



A Step Too Close (The Breaking Point #2)

Author: *Emily Klepp*

Category: Dark Erotica

Description: He sees me, but he won't let me in. Sometimes if you want something, you have to take it. That's what I do with Levi. He is everything I want wrapped in one grumpy package and I am determined to unwrap each layer until he lets me in. When my past resurfaces and his nightmares come to life, will we survive?

This is a DARK ROMANCE with HEAVY triggers. Readers Discretion is HIGHLY advised.

*This is book 2 in The Breaking Point Series. Please read A Piece Too Far: A Dark Billionaire Romance BEFORE reading this story.

Total Pages (Source): 8

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:44 am

Arden

I am so damn nervous, and I don't know why. I have known for months that when Levi had a break in cases, he would bring me on. The time has come, and today is my first day. I have done everything I need to do to become a private investigator; I just need field hours. In the last few months, I focused a lot on strength training. Every morning at four, I meet Levi at the gym.

I met him through college in my final semester when he came to talk about serial crimes. Although he has never worked as a detective, he has done the research to investigate. His primary goal with serial crimes is to recover bodies. Active crimes obviously go to city detectives, but he will also take on cold cases when he is contracted by the city. This means he is the perfect man to learn from. The moment he stopped talking, I jumped up and asked if he took on trainees. He said no because newbies slow him down. So, then I proceeded to visit him every day at his office until he finally said yes. He was clear that not only would he push me, but he expected me to be able to keep up with him. I said I wanted to get better with physical fitness, but all people wanted to do with me was focus on weight loss, not muscle gain. He said to pick a gym, and he would meet me every morning.

I am wide awake and on my way to the gym. I am so excited, but this man... he is so damn grumpy. Levi is also dangerously hot, and I have definitely caught feelings for him. His energy is magnetic, and I can't get enough of him, no matter how little he smiles.

I walk into the gym and go back to the locker room to set my bag down. It's always so fucking hot in here, so I usually wear spandex shorts, a sports bra, and a drop

armhole tank top. When I step out of the locker room, I am quickly reminded why I hate wearing this here. I picked the creepiest gym, and if it weren't for the fact that I stick with Levi, I would never come here alone.

"Good morning," I say, walking up behind Levi.

"Hey," he says with a half-smile. I will take it. He must be in a good mood today. I have seen him every day for six months, and I can tell what his mood is based on the kind of expression on his face. I'm like a grunt translator now too. He sounds different to express different things.

"Well, well, aren't you just a chipper little peach today, Levi," I say proudly, and he actually smiles. Like a full-on grin. That makes me giddy.

"Ready?" he asks.

"To get tortured by you?" I ask. "Always."

"You know the drill. Cardio first," he says. I decide not to complain today, and we go toward the treadmill. He sets mine up because he knows I will cheat the moment he lets me pick the setting. He starts us out with a fast-paced walk on a slight incline. "No complaining today?"

"Nope. It's a good day today," I say.

"Mmm. I miss whiney Arden," he smirks and speeds mine up to force me to start running. I immediately reach over and bump his up so he has to run with me, making him chuckle.

"Sorry, Levi. You're smiling. I'm in a good mood. It's a good day," I say as I run.

“Mhmm,” he grunts.

“There he is. I thought I’d never hear that famous grunt,” I remark. Instead of responding, he speeds mine up before his own.

He’s a fucking sadist. A sexy and ripped sadist. He is hardly breaking a sweat, yet I’m fucking dying. I won’t stop, though. I haven’t so far, and I don’t plan to now.

I owe Levi so much after he helped me with Wilder and putting that psycho bitch in jail. After Tina plead guilty, she was given twenty years with a possibility of parole after ten. Macie and Wilder finally had a real wedding a few weeks later, and I forced Levi to come celebrate. He usually keeps me at arm’s length, but when he lets himself relax, I am able to get closer. I will be as patient as I need to be for him to really let me in.

Once we are done running, we go to the decline sit-ups. I am usually in a lower setting, so I am wide-eyed when he increases it to nearly what he does. “Are you trying to kill me?!”

“Was that a complaint, Arden?” he asks.

“No,” I say. “Nope. Let’s do it.”

I put my feet in place to lock me in position before laying back. I am upside down, and I start to doubt if I can do this. “Let’s start with ten. Let’s go.”

“Ugh!” I groan. I cross my arms over my chest to touch my shoulders before I sit up. “Fuck!”

“There ya go. You’ve got it. Keep going,” he encourages. I do another, and he continues to praise me. “That’s it. Keep going, Arden. Four down. Come on!”

“Ah. It hurts,” I whine.

“Come up. Pull yourself up, Arden. Let’s do it,” he pushes. “Five. Let’s go... Six... you’ve got this, girl. Keep going. Seven...”

“I can’t,” I groan. I try but can’t get myself up again.

“Tighten your core, Arden. Come on,” he says. He lays his hand on my lower belly, and it’s like a burst of energy. I sit up again but can’t hold myself as I lower back down.

“Fuck,” I growl

“There ya go. Up. Come on. Push, Arden. Almost there,” he says, keeping his hand on my belly. It reminds me to engage my core muscles rather than using just my back muscles. I don’t know what it is, but my core is weak as fuck. “One more, Arden. Let’s go.”

“Ugh!” I complain but force myself up.

“There ya go. Push, Arden. Come on. Up. Just a little more... Alright. Slow. Don’t drop... There ya go. Good girl,” he says, offering me his hand. He helps me up, and I put my hands on my knees to catch my breath.

“You did well, Arden. I’m proud of you,” he says, patting my back.

“You are an evil, evil man,” I groan and stand up.

“Get some water and breathe. Your face looks like a tomato,” he says.

“Well, fuck you too, buddy,” I say, and he chuckles as he hands me his bottle.

“Thank you. I should get my own bottle. I’m always stealing yours.”

“I don’t mind,” he says simply. “You need to remember to breathe when you are pushing yourself like that.”

“I forget,” I say. “I know that sounds dumb.”

“It doesn’t. You are focused on other things,” he says. “I’ll remind you. Want to do some squats?”

“No, but you’re going to make me anyway,” I say.

“You know me so well, Arden,” he says, taking a sip of his water and closing the lid. We go over to the bar, and he gets set up while I stand back and watch.

I can see in the mirror that there is a man behind me with his phone out, and it looks like he is taking a picture of me. I turn my body so he can’t get a full picture of my ass. I don’t know what else to do because freaks like him rarely take it well when confronted. I look directly at him, hoping it will make it known that I can see what he’s doing, but eventually I give up, and my mood changes drastically.

“Okay. Let’s get it, girl,” Levi says. I position myself, and he stands behind me with his hands out at my sides to spot me. “Keep your back straight. Use your legs, Arden.”

I drop deep and grit my teeth and nearly growl as I push back up. “There ya go. That’s great, Arden. Four more.”

One by one, my anger at the brazen motherfucker taking a video gets let out. He is being so obvious about it, too. “Shit, that’s heavy,” I huff as I rack my weights.

“That was one hundred and fifty pounds, Arden. Good job,” he says, giving me a high five. “We will keep today short since I am pushing you so hard. Let’s do some deadlifts and finish out cardio.”

“Kay,” I say.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, turning to look at me.

“That asshole has been taking pictures and videos of me the whole time we’ve been over here. It’s just getting to me,” I say. “It’s not a big... Levi!”

Levi turns with no hesitation and walks over. The guy tries to put his phone away, but it is snatched out of his hand. He taps around for a second but I slap my hand over my mouth when Levi abruptly throws the phone across the room and it smashes against the wall. The man runs over to grab the remnants of his phone before leaving and Levi comes back and helps me wipe everything down and put the weights away.

“Get your stuff. Let’s go grab some breakfast and we can shower at the office,” he says, gently squeezing my shoulder. I simply nod and scurry off to the locker room.

When I come out, Levi is waiting for me. “Ready?”

“Mhmm.”

“Arden?” Levi says, narrowing his eyes at me. “I’m the grumpy one, remember?”

I shrug, and he sighs before we turn and walk out of the gym. I toss my bag in the back seat, and before I can get into my car, he grabs my hips and pushes me back against the door. “I scared you, didn’t I?” he asks.

“Uh. I don’t know. I don’t think it was you. He was just... He reminded me of

someone, is all. I'm sorry," I apologize.

"Don't apologize. You've done nothing wrong, Arden. I'm sorry if I frightened you. He... took a lot of photos," he says.

"Gross," I frown.

"Let's go to the office," he says.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:44 am

Levi

I can hear her showering and knowing she is over there naked with her hands all over her beautiful body... it's too much. My cock is painfully hard, and there is no willing it to go down this time. I shame myself as I start stroking my cock, imagining myself going into her shower and fucking her senseless. I steer clear of relationships, and I have had no desire to consider them... until her. Until she forced her way into my life and rooted herself inside my brain. I am drawn to her in a way I haven't experienced since... No. I won't compare her. That's not fair.

Let's be honest, though. Arden is one of a kind; she is smart, strong, and feral . God, she is such a fucking brat, and I am constantly wanting to put her ass over my knee. When I touch her and hear how her breath catches... Fuck . I know she wants it too. I won't reject it, but I won't feel it out either. If it's meant to happen, it'll happen.

I place my hand on the wall and stroke myself faster. I listen to her hum and sigh quietly to herself, but it's her fucking voice that sends me straight to the edge. "Why do you have showers here?" Arden asks.

