her head and reaches out to it, but I turn her around and hold her against my chest. She beats against my shoulder, sobbing and babbling incomprehensibly. Dimitri just stares at it. He doesn't react. He might as well be frozen.

I shudder, but Hope screams into my shirt, then goes utterly limp. I drop with her, rubbing her back.

"She escaped!" she yells, voice unfamiliar and ragged. "She got out!"

"Fucking..." Not even Jaxon can put this together.

He's panting, but pale. None of us thought Coach was capable of this.

Hope's mom left. She ran off with someone else. We had no reason to question him. We had no reason not to believe him.

We had no reason to believe that Hope wasn't demanding sex from him either.

I curse softly and hold her tighter. "Sweetheart."

Her hold on me softens as she continues sobbing. Even when I try to keep her focused on me, she's restless. "Hope, don't look. You don't need to see it. We'll take care of it," I promise.

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She pushes at my hand on the back of her head, obviously willing to let me rip her hair out, but shoves and pushes at me until I let go. Rolling over, she crawls back to the skeleton and gently touches the skull.

It looks so white against Hope's dirt-stained fingers. Her hand shakes and she gasps between her sobs. "Safe now. You're... safe now."

"Fuck, this is... it's too..." Jaxon can't. He looks from Hope to her mother's unmarked grave again and again, tears clouding his eyes as his hands tremble at his sides.

He can't process it and Dimitri remains frozen.

Hope's dealing with the worst of this, but knowing a murderer, having trusted a murderer, backed a murderer, seeing Hope like this, learning so much about Coach, seeing the evidence of exactly how terrible he was, isn't something any of us can shake off.

Jax is furious, that's obvious. He's choking on his words, restless, obviously plotting something, Dimitri is in shock. If I take even a second to focus on myself, I'll implode. And Hope... Hope stroking her mom's skull like it will help her, like it will comfort a long-dead woman is really fucking close to ruining me.

"Hope, it's time to walk away. You don't have to see this—"

"Death is safe," she whispers.

Fifteen

HOPE

Death is safe.

That's all I can focus on. I know how hellish it was living with Dad. Before he was hurting me, he was hurting Mom. Their screaming matches weren't a secret from me. Hearing her go quiet, the nights she'd tell me to put on headphones, the sad smile she'd give me when I'd spend the night at a friend's house... she never let me know how bad it really was.

She never let me know what a monster he was. She wouldn't leave me alone with him in the house. She was so protective. She always did what he said if I was in the room.

She constantly lost.

She welcomed his punishments and the pain.

All to protect me.

She died—he killed her, but she is safe now.

I wonder if her last moments were terrible, thinking about the pain, what she'd miss, what she'd never get to experience, worrying about me... or if she felt good. If she knew he'd never hurt her again. If she welcomed the peace of nothingness, knowing she'd never feel his touch or the agony he'd bring her again.

She finally got to rest. She got peace. She was safe and away from him.

Mom was in our favorite place.

“You’re safe,” I whisper. “Death is safe.”

I want her to hear me. I want her to know it’s okay. I want her to know that she fought hard enough. That she did enough. That she wouldn’t have been able to stop what he did. Mostly, I hope that if there was any kind of life after death, that she never looked at me. I need to know that she didn’t see a thing, that she just got to rest.

“Hope, please stop saying that,” Knox whispers.

I look at him, at Dimitri, at Jaxon. They’re all upset. They didn’t know. Now there’s no denying how terrible my dad is. No one will save him. He’s useless. A waste of breath. A problem that can be crushed as easily as a cockroach. No one will miss him.

I turn my mom’s skull and notice a scrape on her lower jaw. I touch it and grit my teeth. He stabbed her. He stabbed her more than once too. I’m sure of it. He wanted to get his hands dirty. He wanted her to know that he was in control of her life and death.

Slowly, I stand.

He’s going to know what it feels like.

“Hope!” Dimitri yells.

It doesn’t matter that everything is blurry. It doesn’t matter that there are plants whipping at my hands and face. I’m done living in fear. I won’t let my mom die for nothing. I’m going to kill the monster that ripped her apart and if that means doing it with my bare hands, I will. No hesitation. No mercy. The same kind of treatment he’s given me my entire life.

I race through the cabin and don't stop until I'm standing in front of my father. He's asleep.

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Fucking asleep.

As if everything is fine.

Every single horrible memory. Every time I said no and he didn't listen. Every threat, every promise of more, the video camera, killing my mother, screaming at her. It builds in me until there's no room for crying. There's only fury like I've never known. It feels good. It feels like power. It feels like being alive.

