

In the wardrobe before practice I felt more carefree than I'd done since the day I first met Andersen. I tuned into focus mode before entering the hall. Feeling calm, I joined Hammons and Andersen, currently chatting techniques with Brandon. I dropped my bag down next to theirs. "Hello guys."

They replied almost in unison. Brandon and Hammons resumed their conversation, but Andersen continued to watch me in silence, distancing himself from the conversation. Was he assessing my mood? I gave him an apologetic half-smile to show I wasn't going to bite his head off today.

During the practice I focused on the tasks at hand, and it was great having a time-out. Even with Andersen in the room. I kept tabs on him though, and I could feel him watching me too. When Mr. Evans announced for us to find a grappling partner, Andersen sought me out, grinning. Enjoyment and challenge gleamed in his eyes. I cracked my neck and shook my body to loosen up. "Your funeral". I wasn't going to take shit today.

"We'll see about that. At least you're not avoiding me today." Andersen said.

Butterflies moved around in my stomach, I drew breath to calm them down. Andersen lay down on his back spread-eagled and smiled.

"Ladies first then, come get me."

My heart hammered, but I blamed that on the exercise. I got down on the ground and straddled him. The intensity Andersen's eyes made the grappling situation more intimate. Leaning forward I looked at his arms and grabbed them, holding them down.

The positioning made it stupid to avoid meeting his eyes, so I didn't. I tensed slightly, feeling my cheek redden. Being so close, the smell of his sweat and body wash found its way to my nose. It caused

my body to relax, remembering the smell from the night at the party. Then we were in motion, him dragging my arms out of balance, making my upper body fall forward. He thrusted his hip upwards and used one leg to steer my body away from landing on his face. I rolled over to my back, and in seconds he had crawled over and reversed our positions. He held my arms, smiling flirtatiously.

“Now, that was way too easy. Show me what you’ve got.”

I looked at him, feeling his weight on me - man he was heavy - his strong hands around my wrists. I looked past his head, wriggled my hip and put both foot soles on the ground so he wouldn’t know which way I’d go for. He leaned ever so slightly to the left and in one fluent motion I threw him off. Triumph spread in my chest.

“Hah!” I said. He answered with a playful grin, lying on the ground with his arms out in a defeated manner. “You got me.”

I paired up with James next and tried to get my head focused again. We’re old partners and I know he loves to push everybody’s limits. James pointed to the floor. “You first.”

I said nothing and lay down. My first attempt wasn’t forceful enough. James regained his balance before I got free and quickly had me under his control again. He laughed and tightened his grip. “Oh, no. You gotta do better.”

James stretched my arms further over my head and shifted his grip so one hand was free. My body froze and panic welled in me with uncontrollable speed. James was oblivious, laughing moving his hand downward to tickle me. It didn’t feel right. I only had time to whisper a low warning ‘No.’ before it hit me. I wriggled fanatically, tugging my arms, helplessness chocking me. I could feel the invisible hands touching me now, the tearing of my clothes. In my head I screamed.

“Vanessa? Vanessa, can you hear me?”

The voice grew louder and I realized that I was lighter, free to move again. I hugged my arms around my chest, rolled over to the side, and pulled my knees up. A sob escaped me as I tried to catch my breath. The scared voice called my name again. Who was that- James? A second voice yelled in alarm.

“No! Don’t touch her.”

My brain started registering from my eyes again and Joan came into focus, laying herself down beside me.

“Breathe with me, Vanessa.” []

I tried to do as instructed, but it was hard. Like my chest didn’t listen to what my brain was telling it. I focused on Joan’s lips, which made it easier. Slowly I regained control of my breathing, and I began to take in more than Joan’s face. Recollection dawned.

“Oh...” I said.

I sat up, and realized that everybody was leaving. My head spun. Mr. Evans, James and Andersen were the only ones standing still, though at a distance. James looked distraught and confused, gesticulating and clearly describing to Mr. Evans what had happened. Mr Evans’s looked sternly at James, arms folded and brows contracted. Andersen stood right behind Mr. Evans, scowling at James, his whole body radiating hostility. I couldn’t bear the looks on either of their faces so I looked at Joan again. “Hey there.” She said. I sighed. “What happened?”

Joan frowned and tilted her head to the right. Then she answered.

“All I know is you started kicking and screaming. James let you go immediately, but it was as if you didn’t notice, like you weren’t really here. Then you rolled over.” She said. “How do you feel?”

I averted her eyes. "Better. [] Confused." I looked over at the three men, now looking at us in silence, and to myself I added embarrassed to the list. I was about to get up when Andersen approached and stretched out his hand, a concerned look in his eyes. I looked at it for a second, then rose without taking it. My tone was curt, and my voice firmer than expected when I spoke.

"I can get up on my own, thanks."

James was right behind Andersen; he opened his mouth, but I beat him to it.

"I'm sorry James, I don't know what happened." I said. I wanted to reassure him. I walked over to my gear on unsteady legs, wanting to get the hell out. An apology from him would only make me feel worse. Andersen trailed me, and responded with indignation.

"You're sorry? Are you kidding me, it's he who should be apologizing."

"Oh drop it, Andersen." I barked. Not looking at him I stomped off into the safety of the girls' wardrobe, only Joan able to follow, though she didn't. I believed what I'd said, though.

It wasn't James's fault- I knew it wasn't mine either. The weight of the thought made it hard to breathe again. The wardrobe was empty now. I dropped my bag to the floor and leaned my forehead to the wall. What's happening? Why now?

I rubbed my chest and concentrated on breathing again. I hurried up to get the sweaty, sticky clothes off. Undressed, nausea hit me. I headed for the garbage bin and emptied my stomach. I cleansed my mouth in the sink before I walked into the shower room, turning on the hot water and letting the warmth consume me.