"Uhm... For this reason. In case anyone needs a shower. Search and rescue can get dirty," I choke out, but I don't stop. The barbells of my piercings are rubbing against my palm, and it makes my body jerk. Fuck, what I wouldn't give to have this girl on her knees so I can fuck her throat. Something about making her nearly throw up from my brutality has my balls tightening. Jesus, I bet she is incredible with her mouth. The waves break, and my orgasm finally washes over me, and I come. My ears are ringing, and it takes me a second to force the images of her sucking my cock out of my mind before I can function.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I just thought I heard... Never mind. I’m just about done,” she says. I say nothing because I know she heard me moan. I tried not to, but imagining her on my cock... Fuck, that’s amazing.

I grab my towel from outside the shower after shutting the water off and wrap it around my waist. I step out and immediately realize I should have waited. I run directly into Arden. She nearly falls over herself as she spins around to face me. She looks absolutely stunned, but that fades as her eyes drag down my body, and that feral little brat brings out something lustful.

“What happened?” she asks softly as her fingers lightly trace a scar on my abdomen.

“I was shot,” I say. “It’s what made me go from being an active Marine to this.”

“Damn. I’m sorry,” she frowns. “But, I’m kinda not surprised you were a Marine.”

“Oh?”

“It’s the hair,” she grins. “I need to get dressed. You look far too tempting right now for me to not try and persuade you to touch me.”

“It wouldn’t take much convincing,” I say honestly before stepping out of the shower area so I can grab my clothes and get dressed. When I’m done, I leave and go to my office.

I brought in another desk so she can work in here. Partly because I’m a selfish bastard and I want her close, but also because it makes the most sense that she doesn’t have

to come find me anytime she needs something.

After a few minutes, Arden joins me with damp hair. She's only wearing tight jeans and a simple T-shirt, but damn, she can make anything look sexy. I'm leading with my dick right now, and I'm trying to not lead that inside of her. She wants to learn, not get fucked over my desk like I am some kind of beast. She would sound so amazing laid out on my desk with my face buried in her cunt. The way I could make that woman sing for me...

"So..." she starts to ask.

"Don't ask unless you are prepared for my answer," I say simply as I flip through paperwork.

"Right... I mean... Fuck it... Did you moan? Because it sounded like a moan. Not that I have heard a lot of men moaning, but enough to know that you were..."

"That I was what?" I ask when she stops talking.

"You were jerking off," she says bluntly.

"Do you really want to have this conversation, Arden?" I ask, sitting back to look at her. I can see her contemplating. I simply look back at my computer and continue clicking through my email.

"Why?" she asks. I don't have an answer for her because why would I jerk off with her five feet away? Why have I ever jerked off with her on my mind? How am I supposed to tell her that I crave to be around her? I'm afraid of taking a step too close and falling headfirst in love with her. I don't have the willpower to pull away because I am addicted to the way she smiles at me. It's been so long since someone has lit up my world, but she does. She shines bright and makes me believe that there is life after

loss.

“What do you mean?” I ask, not looking up at her.

“Why did you do that?”

“Do what?” I ask.

“Really? Why did you do that?”

“Do what?” I ask again.

“Goddamn it, Levi,” she snaps. I smirk at my computer and ignore her, which only pisses her off more. “What kind of fucking game are you playing?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Will you fucking look at me?” she asks. I sigh and sit back in my chair. She deserves an explanation and to feel safe, but I don’t know how to explain that despite the desperate urge to fuck her unconscious every time she gets an attitude or acts like a brat, I would never force her. “Why would you do that?”

“Why not?” I ask. That was a dumbass response. Why not? Because it’s inappropriate.

“You keep me at arm’s length and never let me close to you, but you you’ll jerk off in the shower next to me?” she says. “Six fucking months, Levi. I see you every fucking day and I don’t even know your favorite color.”

“Yellow,” I say.

“What?” she asks. “Yellow?”

“It was my daughter’s favorite color,” I say. I am surprised I even mention Melody, but I see rage flash in her eyes and I realize that she doesn’t know.

“What?” she yells at me. “You have a child? Do you even give a shit about me? I know nothing about you. You are grumpy as fuck all the time, and apparently you don’t fucking trust—”

I see the anxiety and I recognize the spiral. I stand and tears roll down her cheeks. “Arden,” I say. “Slow down.”

“Why am I here?” she asks. “Why am I here if you don’t even trust me enough to tell me you have a child? Or are you one of those shit parents who just wants the title of dad?”

I take her face between my hands, and she is fighting back sobs. “She’s dead, Arden,” I say. Arden stops and her eyes go wide.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t...” she starts to apologize.

“Her name was Melody. She would have been fourteen years old, but she died when she was five,” I explain. “I had a wife named Charlotte, and she’s dead, too. I don’t talk about them because it hurts. I was there and I couldn’t save them. I trust you, but I don’t trust that I won’t immediately go to a bar and drink the memory of my wife and daughter being raped and killed in front of me away.”

“I’m so sorry,” she says tearfully. “I didn’t know. I’m so...”

I cut her off by hugging her and her body shakes. Right now, I am realizing that someone has hurt her. This isn’t just heartbreak, this is a memory being triggered.

Does Wilder know someone has broken Arden?

“Shhh,” I say. “Breathe. It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why...” I hold her face again and wipe away her tears. “I’m not trying to be selfish. I didn’t mean to...”

“Someone has hurt you before,” I say. She is reluctant, but nods. “We all have trauma, pretty girl. We just carry it differently.”

“You were there?” I ask. “You don’t have to answer.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Charlotte’s ex stalked her. He had been silent for a long time. He thought I was out of the country still, so he broke in. I was still healing from the gunshot wound, so I was on pain medicine. By the time I woke up, I was tied up. I watched as he violently raped both of them for... hours. Eventually, he shot them and then himself.”

“That’s awful,” she sniffs. “I’m so sorry.”

“Arden, honey. You are the first person I have made space for in my life since that day. It feels natural to be close to you... to touch you... But I have no idea what I am doing anymore. I don’t do relationships, I do one-night stands and never talk to them again. But you... You are addictive,” he says. “Yes, I moaned. I was doing exactly what you think I was doing. I don’t know why, but I did. I would never hurt you and I’m sorry that I was inappropriate. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“I’m not upset,” she says. “I just... You are a confusing man, Levi. You have no problem touching me, but never too much. I see the way you look at me, but you never let me get close.”

“If I let you get close, I’ll never be able to let you go, Arden. I’m not strong enough to let you go,” I say.

“Do you want me here?”

“Absolutely,” I say. “I think you are brilliant and capable of so much. I enjoy your company, and I’d like to think you enjoy mine.”

“I do,” she says. “Why did you throw that guy’s phone?”

“He was taking pictures of your ass, and it pissed me off,” I say simply. I won’t mention the vile comments he was making. I’ll be too tempted to go find the fucker.

“Oh,” she says. “I don’t know what to say now.”

“I will try my best to be appropriate,” I say. “I want to offer for you to come to my house to train because I have a home gym, but I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“You don’t make me feel uncomfortable,” she laughs. “I mean... you do, but not in a bad way.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I mean... When you touch my lower belly like that... I’m just a girl with a filthy mind who is attracted to a grumpy man who could break my ass in half.”

I laugh heartily, and she grins. “How about this? Let’s start being open about things and just see where it goes. No forcing things either way, we just continue on.”

“And you want me in your house?” she asks.

“Pretty girl, I want you in my bed and on any other surface I can sit your cute little ass on,” I say bluntly. “Yes, I’d feel better with you not being in that gym full of perverts. You picked the sleaziest gym in the city.”

“Where do you live?” she asks.

“On Franklin Street, a few miles from here. Why?”

“I live like forty-five minutes away with my parents,” she says. “Just thinking about how early I’d have to get up.”

“Just an idea. At a minimum, I’d like you to move gyms,” I say. “You live with your parents?”

“Yeah. Yeah,” she sighs. “I know. It’s weird and slobbish. I just... I used to live by myself, but I couldn’t do it.”

“Something happened?” I ask, and she nods. “I won’t push, but know that I am not judging.”

“Wilder offered for me to live with them, but I just can’t,” she says. I can tell she wants to say more but doesn’t.

“We can try it out and just see how you like the drive, or we can pick something else. I just want you to be comfortable.”

“That place creeps me out,” she admits. “I would never go there without you.”

“Good,” I say. “Let’s get your paperwork settled. While you fill that out, I will go through my email and see if there are any case requests that are more pressing than the others.”

“Okay,” she says with a smile.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:44 am

Arden

Once all my paperwork is filled out, Levi moves me to sit with him so he can explain how he prioritizes emails and cases. He has received a ton of requests, but there are many things he isn't able to do. He does have access to a lab though, so he can send off samples, but if things go to court, I am sure it would make things more difficult to prove that nothing was tampered with.

I do my best to stay focused on the task at hand rather than his admission of wanting me. I have no reason to think he would ever do anything to hurt me, but I once trusted someone on the deepest possible level, and they broke me. I am broken, and I don't know how to repair the gaping holes he left behind in my soul.

I keep telling myself that I am confused, but I am not. Some part of me has known for months that he was attracted to me. I just chose to ignore it. I enjoyed his subtle remarks, his praise, and the touches that always seem to linger. I saw the signs, but it always brought with it a wave of paranoia that I have yet to figure out how not to send me into an anxiety attack. I can't be hurt like that by someone I trust again because I simply will not survive it.