And curling my fist and driving it right into his nose with a crunch feels even better.

So I do it again.

Then I slap him when he tries to say my name.

When he tries to speak, I aim for his jaw.

He never gets to speak again. He never gets to defend himself. No more excuses. No more easy living. No more lying down and taking it. He gets to feel my fury and nothing else.

JAXON

"Take it. Take it," Hope chants with every blow she gives Coach.

"Hope, you have to stop!" Knox says but she doesn't.

She punches his stomach, his chest, his face. His face is going to require a whole lot more than ice at this rate and I love it. Dimitri skids to a halt behind me, but I'm already crouched, my fingers closing around the cold steel of the knuckle buster I slipped into my pocket earlier.

"Hope! You don't want to do this!" Knox insists. "We can talk about it, make a plan and—"

"You can take more!" she screams at her dad when he gurgles something from his mangled face.

I shush Knox when he tries to speak again and put my hand on Hope's shoulder. She pauses, somewhere between sobbing and panting. I show her the knuckle buster. "Try this, baby. It'll feel better."

She freezes, chest heaving, tears mingling with sweat. I press the knuckle buster into her palm. "Make it hurt," I whisper.

Her expression tightens. The tears vanish, replaced by a hard-set glare. She lifts her arm and slams the metal into Coach's jaw.

"Jaxon?" Knox asks and I shake my head.

"She needs this," I note and step back.

I don't let my gaze drift, not when she's staring down at the monster. Her chest expands, her shoulder drops, and with a single swing, she slams her fist against his jaw.

He groans as his head whips to the side. The metal on Hope's knuckles is painted in his blood and she hits him again.

“She’s going to kill him,” Knox grits as he stands beside me.

I let a slow smile curve my lips. “Good.”

Knox’s eyes flick to me. “She shouldn’t carry his death, Jax. Not with everything, she shouldn’t be the one—”

I cut him off. “Or maybe she should,” I sneer back at him. He doesn’t get it, he can never get it. He might have read her diaries, got burned by his own blood, but he can never get it.

She’ll never know peace or safety when he’s alive.

Hope’s knees buckle and a cry of pain rips free from her, just before Dimitri catches her.

She’s spent, exhausted, but this moment—it had to be done. She needed to regain her strength, to feel how it is to hurt the one who hurt her the most.

Power, control.

“Take her inside,” Knox barks and I smile at the bloody pulp of a man in front of me.

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“You won’t survive this, she won’t let you live, not anymore,” I tell him and Coach coughs weakly.

Blood is the only way to cleanse her body from the fear and pain.

She needs closure... from everything.

“You stopped me once and I lost her. You won’t stop me now. You won’t take anyone away from me.” My voice is even as my heart races.

I can’t turn back time, but I can be better.

I head back inside and leave Coach tied up and bloodied outside. We’ll deal with him later.

Inside, Dimitri sits beside Hope on the couch. “These need to be cleaned and bandaged,” Dimitri says softly as he examines Hope’s hands. “I think there’s a first aid kit around here somewhere.”

He gets up and begins rummaging through the cabinets. Hope sits motionless, staring blankly at her hands resting on her lap, knuckles raw and oozing.

I walk over and take the seat Dimitri vacated. Reaching out, I lightly touch Hope’s arm. She flinches faintly.

“Hey,” I say, keeping my voice low and soothing. “You did good out there. Real good. He deserved every hit.”

She doesn't respond, just keeps staring at her hands. I glance over at Knox, trying to gauge his reaction, but his expression is unreadable, his jaw tight as he watches Hope in brooding silence.

Dimitri returns with the first aid kit and sets to work, gently dabbing at her torn and bloodied knuckles with a damp cloth, only the occasional hitch in her breathing betraying the sting.

"We need to figure out our next steps," Knox finally says, pushing off the wall. "We can't stay here."

"Agreed," Dimitri replies without looking up from his task. "But Hope needs rest first. And time to process... everything."

Knox nods slowly. "A few hours, no more. Then we move."

The unspoken "before someone finds us" hangs in the air. Coach is a loose end we'll need to tie up. And decisions will have to be made about what to do with Hope's mom...

I reach out and tuck a strand of hair behind Hope's ear. She allows the touch. It's a tiny victory but I'll take it.

"You're safe now, baby," I murmur. "We're going to take care of you. Of everything."

She finally looks up and meets my eyes. In their haunted depths, I see a flicker of something. Not hope, not yet. But maybe the beginnings of trust. Or at least acceptance that her fate is tied to ours now.

Knox clears his throat. "I'll take first watch, make sure Coach doesn't try anything."