I was nineteen and saw the world through rose-colored glasses. I thought I was invincible, and that nothing bad could ever truly happen to me. Boy, was I dead fucking wrong. Not only did bad things happen to me, but I never got justice. I never found out the truth because the police didn't believe me. I wasn't injured, so I must have just hooked up and regretted it. Never mind that I was drunk off my ass, and he had a mask on. Never mind that even drunk, I was positive about the identity of the man who had held me captive in my own apartment for three days. This horrific event

led me to want to become a private investigator. I didn't want to be a detective and be bound by department rules. I wanted to work for the victims and their loved ones. I wanted to make a real difference and actually care about finding the real truth, not the truth that the government is notorious for spoon-feeding the public. Only Macie knows the truth about what happened during those three days because after I was immediately shut down by the police when I went to report the events, I decided I wanted to keep it to myself. My parents let me move back in with no questions asked and haven't pushed me to leave.

I realize that I am completely zoned out, thinking about everything that happened to me during those three days. When my eyes meet Levi's, I see familiarity. "Where did you go?" he asks.

"I'm sorry," I say, dropping my gaze to my hands as I pick at my nails.

"Don't be. You were triggered and I understand that more than you know," he says. "Where did you go?"

"To my old apartment... When I lived alone," I say, sniffing back tears.

"I won't push unless you want me to, Arden. I just want you to know that you don't have to keep it in."

"I just don't want you to think that my paranoia has anything to do with you," I say tearfully. "I swore I would never tell anyone after being called a liar... and I haven't. Not even Wilder knows... Only Macie."

"I don't think you are a liar, Arden."

"You don't even know what happened," I say with a snide tone.

“I don’t need to, sweetheart. I recognize the pain on your face right now. I see how the memories are flashing through your eyes, and the reel never stops rolling,” he says, taking my hands into his so I will stop picking at my nails. “Do you want to explain?”

“Yes,” I say tearfully, making myself look up at him.

“Start slow,” he says. “Keep your eyes on me so you can’t get lost in the memories.”

“Okay,” I say. “I was nineteen, and I had my own apartment. I broke up with my boyfriend a few days prior because his temper was scaring me, and he threw me against a wall when we got into a fight. Caleb accepted it and left, so I didn’t think anything of it... Macie and I had a fake ID, so we had gone out with some friends. The bar was only a few blocks from my apartment, so I walked home. I was tipsy, but not shit-faced drunk... I was so oblivious that I didn’t even know someone was following me. I never imagined that anything bad could happen, so I didn’t pay attention. When I got to my door, I heard movement behind me. I opened the door only to turn around and get shoved backward into my apartment by a man in a ski mask.”

The emotions are choking me out, so he stops me for a moment by hugging me. “Breathe, Arden. You are safe,” he encourages softly. When I relax, we pull apart and he resumes holding my hands to prevent me from pulling my nails off.

“I froze for a second and he came in and locked the door... I finally moved and I tried to crawl away, but... he grabbed me up off the floor and took me straight to my bedroom. He knew exactly where it was. He used his belt to tie my arms to the headboard before finding a scarf to cover my eyes and duct tape over my mouth,” I explain. “He wasn’t violent in the sense that he caused injury. I remember hearing the condom wrappers and the lube... He raped me over and over again. If it wasn’t him fucking me, he was using toys on me... My own toys... He knew exactly where to

find them... He just... kept me on that bed. He'd let me up to take me to the bathroom every few hours. Outside of water, he offered me nothing else... I spent three days being raped and forced to come, and I would be willing to bet my life that it was Caleb... He drugged me at some point because I woke up early Tuesday morning and he was gone. He left absolutely nothing behind... I called the police and had the rape exam done. Nothing came back. It didn't prove rape, only that I maybe had rough sex at most. The detectives told me that sometimes we do things we regret, and this should be a lesson on why I shouldn't be drinking."

"That's a load of bullshit," he frowns.

"I never told anyone because I didn't have proof. It was my word against no evidence. I never saw his face and he never spoke, but I knew. I knew it was him. Caleb was the first person I ever had sex with. He was my first real boyfriend... I was going to marry him, or so I thought. His temper got worse and worse, until I no longer recognized him. Macie is the only person I've ever told, and she only knows because she cornered me and made me tell her. She is like a bloodhound when it comes to noticing if someone is upset. She promised me she wouldn't say anything until I was ready... So, I moved back in with my parents. I don't date, but I do sleep with people. I coped by being a giant whore, so maybe that wasn't the smartest thing to do."

"It's normal," he says. "Hypersexuality after a rape is extremely common. For some, it can be an impulse to seek those situations out to try to find some sort of control. It may be something you don't actually want to do, but you do it as a way of being in charge of what happens to your body."

"Is it normal to get men to hold me down and fuck me while I fight them? Because I do that too," I say bluntly.

"Yes, Arden," he smiles. "It's called consensual non-consent, and it is a kink shared

among a large number of sexual assault survivors. It's risky to do it with someone you don't fully trust, but it's still healthy and normal. It doesn't mean you wanted those awful things to happen to you, it just means that you want to be able to have a say in what happens to your body. You have a safe word and a way out, but you get to explore. There is no correct way to respond to trauma, Arden. I drank like a fish and fucked anything that had a pussy attached to it when Charlotte and Melody were murdered. Was it healthy for me to do that? No, but it is a normal reaction to trauma."

"How long have you been sober?" I ask.

"Seven months," he says.

"You... Did you stop drinking when I bugged the shit out of you until you agreed to let me come here?"

"I did," he says. "I kept saying no because I was afraid that my drinking would affect my work and ruin you. I was also afraid of letting you get close and me liking you."

"Do you regret taking me on?"

"No," he says. "I decided that instead of telling you no because I drank so much, that I would tell you yes and just stop drinking. I was grumpy because I was going through withdrawals after drinking heavily for so long. I focused on helping you train and working cases. I purged my house of everything, and I decided that I wanted to get back to the reason I was doing this."

"Why did you start?"

"Because if investigators had done their jobs to begin with, they would have found the evidence of Charlotte being stalked by a man who had a very long history of domestic abuse, aggravated stalking, and being involved in the suspicious deaths of

his ex-girlfriends. I would still have my wife and daughter, and he'd be in jail," Levi explains.

"I wanted to do this because I wanted to help people when the cops were too biased to give a shit," I say. "I started researching and found that the vast majority of rapists will never see the inside of a jail cell for their crimes. That didn't sit right with me, so I decided to try and make a difference."

"I like that," he smiles. "Now... What exactly triggered you?"

"I want to believe that you want me for me and not for how you can use me," I say. "It's hard for me to trust, but I am so fucking drawn to you that it's conflicting. I feel as though I should run for the hills, but I don't want to. I am completely willing to let you hurt me just so I can be near you, and that scares the shit out of me."

"And when I threw the phone, it reminded you of Caleb," he says, and I nod. "I'm sorry my temper scared you, Arden. I will do whatever I need to prove to you that I will never hurt you. I understand the paranoia because it feels like letting you in is setting myself up to lose you. I am finding with you that avoidance is not healing me or protecting me. It's making me a prisoner of my own mind and that is no way to live. Charlotte would not want that for me."

"What was she like?" I ask.

"She was a lot like you," he remarks with a chuckle. "She was a giant brat, but she was so sweet and kindhearted."

"And Melody's favorite color was yellow," I say. "Why?"

"She always told me that yellow reminded her of happiness and her mother and I made her the happiest," he says. "She was... so sweet and so smart."

“I’m sorry you lost them,” I say. “No one should ever have to experience that. The fact you had to see it...”

“Hearing my little girl scream like that... Begging me to help her... It haunts my fucking dreams,” he admits. “I’d get so goddamn drunk so it would drown out the sound of her crying and the way Charlotte begged him to let Melody live... The last thing Charlotte said before he killed her was her telling Melody that she and daddy loved her so much. She was practically lying on top of her, shielding her. Even for her age, I think Melody understood what was about to happen. When Charlotte said that, she just said that she loved us too and buried her face in Charlotte’s chest. Tyler then shot them back-to-back before putting the gun in his mouth... he never looked at me... Acknowledged me... I taunted him and said everything I could think of to try and get him to turn his anger on me instead, but he didn’t. I laid there like that for nearly two days before my brother showed up to check on us after not getting a call back.”

“You have a brother?” I ask.

“Mhmm. I haven’t talked with any of my family since the funeral, though. Not sure if they’d want to see me at this point,” he says. “Even saying that, I know it’s not true. They all take turns calling me every few days. They leave me voicemails and tell me what’s going on. Jett texts me every single day and has for the last ten years.”

“Why won’t you talk to them?” I ask. “I’m sorry for asking so many questions.”

“It’s okay. It’s surprisingly easy to talk to you,” he says. “I was a drunk and I didn’t want them to see what grief had done to me, even with the success of this business.”

“Well, you are sober now, so text him back,” I say. “Clearly they love you.”

“I’ll make you a deal,” he says. “For the sake of healing.”

“Okay....” I say carefully.

“I will go see my family if you tell Wilder and your parents,” he says.

“Okay,” I shrug and pull out my phone. He seems a bit shocked when I call Wilder.

“Hey,” Wilder answers.

“Hey. Hold on, I’m going to call Mom and Dad and add them to the call,” I say. I tap around and join the calls as soon as my mom answers. “Hey, Mom. Is Dad there?”

“Yeah, baby. What’s up?” she asks.

“I have Wilder on the line. Wilder, is Macie there?”

“Yeah. What’s wrong?” my brother asks.

“So... I made a deal with Levi, so I am going to trauma dump on everyone real fast,” I say.

“You told Levi about Caleb?” Macie asks.

“I did,” I say.

“I am so proud of you, Arden,” Macie says happily.

“I would love to know why we are talking about that little fucker,” Wilder says.

“What did he do?”

The emotions hit me, and I start crying as soon as I start explaining, but Levi holds my hand while I talk. I keep my eyes on him as my phone sits on his desk on

speakerphone. My family is quiet and lets me get everything out. When I am done, Wilder is the first to talk.

“I’m so sorry, Arden,” Wilder says. “I’m glad you had Macie to talk to about it. I am also proud of you for opening up with us.”

“What was the deal?” Macie asks. I look at Levi, and he speaks up so that I don’t have to.

“I opened up to Arden about me losing my wife and daughter ten years ago,” he says. “They were assaulted and murdered in front of me, I wanted her to know so that she understood why I am the way I am. I expressed that I haven’t seen my family since because I was drinking heavily until I met her, so we made a deal that she would tell you all and I would visit my family.”

“I love that,” Macie says happily. “You should take her with you.”

“Wait...” I say.

“That’s a great idea,” Levi says with a grin. “I’ll do it tonight so I can’t talk myself out of it.”

“Good timing because we won’t be home tonight either,” Mom says.

“I love this so much. If he takes you home to meet his family, does that mean you are dating?” Macie asks.

“Yes,” Wilder laughs.

“Jesus,” I say. “I love you guys. Goodbye.”

“Text me,” Macie laughs.

When the call ends, Levi smiles at me. “What?” I ask.

“I’m proud of you, Arden,” he says.

“Text your brother,” I say.

“Fair is fair,” he says, laying his phone on the desk in front of us. I watch as he navigates to Jett’s contact before he stops. I gently grab his hand and squeeze, triggering him to press the call button and place the call on speaker.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?” A man answers.

“Hey to you too, little brother,” Levi says. “Got a second?”

“I have all the seconds in the world, Levi. How are you?”

“Nothing is wrong. Relax, Jett,” Levi says gently. “Look... I’m not going to bullshit here. Okay?”

“Oookay,” Jett says.

“After Charlotte and Melody died, I turned into a drunk and I was ashamed of who I had become. I did start my own PI business and have somehow managed to make that into something successful, but... A really special woman came into my life and motivated me to get sober. I haven’t had a drink in seven months and she is encouraging me to reach out to y’all.”

“I love her already. When do you want to meet up?”

“If I give you an address, can you get Mom and Dad there without telling them? I want it to be a surprise,” Levi says.

“Oh, for sure. And I should probably go ahead and fess up... I totally stalk you,” he laughs. I know where your office is and everything.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. I sometimes think I have seen you in that coffee shop across the road,” Levi laughs. “I listen to everything you guys send me. I read every text... I’m not perfect and you all didn’t deserve that, but... I was drowning for a long time.”

“You watched them get raped and murdered. I don’t know anyone who would take that well, Levi,” Jett says. “No one ever blamed you. If we did, we would have hunted you down. Mom told us all of the time that when you were ready, you’d come back. You have always processed things alone, and this is no different.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Levi says.

“So... Who’s this miracle worker of a woman?” Jett asks.

“Her name is Arden,” Levi says, smiling at me. “I met her when I was giving a lecture at the college. She then proceeded to bug the shit out of me until I agreed to take her on so she could get field hours to get certified as a PI. I made her start with physical training but today is her first day in the office.”

“Oh, so she’s Charlotte,” Jett says.

“She and Charlotte share some similar qualities,” Levi laughs. Seeing the way his smile reaches his eye warms my heart. “Not that I am intentionally comparing her to my dead wife.”

“Meh. I’ve been compared to worse,” I say.

“It’s nice to meet you, Arden. Will you be there tonight?” Jett asks.

“Yes,” Levi answers for me.

“Are you two dating?”

“We are just exploring things right now,” Levi says.

“Oh, that is your bullshit way of saying yes, but you are too nervous to admit it,” Jett laughs. “I will bug you more in person. What time?”

“Six okay? I’ll make dinner,” Levi says.

“Sounds good. Thank you for calling, Levi,” Jett says.

“Thank you for being patient with me,” he replies. “Love you, man. I mean it.”

“Love you too, Levi. I’ll see you tonight.”

When the call ends, he sighs heavily. “I thought for sure he’d be mad,” Levi admits.

“Well, I am very proud of you,” I say. Levi sighs and cups my cheek. “Are you okay?”

“What are you doing to me, Arden?” he asks.

“Trying to make you fall in love with me. Is it working?” I ask with a grin.

As he brings his other hand to my face, one of us moves first, but we both react.

When our lips meet for the first time, it's like a shock of electricity surging through my body. I know he feels it too, because he immediately pulls me up and onto his lap to straddle him. His hands wrap around my hips, and I break our kiss with a soft moan when he presses his thumbs into the bend of my hips. "Fuck," I whisper.

"I don't have the strength to stop now," Levi says.

"Please don't," I whisper.

"If I don't stop, I am going to fuck you, Arden," Levi says matter-of-factly.

"Then what the fuck are we doing still sitting in this chair kissing for, Levi?" I ask with a mischievous grin. He immediately stands and turns me around before yanking my dress pants and panties down.

"I am not going to be gentle, Arden. Are you sure?" he asks.

"Please... Fuck me like it's a punishment," I say, bending over his desk to rest on my elbows. He grunts his approval before pushing three fingers inside my dripping cunt, making me moan.

"God, you are fucking soaked, Arden," Levi says sweetly.

"Please... I need it hard, Levi. Ruin me."

"Don't say I didn't warn you, pretty girl," he says in an ominous tone. He pulls his fingers out of me and grips onto my hips. Without warning or a lead in, Levi buries his cock deep in my pussy and a feral moan rips from my throat as he starts to fuck me unbelievably hard and deep. I can't form words, and my thoughts are jumbled as each bar of his piercings torture my insides with overwhelming pleasure. He has a Prince Albert that is hitting my G-spot and he is fucking brutal about the way he

slams into it, making my legs shake.

I manage to move up to my hands more so I can push back, taking him harder. “Fuck yes!” I moan. Levi quickens his pace and surges into me faster and faster as I match his rhythm, meeting his force. We moan wildly in perfect harmony, and I have never felt a pleasure this addictive. His groans and grunts suddenly remind me that I am not on birth control, and he is fucking me raw.

“Fuck. Pull out. You have to pull out,” I choke. “I’m not on birth control.”

“Oh, sweet girl, you shouldn’t have told me that,” he says with a conniving tone. “I’m going to fucking fill you up.”

“What if I...” I start to ask. I stop when he pulls me up and wraps his hands around my throat.

“Are you warning me for my sake or yours?” he asks.

“Yours,” I choke out. “I would sell my soul to the devil to carry your baby.”

He tips my head back to whisper in my ear, and my entire body shivers. “Then bend over, shut up, and take my cock like a good girl,” he sneers. “I’m going to put my baby in your belly, Arden. I fucking own you now.”

“God yes,” I moan. When he releases me, I bend over, and he starts pounding into me hard and fast. I am nearly screaming through my orgasms, and the desk is holding the majority of my weight as he absolutely wrecks my pussy. This man has single-handedly ruined me from ever taking another cock, because no one will ever amount to just how goddamn good this feels. I have spent six months patiently waiting for the moment we would finally let ourselves connect. A part of me always knew there would come a day where everything broke at once, and today was that day. Today, he

finally owns every part of my existence, mind, body, and soul included.

I am not jumping in headfirst. No, I am jumping in with both feet, and I will survive the fall. I know paranoia will find its way in eventually, but right now I know this is where we are meant to be. I know that a step too close would make the difference between us falling madly in love and us crashing and burning, but I will burn for eternity to keep feeling like this.

Each time our bodies collide, we both moan wildly, and we quicken our movements until I am in tears, and he is growling as he rails me into his desk. I can feel his cock swell inside of me just before he explodes and fills me with his come.

“Oh... My... God...” I pant. “You... You are a monster... I love monsters.”

Levi laughs breathlessly as he pulls my pants up and turns me around. “I hope you understand how serious I am,” Levi says.

“I can feel in my belly just how serious you are,” I laugh. “Levi, honey. I have never been so fucking sure of anything in my entire life. I know I will get scared and triggered, but I trust you. I trust that we can get through this and if one of us is too weak, we will pull the other out of the dark. With a clear mind, I am fucking jumping, Levi. I want this. I want us. We both deserve to be happy. Worst-case scenario, we part ways and move on. We have both lost so much of our soul to trauma that others have inflicted on us; we deserve this. We deserve to be happy.”

“Marry me?” he asks. I am stunned for a second, not knowing if he is serious. Before the paranoia can surface, he continues. “If we are going to jump, let’s jump in the deep end—together. We have been swimming upstream for years now, and we have survived far worse than a failed marriage. We deserve happiness, so let’s fucking take it.”

“Are you sure, Levi?” I ask. “I am needy sometimes. I snore when I’m sick. When I get overstimulated, I might rage and throw shit like a toddler. I cry during sappy commercials, and I am paranoid. I am so goddamn paranoid that I will pick a fight for no fucking reason just to try and prove to myself that you are a piece of shit. I’ll feel bad when I’m wrong and sob like a baby. I’m a lot, Levi...”