“What about my mother?” Hope’s torn voice catches us off guard.

“Whatever you want and need,” Knox rumbles. “You call the shots now, Hope. We’ve got your back, no matter what.”

A lone tear traces down her cheek but she quickly wipes it away.

We failed her in the past. We bought into Coach’s lies, ignored the signs. But no more. Hope comes first. Keeping her safe, helping her heal, giving her anything and everything she needs—that’s our sole focus now.

Coach will pay for what he’s done.

One way or another, we’ll make sure of it.

Sixteen

DIMITRI

I stare at Coach’s unconscious body, his chest rising and falling with shallow breaths. Knox follows my gaze, his jaw tightening.

“What about him?” Knox asks gruffly, nodding towards Coach.

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I rub a hand over my face, exhaustion and adrenaline warring within me. “I never thought I would agree with Jaxon on something like this, but I think he’s right. Coach’s life is done. It ends here.” I sigh and trace my fingers over the gun tucked in the back of my jeans. “But first we need to help Hope get some closure. She deserves a chance to say goodbye to her mom.”

Knox is quiet for a moment, then he nods. “You’re right. We’ll figure out what to do with that bastard after.”

“Come on, he’ll be out for a few hours,” I say and we head back inside the cabin. Hope is sitting on the edge of the couch, staring blankly at the wall, her arms wrapped around herself. She looks up as we enter, her eyes glassy and distant.

“Hope,” I say gently, kneeling down in front of her. “We were thinking... we wanted you to have a chance to say goodbye... to your mom. Would you want that?”

Hope blinks, her brow furrowing as she processes my words. Then, slowly, she nods. “Yes,” she whispers hoarsely. “I’d like that.”

“Give us a few minutes to get everything ready,” Knox says and I nod.

“Jaxon can take you,” I say and glance briefly at Jaxon.

“Okay,” she whispers.

I swallow hard, staring at the bones. “We need to cover her up.”

Knox nods, dark circles under his eyes. “Yeah,” he says hoarsely. “She can’t see it like this.”

We work in silence, pushing dirt back into the hole with our hands. The soil is damp and clings to my skin, embedding itself under my nails. I don’t care. I keep digging, making sure that every bone is covered, that nothing is left exposed.

Finished, I wipe a filthy hand across my forehead. “She really loved her,” I whisper, more to myself than to Knox.

Knox clears his throat, a harsh sound in the quiet. “I don’t think she stopped,” he says. “Even after...”

He trails off but I know what he means. Even after her mom disappeared, even after everything, Hope still clung to the idea she was out there, that she might come back. Finding her like this... it must have shattered something inside her.

Knox stands, brushes dirt from his jeans, and looks around. “These flowers,” he says, pointing to the white blossoms scattered around the tree. “That what she would want?”

“Yeah,” I say, remembering Hope’s shaky voice as she whispered about the flowers her mom loved. I gather a handful and scatter them on the grave while Knox does the same.

When the grave is covered and the flowers lay in a heap against the dirt, we step back.

“Do you think anyone else saw it?” Knox asks softly.

“The videos about Hope’s... stay here?”

“Is there a way we can know?”

I shake my head. “Not sure. But we can find out.”

Knox seems lost in his own thoughts, his eyes dark as he stares straight ahead.

I can’t tell if he’s pissed at me.

At himself.

At all of this.

At Coach.

“We’ll trace the IP,” I say.

“Yeah,” Knox says and scratches his jaw.

I sigh. “We found a lot of shit on it. I was able to make out a few entries. I couldn’t get through all of it,” I tell him.

“I want it gone,” Hope’s voice startles me and she slowly stands beside me. “I can’t live knowing it’s out there. That there are more people like me, being used, beaten, and... killed.”

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Hope kneels at the edge of the grave, tears streaming silently down her face. She reaches out with a trembling hand, gently touching the flowers. “Goodbye, Mom,” she chokes out. “I’m so sorry. I love you.”

Knox, Jaxon, and I stand back, giving her space to grieve. After a few minutes, Hope rises unsteadily to her feet and I move to her side and carefully put an arm around her. She leans into me, clinging to my shirt as she lets the tears fall freely.

No more pretend.

“It’s going to be okay,” I murmur, rubbing her back. “We’re here for you. We’ll get through this together.”

She wipes her tears from her skin with her sleeve. “Thank you,” she says softly, glancing between Knox and Jaxon. “For everything.”

I nod, then stare at the grave as I can never truly accept her thanks, not after everything.

Hope gathers more flowers to lay over the grave, covering every inch with blossoms. The white petals stand out starkly against the dark soil, but the sight seems to calm Hope.