“Arden, no one is perfect, baby. I don’t want a perfect wife and perfect children. I want to be pushed every day to grow. I want someone who will keep me on my toes and encourage me to be a better man tomorrow than I was today. I don’t need a picture-perfect life because nothing about my life has been picture-perfect. If you want to rage and throw shit, baby, I will be right beside you with a broom to help clean up the mess. If you cry, I will wipe the tears away and lie when you ask if your face looks like a tomato,” he says, making me laugh as he wipes away my tears. “Baby, I want you. I want all the flaws and all the passion. I want every fucking pound of your baggage because I know we can carry ours together. If I have learned anything from you over the last seven months is, it’s that you never stop fucking fighting. You push until you get what you want, but you keep fucking pushing to see how far you can get. No matter what the goal is, you keep. Fucking. Pushing... I want you, Arden. Give me your absolute worst, because we both know we have already survived the pits of fucking hell.”

“Let’s get married then,” I say with a grin.

Levi kisses me hard as he picks me up in a hug and spins me around. “Call Macie and have them meet us for lunch,” he says. “We can tell our parents after.”

“Then you have to call Jett,” I say with a sweet smile. “I’m going to go clean up and change into new panties, since these are full of your come now.”

“You do that and then call Macie. I’ll have Jett meet us,” he says, kissing me again. “We can go to the house and work from there after.”

“Okay,” I smile.

I am fucking giddy as I grab my bag and go to the bathroom to call Macie. “Hey, girl,” she says.

“Are you still with Wilder?” I ask.

“I am. You’re on speaker now. What’s up?” she asks.

“Y’all want to meet for lunch?” I ask.

“Sure. We were going to go to The Red Tulip. That work?”

“Yeah,” I say. “So... I am going to tell you something, but I just want you to support me, okay?”

“Okay,” she says.

“Levi and I are getting married,” I say carefully.

“Oh my God!” she squeals, and I relax. “That is so amazing. Wait... today? After lunch?”

“Yeah. Levi is calling his brother to meet us,” I say. I turn to the door and Levi is smiling at me.

“Where are we meeting them?” he asks.

“The Red Tulip,” I say.

“I heard the squeal. I assume she approves?”

“Sounds like it,” I laugh.

“Good. Jett cried,” Levi laughs.

“Wilder, you are too quiet,” I say.

“Give him a sec. He is crying too,” Macie giggles.

“I am so fucking happy for you, Arden,” Wilder sniffs.

“Fuck you,” I say tearfully. “Why’d you have to go and cry, asshole?”

Macie and Levi laugh as he wraps me in a hug. “You have grown into an amazing woman, Arden. I’m serious,” Wilder says. “We have watched you two fall in love over the last seven months and it’s been incredible to see.”

“Levi,” Macie says seriously.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“If you hurt her, they will never find your fucking body,” Macie says seriously. “She deserves to be treated like a princess, so I better never fucking hear from her that you have been anything less than amazing to her.”

“I give you my word. I will pamper her so hard that she damn near suffocates from love,” Levi says playfully, making me giggle. “I promise. I will take care of her. Also... I have seen this girl in the gym. She’d kick my ass.”

“Yeah,” I laugh. “I totally could.”

“Meet us for lunch, and we can go to the little twenty-four-hour chapel,” Macie says.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:44 am

Arden

We pull into the parking lot and Levi is nervous. I know it's because he is about to see his brother, so I wave Macie off for a second before she opens my door. "You've got this, baby," I say, turning his face so he looks at me. "Your brother loves and misses you."

"Thank you for getting me to call him," he says, kissing me.

"You're welcome," I smile. "Let's go."

"Okay," he sighs. When he opens his door, Macie yanks my door open and drags me out so she can hug me tightly. Wilder gets to me next, and I start crying.

"Fuck," I sniff. "Damnit, Wilder."

"I love you, Arden," Wilder says with a smile when he pulls away.

"I love you too," I say, wiping my face. I turn and see a man who looks almost exactly like Levi. I smile brightly and Levi turns to his brother. Jett instantly tears up as he and Levi hug, and now both are crying as they move through a decade of emotion.

"Now I'm gonna cry," Macie sniffles quietly.

"I'm so sorry," Levi mutters to Jett.

“Please don’t apologize. Please,” Jett pleads. “It’s so fucking good to see you, man.”

“You can thank Arden for that,” Levi says as he pulls away. “Arden, this is my little brother, Jett. Jett, this is her brother Wilder and Macie, his wife and Arden’s best friend. ”

“It’s wonderful to meet you guys,” Jett says before hugging me. “Thank you so much.”

“Thank you for never giving up on him,” I say. When he pulls away, he shakes Macie and Wilder’s hand.

“I knew he needed time, so we respected that while still making sure he knew we loved him,” Jett says. “Levi, man. You’re looking good. I haven’t seen you close up in a long time.”

“How are Mom and Dad?” he asks.

“Good. Both retired, so they just sit around and annoy each other now,” Jett laughs. “Mom is too smart. She knows something is up.”

“She is a sneaky little shit,” Levi laughs.

“I sent her the address you sent me and said they needed to meet me for dinner,” Jett says.

“She will just look at the address,” Levi says. “She won’t spoil it for Dad, though.”

“This is exciting,” Macie says. “Wait...”

“Go on,” Wilder says with a smile. Macie turns and grins at me, and I just know.

“Shut up,” I say with a gasp.

“You two are fucking creepy,” Wilder laughs.

“I’m confused,” Levi says.

“No, the fuck you aren’t. Shut up, Macie,” I say as I hug her.

“What is happening right now?” Levi asks.

“Macie is pregnant,” I say.

“May as well tell her then,” Levi laughs.

“Wait,” Macie says.

“He’s made it a goal to knock me up,” I say with a shrug. Macie squeals and hugs me tightly before looking at Levi.

“Hop to it, buddy. I need a baby bump buddy,” she says.

“Trying as hard as I can,” he says with a grin.

“Very... Very hard. Trust me,” I say, and Wilder curls his face up in a grimace.

“Let’s go get some food,” Levi laughs.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:44 am

Arden

I am on the verge of a panic attack, pacing the bathroom. Everything is hitting me all at once, and I feel like I cannot breathe. Everyone is out there waiting on me so we can tell them we got married, but I might actually barf. Paranoia and every “what if?” situation possible is flooding my brain all at once, and I can’t make it stop. I just need one fucking second of a reprieve to be able to slow down my thinking before it spirals into something darker, but I can’t. I can’t catch myself, and I need help. I have never wanted help in these moments before, but I need it. I need help out of the dark, so I pick up my phone and send a quick text to Levi.

Help

On my way. Breathe!

That is the most annoyingly helpful thing he says to me. Like, of course, I need to fucking breathe... but I’m not. I’m not breathing. I am holding my breath, terrified of what might happen if I let myself feel this panic. The door to the master bathroom opens and I instantly start crying. He shuts and locks the door before lifting me up to sit me on the counter. When he wraps me in a tight hug, I disappear in his arms.

“Breathe with me, Arden. Focus on my breathing,” he encourages, rubbing my back. I sniffle and nod as I try as hard as I can to only focus on the rise and fall of his chest. I synchronize my breathing with his, so I rapidly calm down and my body relaxes. He holds me for a little longer before pulling back and wiping my face.

“Thank you,” I say.

“It was all you, baby. I just kept you company,” he says. “What’s going on?”

“Every bad thing that could possibly happen is playing through my head and I can’t make it stop,” I say.

“Do you regret it?” he asks.

“No. Not at all.”

“Then fuck what anyone else thinks, baby,” he tells me. “We’ve got each other, and we will weather every single storm together, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I sniff.

Levi kisses and picks me up from the counter before taking me out of the bathroom. When he sets me down, I smile.

“What?” he asks.

“Fuck me,” I say. “Fast and hard, because we don’t have much time.”

Levi nearly rips my shorts off getting them down. When I step out of my panties, he pushes me back onto the bed and brings my legs to his shoulders. He takes a second to pull his cock out before slamming it into me as he covers my mouth. I scream against his hand as he proceeds to fuck me as hard as he can, chasing down his orgasm like our lives depend on it. He leans in and practically folds me in half and pushes even deeper. We both start to come together and I am shaking as he drains his cock deep inside of me.

“Fuck,” I pant. “Holy fuck.”

“You good?” he laughs as he leans down to kiss me.

“You, sir, are so goddamn brutal, and I love it. No matter where we are, Imma need you to fuck me like that every time I get paranoid or panic.”

“I’ve got you,” he says as he pulls me up and goes to the bathroom to get what he needs to clean me. When he gets back, he takes his time cleaning me before helping me get redressed. “Ready?”

“Yeah,” I say with a smile. “Let’s do this.”

We make sure we look presentable before going down to the living room where the others are. “Good timing. Mom and Dad just pulled in,” Jett says before grinning at me. “Fix your sex hair, girl. You look like you just got railed.”

“Did y’all really disappear just to fuck?” Wilder asks.

“Leave them alone. They’re newlyweds,” Mom says happily. “Gotta give me a grandbaby somehow.”

“Macie is giving you one,” I laugh.

“One each, girl. Come on now,” she says with a smile.

“You mean come in?” Macie asks.

“Macie,” I laugh.

“Definitely come in,” Levi says.

“Mhmm,” I say, smiling as I lean up on my tiptoes to kiss him. “Ready?”

“No,” he sighs.

Jett opens the door and a couple walks in. They instantly tear up as the woman darts for Levi. “My baby boy,” she cries as she hugs him tight.

“Hey Momma,” Levi says softly. “I’m so sorry.”

“No,” she says tearfully, pulling away to grab his face and pull him down. “You needed your space so you could find yourself again. I knew you would come back.”

“I was so damn ashamed of how much I was drinking,” Levi says.

“Son, we all grieve differently. You found your way out, and that’s all that matters. Charlotte would be proud of you,” his father says. “Maybe I shouldn’t mention her in front of your girlfriend.”

“It’s okay,” I smile. “I like hearing about them.”

“Wife,” Levi says.

“What?” his mother asks.

“Wife... We got married today. Jett, and her brother and sister-in-law came,” he says.

“Oh, that’s amazing, Levi. I’m so happy for you,” she says before hugging me.

“Thank you, sweetie. So, so much.”

“You’re welcome,” I say sweetly. “He’s a good man.”

“He’s also trying to knock her up,” Jett says.

“Yes. I need another grandchild to spoil,” his mother says.

“Her brother and her best friend are also expecting,” Levi says.

“Oh good. I’ll spoil that one too,” Levi’s mom says happily.

“That reminds me. Do you still have their stuff in storage?” Levi asks.

“Of course,” she says. “Why?”

“Just some things I want to show Arden,” he says. “I think it’s time I sort through things, too.”

“Dumb question. Is this the same house?” I ask.

“No,” Levi says. “That house was sold about a year later to the bank. They tore it down and the land was used to build a housing development.”

“Ah. Okay,” I say.

“Dinner should be ready,” Levi says. “Let’s eat and catch up.”

Everyone moves to the dining room and I help Levi bring dinner out. Once we are all sitting, the tension seems to melt away. We talk and laugh as if we have all known each other our entire lives. This is the most at peace I have ever seen Levi, and it truly warms my heart to witness. Macie and I clean up after dinner while the others chat, but eventually we make our way into the living room to meet up with the others.

“Hey,” Levi says with a confused look.

“Hi. What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Where were you? I didn’t even realize...”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m a big girl,” I laugh. “Macie and I cleaned up the kitchen. You’ve been busy catching up.”

“Arden, you didn’t have to do that,” he says, pulling me into his lap to sit.

“Maybe. Maybe not, but I did. Don’t worry about me; just catch up with your family, sweetie.”

“God, you are just like her,” Jett sighs.

“Charlotte?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Jett says.

“I don’t know if it’s appropriate to compare Arden to Charlotte,” Heather, Levi’s mother, says.

“Eh. As long as she’s okay with it,” Parker, Levi’s father, says.

“I don’t mind,” I laugh. “What did she look like?”

“You want to see her?” Levi asks me.

“I do. Melody too,” I say. “If she got her attitude from her daddy, I bet she was stubborn as shit.”

“Funny,” Levi says with a smirk as he tickles my side. He pulls his phone out and pulls me back to lie against his chest. I watch as he navigates through his pictures until he selects one.

The picture is of a younger Levi, a beautiful blonde woman with bright blue eyes, and a little girl who is the spitting image of her mother. Looking at them, it fucking hurts. I never knew them, but knowing they died the way they did... it's heartbreaking. "They were beautiful," I say softly. "Melody looks identical to Charlotte."

"Yeah," Levi says blankly. I turn slightly, and he is lost. I lift his chin to make him look at me, and I watch as the memories slip away and he comes back to me.

"There you are," I say sweetly.

"I'm sorry. I..."

"Stop apologizing, Levi," I say, cupping his cheek.

"Thank you for pulling me back. I haven't looked at a picture of them since I drank last."

"I cannot imagine how much it hurts," I say. "But Levi... They are still with you. Charlotte and Melody are every ray of sunshine and every cloudy day. They might not be here in physical form, but they are looking down on you and I have zero doubt that they are so damn proud of how far you've come, baby. You served your country, survived being shot, came home and lost your family to a horrific attack, and you still survived. You battled against yourself and the memories for a decade, but you still survived. You built a company, and you found your way to the surface. I haven't lost a spouse or a child, but I had a part of my soul stolen from me. I know what drowning feels like, and you survived, Levi. Be proud of that and never apologize for getting lost in those memories because love it or hate it, it's a part of you now. We will never get over the things that have happened to us, but we will learn how to navigate better through the pain every day."

Levi grabs my face and kisses me hard and for a moment, the world disappears.

When we pull away, I can't help but smile at him. "You are amazing, Arden."

"I'm not amazing for telling you the truth," I laugh. "We leave an imprint on this earth that lasts long after death."

"Despite the constant reminder that you and Charlotte share qualities, you two are so different," he tells me. "I don't ever want you to think that you are a replacement or a surrogate, Arden. You are your own person, I just happen to have a thing for sassy little brats with hearts of gold. "

"Well... You and Caleb are nothing alike," I say. "He was trash in bed and had a small dick. Hey... maybe that's why I wasn't injured. Not much to injure me with."

"That is so dark," Levi laughs. "I aim to please, my love."

"We will have a wonderful life together then," I say, kissing him.

"Fuck, you two are adorable," Wilder says. "I want to hate this and be a controlling big brother, but... I love it."

"You love that your sister is being properly railed for a change?" Macie asks.

"I mean, if she's going to do it, I'd rather it not suck for her," he shrugs.

"Oh, it definitely doesn't suck," I laugh.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:44 am

Arden

Six Months Later

I am tapping my fingers on the desk, staring at my email. I took the test to be a certified private investigator yesterday, and I still haven't received the results. I have busted my ass for a year for this, and I'm impatiently waiting for the results.

"Arden," Levi says, looking at his computer.

"Huh?"

"Staring at your email won't make it show up any sooner," he says.

"Oh, bite me," I say.

"I'm sorry?" I squeal and jump up when Levi suddenly stands.

Levi and I have an amazing relationship. It's not perfect, but we know how to communicate. We also have an agreement of assumed consent for free use. That means Levi can fuck me anytime and anywhere he wants. He can do whatever he wants to me and he will only ever stop if I say my safe word. I never have, simply because I trust him. Even when I get overwhelmed, he has this way of bringing me back to baseline, so I don't spiral into a panic.

This isn't to say that the paranoia hasn't found a home in my psyche, because it has. It appears and I do more than just panic. My brain conjures up every reason to think

that Levi has done something nefarious, but he hasn't. Levi without fail reassures me without belittling me. He doesn't feed my paranoia, but he doesn't sugarcoat things. If I am being unreasonable, he tells me. No matter what, he is always honest and explains the situation rather than just calling me crazy, even though I am sometimes absolutely nuts. Just last week, I was convinced he was cheating. He was actually with Jett, but my brain refused to see the logic. Levi simply put me in his truck and drove me to Jett's house. It was late and Jett was confused, but Jett was just as patient with me. By the time we left, I felt better and finally found the logic.

Jett and Levi have spent so much time together, and Jett has become like my brother. He is so fucking sweet and loves his big brother. They have gotten so close and it has impacted Levi for the better. The version of him that is playful and not grumpy is incredible. He still has his bad days and living with him for six months, I can see how he struggles with not drinking. Some days are harder than others, but he is always honest about where he is at with his mental health.

His nightmares are better when I am in bed with him, so I make it a point to go to bed when he does. When he has them, I just hold him until he goes back to sleep. I occasionally have nightmares and he does the same for me. They tend to flare up when we have cases involving sexual assault, but I make sure to communicate with Levi so that he knows where my head is.

"Say it again, Arden," Levi says, backing me against my desk.

"Bite me," I laugh.

"Turn around."

"Make me," I say. He immediately spins me around and shoves me over my desk before pushing my skirt up. I gasp when he grabs my panties and rips them off. I hear his zipper, so I'm surprised when he leans down and bites my ass cheek. "Fuck!"

“Tell me to bite you, I will,” he says before slamming his cock deep inside of me.

“Oh fuck, Levi,” I moan and push back on him. He responds by grabbing my hips and rapidly fucking me hard and deep. I push my hips back to take him harder, moaning wildly.

The pressure in my belly is building fast and this orgasm is different. I can feel the intensity and just as it starts to surface, I realize we are going to make a mess. “Wait, wait, wait. Oh my God. Levi, no. Fuck. I’m gonna...”

I can’t get the words out before it hits and my arousal floods out of me. I am lost in this feeling and he never lets up as he continues to hammer into me. It hits again as he starts to come and he forces my arousal out.

“Fuck, I love you so much,” Levi says. When I stand up, I scream and nearly hit the floor when I see Jett leaning against the door frame of our office.

“Well, that was weird to walk into,” Jett says, and Levi laughs as he turns me around and hugs me.

“Relax,” Levi whispers in my ear.

“I’m sorry,” I say when he pulls away.

“I’m sorry I scared you,” Jett says. “You two made a mess, though.”

“You did that on purpose,” I frown at Levi.

“Guilty,” Levi laughs and fixes his pants before pulling a towel out of the gym bag beside his desk. I make sure my skirt is fixed before stepping away so Levi can lay the towel down. Instead, he grabs me and pulls me back to clean me. When he is

done, then he takes to cleaning up the floor.

“What’s up, Jett?”

“I was in the neighborhood,” Jett says. “How is Macie?”