Knox shifts and tilts his head back to the cabin. “Ready?” he asks.

“Yes.” She licks her cracked lips and her gaze flicks between us, her expression softening. I see trust there now, small but real. It makes every bruise on my knuckles

worth it.

Every second of doubt. Every hesitation. Every lie we told ourselves.

“Come on,” I say, guiding her back towards the cabin.

Knox lags behind, lingering by the grave. I know what he’s thinking, the guilt he hasn’t quite let go of.

“You coming?” I call back to him.

He nods, his gaze lingering on the flowers. One more deep breath and he’s with us, his shoulders straightening as he falls into step beside me.

KNOX

My eyes are fixed on her as she walks between Jaxon and Dimitri. A weak sway in her steps but her strength is seeping back. She’s stronger than I’ve ever been. I know what I have to do now. I know how to make it right. I have to be the one to end this, to cut the last tie.

I watch her as she curls up on the couch. She doesn’t flinch away when I sit next to her. She doesn’t pull back as I graze my fingers over her side.

“Here,” Jaxon hands me a water bottle and nods towards Hope. “She needs to drink.”

I open the cap and press it against Hope’s lips, careful not to hurt her. She takes a sip, then slumps against me.

“We can’t stay long,” Dimitri says, pacing. His eyes flick to me and I know he’s waiting for my answer, my decision. “Whoever called Coach must realize we’re

here.”

“Pack up,” I agree. “Then we’re gone.”

Hope shifts slightly, her head resting in my lap. Her trust feels like a second chance, one I don’t deserve but will take. One I’m not going to waste.

Dimitri’s unease prickles my skin. His hands flex at his sides and I roll my shoulders. “I’ll do it.”

He stops and stares at me but it’s Jaxon that speaks. “Can you, though?”

I scoff. “Why couldn’t I?”

“You were his golden boy, his freaking poodle.”

I pause for the anger, the lash out, but it doesn’t come. Probably too exhausted to truly respond to it, other than, “Did you just call me a poodle?”

He shrugs. “You know what I mean.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose with a sigh. “Right...”

I peek down at Hope, memorizing every spot on her skin, every mark Coach gave her.

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“Give it,” I tell Dimitri and without hesitation, he hands me the gun. “Be ready to leave,” I add, sliding from under Hope’s head and standing up. She gazes up at me, blinks away the sleep in her eyes.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Ending it all,” I say, a weak smile tilting on my lips.

Jaxon blinks at me. “Need help?”

I shake my head. “He made me. I’m doing this alone.”

I look at Hope, searching for something in her eyes. A sign that she gets it. That she understands. All I see is fear and pain.

I walk out before I can change my mind.

The air is colder. The light is fading. Coach leans against the tree, his head lolling forward. Blood stains his shirt, his face. Hope’s marks on him are clear and brutal. She did more damage than any of us expected.

I stand over him, letting memories flood back. The first time he saw the marks on my arms, the way he promised to make me strong enough to never be hurt again. The way I believed him.

I wonder if he knew, even then, how much damage he would do. How he would twist me into something I couldn’t recognize. I wonder if he planned it.

I crouch down, my shadow falling over his battered face. He stirs, lifting his head and giving me a bloody sneer.

He laughs weakly, blood bubbling at the corner of his mouth. “She’s a slut. Just like her mom.”

“Not going to let you hurt her again,” I say as I edge back.

I square my shoulders and cock the gun, the sound loud in the stillness.

I swallow, my grip tightening on the gun.

“Go on,” he taunts, his eyes glinting. “You know you want to.”

My hand trembles. I hesitate. Fuck.

The crunch of footsteps behind me makes me flinch. I glance over my shoulder and see them—Hope, Jaxon, and Dimitri, all watching me with unreadable expressions.

“We can’t risk him getting away,” Jaxon grits as he stops beside me, his eyes flicking to Hope.

I look at them—at Hope, her hands raw and her spirit unbroken. At Dimitri, his jaw set in grim resolve. At Jaxon, his face hard but his eyes fierce with loyalty. I raise the gun on Coach, my fingers clenching around it.

“Do it,” Jaxon urges, his voice low.

My stare meets Coach’s and my hand quivers.

He deserves to die.

We deserve to be free.

My finger tightens on the trigger and yet my grip isn't as strong as I thought as Hope slips in front of me, pushes me aside, and takes the gun from me.

Her small frame moves quick and she lifts the gun, aiming it at her dad's forehead.

"Hope, no, you shouldn't carry this." Dimitri tries to reach her but her hold is unyielding.

Strong.

Powerful.

Hope.

To be continued...