Macie is six months pregnant and officially on intensive bed rest after nearly losing their baby girl. Macie has always been a clumsy ass, but it doesn’t mix well when pregnant. She tripped going downstairs and started bleeding. Wilder called me in an absolute panic at two in the morning when they took her in, and he was left waiting to see if Macie was okay and their daughter was safe. A few minutes after Levi and I got there, we were allowed to go back to see her. She was bruised, but the bleeding had stopped and their daughter was safe. She stayed for a few days but was given very strict instructions to stay in bed and take it easy. This means no sex, minimal walking, and a stress test every other day. Wilder and Macie are working from home and they have Keith in the office to make sure all is well there. I go in once a week but I am also helping from my laptop so Wilder and Macie can spend their time resting without stress.

“Bored and horny,” I laugh. “Macie wants to help Wilder, but Wilder refuses to let her do anything to him. He is determined to make her relax.”

“I think they will survive without sex for a few months,” Jett chuckles.

“I’ll steal her when Macie and Wilder let me get close enough. That way they can sleep, shower, and fuck,” I say.

“Now you just need to get pregnant.” Jett grins.

“She refuses to take a test,” Levi says.

“What?” Jett says. “Are you late?”

“Three weeks late to be precise, but she is in denial,” Levi explains.

“I am not in denial. I have no symptoms,” I say.

“Macie didn’t have symptoms either,” Levi counters.

“Yeah, but...”

“Go buy the damn test,” Jett says. “Go see Macie, take the test, and celebrate with them. I will take Levi and celebrate. Then, you two can celebrate tonight when there isn’t a chance of someone walking in on you.”

“Bossy,” I frown.

“Hormonal,” he teases.

“Asshole.” I laugh and he grins at me.

“Go, baby. Go get a test and go see Macie. The only reason you haven’t done it is because you promised Macie you’d take it with her, but you don’t want to bother her.”

“I was going to get a test the day after her accident but... I just didn’t want to add any stress to anyone,” I admit.

“Baby, you are in denial. You are emotional, your breasts are bigger and more sensitive, you are always complaining about feeling bloated. Remember, I was there when Charlotte was pregnant. Macie had similar symptoms and neither had morning sickness either beyond nausea. You’re pregnant, Arden. I know your body and I can

see the changes. Go get a test. Okay?”

“Fine,” I say with a frown.

“I’ll do this meeting for the next case and make Jett take notes. Just go take the afternoon and see Macie,” Levi says, kissing me.

“I still haven’t got an email,” I say.

“That’s fine. It took me four days to get the email,” Levi tells me. “It’s been one day. You’ll get the email and you’ll be certified.”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll go,” I say. “I’m also going to get Macie and Wilder lunch while I’m out.”

“Good girl. Get your stuff and go, please.” I grab my bag and toss my phone into it before turning to let Levi hug me. “Text me a picture.”

“I will. I love you,” I say, hugging him.

“I love you too, baby.” Levi pats my ass where he bit me, and I giggle.

Once I get into the truck, I turn on music and start driving toward the store. I let myself relax when I park, but I’m not ignoring the weird feeling in my gut as I walk through the store. I get all the junk food that I know Macie wants before going to pick out a pregnancy test.

What no one knows is that I’ve taken ten already. I know I’m pregnant, but I refuse to accept it. Each test revealed a strong positive, but I’m scared. I’m scared to accept this because what if I lose the baby? What if they are born, but then they die? Will Levi survive losing another child? Will I survive understanding what it’s like to lose

your child? What if something happens to me, and Levi loses another wife? God forbid, what if he loses both of us? What if I lose him and our child? Anything can happen, and I am terrified of raising a child in a world where evil lurks around every corner.

I pick a digital test but pause to stare at the options. I sense someone is standing near me, but it's the voice that makes my blood run cold, and fear slams down on me.

"Levi must be thrilled to become a father again," Caleb says. I look up but immediately back away when I see how close he is to me. "It's good to see you, Arden."

"Stay away from me," I say harshly. I didn't miss the fact that he not only knew Levi's name, but also that he lost Melody.

"Is that any way to address me, Arden? You weren't always such a bitch," he sneers as he walks closer. I back up, getting ready to turn and run.

"You're a fucking predator," I say louder than intended.

"Yet no one has connected the dots," he says simply. "Not even you and your drunk of a husband."

"Fuck you," I growl. "Stay away from me. Stay away from my husband."

I turn to walk away, but he grabs my arm. I keep a grip on my shopping basket in one hand as I turn and swing at him with the other. I surprise myself when I punch him, so I immediately run before I find out just how pissed he is. His temper is fucking explosive, and I want nothing to do with it. When I get to the checkout line, I choose to go through self-check so I can hurry through. I am rushing to pay and as soon as I get the receipt, I rush out of the store.

“You can run, Arden, but I always catch my prey,” I hear Caleb say when I get to the truck. I toss my bag into the passenger side before jogging around to the driver’s side. Why the fuck did I not come straight to this side? Before I can get into the truck, Caleb grabs me by the throat and slams me back against the side.

“Please, leave me alone,” I whimper. “Please, Caleb.”

“No one believed you before, so what makes you think anyone will come to your rescue now?” Caleb asks.

“Please, Caleb,” I beg as I start crying. I wince when I feel a blade press against my lower belly. “Please.”

“Turn around,” he growls.

“Caleb,” I say as I try to fight back the sobs.

“If I have to ask you again, I will not hesitate to carve that fucking baby out of you and leave him a widow again,” Caleb growls. His eyes are devoid of emotion and only evil lurks in his gaze on me. I sniffle and hiccup, trying to keep control of my emotions, as I turn. He shoves me over the driver’s seat and I hear the condom tear open. “No matter how many times I watch them cry, they’ll never be you.”

“Wha...” I start to say but I am cut off when he pushes my face into the seat. He spits for added lubricant before burying himself in my ass. I whimper as he holds me in place and thrusts hard and fast. The discomfort is manageable but it’s the flashbacks to nineteen that are unimaginably painful. I sob as he rapes me, but I don’t fight. I just want to get in the truck and get the fuck away from here.

He groans as he pushes deep. As soon as he comes, he pulls out of me and backs off. The second his hands are off me, I jump into the truck, slam the door, and lock them

all. I'm not surprised when I notice that he gets into the creepy, windowless van beside me. When he pulls away, I take the time to grab my phone. Luckily, a car gets in his way for just long enough that I can take a picture of his license plate.

WRG-1111

I am running on adrenaline as I stomp on the gas and peel out of the parking lot. I want to disappear, but I know I can't. He mentioned Levi and knows his history, so he is in danger too. I dial his number as I speed toward my brother and best friend. The moment I hear his voice, the emotion hits me.

"Hey, baby," Levi says cheerfully.

"Levi," I whimper. "I need you."

"What happened? Where are you?"

"Driving to Macie and Wilder's," I cry.

"What happened baby? Are you okay?"

"Caleb. I saw Caleb," I say. "He... I need you. Please."

"I'm coming baby. Jett is driving. What happened? I need you to tell me, Arden," he says calmly.

"He... He knew about you losing Melody... he knew that we're married... He kept saying weird shit, implying he has hurt others and no one, including us, has connected it. I hit him and got away but... He followed me out."

"Did he...?"

“He raped me... I tried to beg him not to, but... he had a knife. He was going to hurt the baby... it’s so tiny but...”

“How far away from Wilder’s are you?” Jett asks. I must be on speaker in the car.

“Five minutes.”

“Is he following?”

“No. I got a picture of his license plate though,” I sniff.

“I’m so sorry, Arden,” Levi says with emotion building in his voice.

“It’s not your fault. I think he’s been watching me for a while. He knew too much not to be close,” I say.

“We are pulling into Wilder and Macie’s right now. Do not stop for any reason, okay?” Levi says.

“I’m not. I’ll be there soon,” I say. “Levi?”

“Yes, baby?”

“I’m not Charlotte,” I say. “I can hear it in your voice. I’m not Charlotte. Okay?”

“I know. I’m trying not to panic. It just...”

“I know. It feels familiar,” I say. “I am almost there.”

“Are you okay... physically?”

“Yeah. I think so. He used a condom,” I sigh. “Pulling past the gate.”

“I see you,” Levi says.

I barely park the truck before Levi yanks the door open and pulls me out. I fall apart so fast that the panic hits me. My legs go weak but he scoops me into his arms before I can fall, but I am suddenly sobbing as I cling to him.

“What the fuck is going on?” Wilder says when Levi gets me on the porch. He says nothing as he takes me in and sits on the couch. “Levi. What’s going on?”

“Caleb cornered her at the store. She was on her way here to take a pregnancy test with Macie. He got to her before she could get to the truck and he raped her,” Jett explains.

“What’s going on?” I hear Macie say as she sits close by.

“Caleb raped her again,” Wilder says with so much anger in his voice that it’s almost unrecognizable.

“Look at me,” Levi says, lifting my chin. “Are you in pain?”

“No,” I whimper. “I’ve taken ten tests... I lied when I said I didn’t know... I knew. I’ve known for weeks.”

“I know, baby. I saw one of the tests,” he says, wiping my tears away. “I also know why you lied. I know you were scared that I wouldn’t handle it well and all the possible scenarios that could play out.”

“What’s happening?” Macie asks. I sit up and move to sit beside Levi but look down at my hands for a moment. I am collecting my thoughts so I can explain, but I don’t

want to keep crying. I look up at Macie and she moves to sit on the ottoman beside Wilder to take my hands.

“I’m pregnant,” I say. “About eight weeks, I think. The period before the missed one was very light, so maybe as far as twelve. I’ve taken ten tests... and I went to get a digital to come here and take with you.”

“What happened with Caleb?” she asks. I focus on her, because I can manage this with her.

“I was looking at the tests and he came up to me and said Levi must be excited to be a father again,” I say. “I backed off, but he followed. He kept making comments that implied that he’s hurt others and people just haven’t connected it, but that we haven’t either. I assume the we is Levi and myself. That makes me think one of our clients or families is connected to someone he has hurt before... I went to walk away after calling him a predator. He grabbed my arm, so I hit him and ran. I checked out and ran to the truck, but he caught up with me. I went to the passenger side first to set the bags down, and I shouldn’t have done that. He got to me by the time I went around to get in. He pulled a knife and threatened to carve the baby out of me, or whatever. He forced me over the seat and raped me... Anally.”

“But you are okay?” she asks.

“Yeah. He used a condom, thankfully. Although, a rape exam would actually show something if he didn’t, but he knows that I would go, because I did last time,” I say with a sigh. “I uh... When he let go of me, I got into the truck. As he was driving away, he got blocked by someone for long enough that I was able to get a picture of the license plate and the van.”

“You did a good job, Arden,” she says. “You kept you and your baby safe. You got as much info as you could. You got help. I am so proud of you.”

“I feel like an idiot because clearly he’s been watching me for a while,” I say. “I never even noticed. I stayed with Mom and Dad for years, and now I live with Levi. I don’t know how he knows anything about me or Levi.”

“I think you should start by reviewing old cases,” she says. “You know Caleb, so I think going into it and looking for those little things you might not have connected before would be a good place to start.”

“I brought you something,” I say. “Before all of that.”

“Oh?” she asks.

“Yeah. I got you gummy worms because I know Wilder is on a health food kick,” I say. “Now I know he won’t bitch because he doesn’t want to upset me.”

Wilder motions for me to let him hug me, so I move forward to let him wrap his arms around me in a tight hug. “I’m going to fucking kill him,” Wilder says quietly.

“I know. You and Levi both will, I’m sure,” I say. Macie hugs me next before grabbing my face.

“Get your test and come take it with me,” she says with a sweet smile.

“Here,” Jett says, handing me the test from the bag he got out of the truck. Macie stands and takes my hand. I stand with her, and she pulls me off to the guest bathroom. We are silent as I take a moment to clean up and take the test. Once I wash my hands, we both stare at the test as it blinks.

“It’s so slow,” I say.

“Give it a second,” Macie laughs.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay. Feeling better but ready to not be pregnant anymore,” she sighs. She squeals and hugs me tightly when the word “Pregnant” pops up on the screen. “I am so fucking happy for you. I know you were worried there for a minute.”

“Now I’m worried Caleb will kill me, and Levi will lose his wife and child again,” I grumble.

“Don’t you worry. His dumbass will be dead soon enough. Don’t think for a second Wilder isn’t serious.”

“I know. He has the money to make him disappear,” I say.

“Let’s go show them the test,” she says, picking it up from the counter.

We walk out of the bathroom and go back to the living room. Macie hands the test to Levi and smiles. “Congrats, Daddy.”

Levi glances at it before handing it off to Wilder and pulling me down to hug me tightly. “I’m sorry all of this is happening,” I whisper.

“Don’t apologize. Just be warned, he is fucking dead,” Levi says. “Fuck jail time. I don’t give a goddamn if he is charged; the justice system had a chance to catch him, and they failed. I will not let him get away with hurting you again.”

“I don’t know if I feel safe at the house,” I admit. “If he knows your history, he knows where we live.”

“I agree. Wilder has already asked that we move here, at least temporarily,” Levi says. “What history?”

“Well, he knew about Melody and your drinking, because he called you a drunk. He knows we work together, I assume. I just get a feeling that he’s been watching me the whole time,” I say. “Me moving out of Mom and Dad’s and getting married must have triggered him into getting closer again.”

“Jett is going to go to the house with Wilder and get our stuff. I am going to stay here with you and Macie, we will handle telling all the parents, but I’d like them to keep their distance for now,” Levi says.

“I agree. I don’t want them to get hurt,” I sigh. “I don’t really even want anyone involved. Especially Jett. He didn’t ask to be involved in my bullshit.”

“Oh, you can get the fuck over that,” Jett says bluntly. “You are my sister-in-law and I will fucking kill this bastard for hurting you.”

“Thank you,” I say. “What do we do about me needing to go to the doctor?”

“I’ll help you get on with my doctor,” Macie says. “She is great.”

“I pictured this all going so differently,” I say. “I’m pregnant, but Caleb still has a thing for hurting me... He made a comment that no matter how many times they cry, they’ll never be me.”

“Ah, that doesn’t sound like he’s hurt just one person,” Levi sighs. “We can sit down tonight and go over files.”

“Why don’t you go take her to the guest room? Macie needs to go lie back down anyway,” Wilder says. “Jett and I will hurry up and go to the house and grab what we can and come back. We can make another trip later on, too.”

“I’ll get her settled and check on Macie,” Levi says. “We will be good here.”

“I need a shower,” I say with a frown.

“We can do that,” Levi says.

“The guest room down here has a connecting bathroom. Jett can take the one upstairs.”

“Don’t even argue,” Jett says to me. “I want to be here.”

“Alright,” I sigh.

“Come on,” Levi says, pulling me up.

“We love you,” Wilder says to me.

“I love you too,” I say. “Thank you.”

“That’s what family does, babe. We support each other.”

“I’m going to eat gummy worms in bed,” Macie says.

We go to the guest room and a few minutes later, Wilder brings extra clothing, towels, and toiletries so we can shower, along with a new bottle of prenatal vitamins with strict instructions on taking them regularly. After, Levi and I go to the bathroom and strip down while we wait for the water to warm. I have fallen silent and numb, so I just let Levi take over and wash my body before washing himself. When he shuts the water off, he gets me out and dries my body before helping me get a large T-shirt on.

“Let’s go lie down,” he says softly. I nod, and we go into the bedroom. I stop short of the bed and look at Levi.

“Fuck me,” I say. “I know it’s stupid to want it. I know he just hurt me, but I want you. I want to feel something other than him. I want to stop thinking about everything.”

“How do you want it?” he asks.

“I want you to take my ass, and I don’t want you to be nice about it... but I want to come,” I say.

“Okay,” he says, kissing me softly. “Lie down on your belly. I’ll be back in a second.”

“Where are you going?”

“To talk to Macie. I’m positive they have lube, but I’ll need to explain why I am asking for it so she doesn’t stab me in the face,” he says.

“Right. Good idea,” I say with a smile. I lie down and rest my head on my arms as I wait for Levi to return. When he does, he pulls the blanket off me and I hear him undressing.

“You ready?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say.

Levi pushes my legs apart before pulling me up to my knee slightly. I hear the lube open and seconds later, he grabs my hips and buries his cock inside my ass. I have no time to react before he starts fucking me as hard and fast as he can, not even allowing time for my body to adapt to his size. I am groaning as I grip onto the sheets, gently rocking my body to push back against him.

“Fuck, you’re so tight,” Levi grunts. “You’re taking me so good, baby. Come for me.”

“Fuuuuck you’re so deep,” I groan as both pain and pleasure ripple through my body. I welcome the pain and revel in the depths of his reach. He slams into me over and over, forcing pleased moans out of me. He eventually pulls my arm back and encourages me to help myself, so I do. I reach between my legs and start rubbing my clit. “Oh, God.”

“There ya go, baby. Come for me,” Levi moans. “Fuck, baby.”

“Oh, Jesus. It’s so good,” I choke out. “Please. Harder. God, I wanna come. I’m so... Oh God! I’m so close.”

Levi tightens his grip and starts fucking me harder and deeper, harmonizing with my ragged moans and whimpers. I am desperately rubbing myself, and it suddenly breaks. I cry out as I come. Levi pushes me flat and leans into my body to quicken his pace. I lift my hips a little as he straddles my body so he can continue pushing deep. I am up on my elbows, rocking my body back on his cock, wanting to be fucking destroyed. When he finally comes, his beautiful moans echo in my brain. He brings himself down to lie on my back while staying buried inside of me and we are both breathing heavily.

“I love you so much,” I pant. “So... fucking much.”

“I love you too, baby,” Levi says, kissing my shoulder.

“I need a nap.”

“Let me clean you up, and then you can sleep,” he says. I nod and he pulls out of me before gathering what he needs to clean me.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:44 am

Levi

Once Arden is asleep, I leave the room and go out to the living room. They technically lied and our parents have gotten together to get our stuff, so Wilder and Jett are still here. “She asleep?” Wilder asks.

“Yeah,” I sigh.

“Good. A nice orgasm and sleep,” Macie says. “And I can see it on your face. She wouldn’t have asked you if it wasn’t going to be helpful.”

“I know,” I say. “I’m just scared of leaving her alone.”

“She’s right though,” Jett says. “She isn’t Charlotte and Caleb isn’t Tyler.”

“I know. We know more and we can see it coming,” I say. “Get anything off the license plate?”

“Yeah,” Jett says. “It’s registered to Caleb... I was looking at your old cases and you have three unsolved rape murders. All three victims match her description. They were drugged, restrained, raped, and then strangled. Their bodies were discovered along Route 81 over the last six years.”

“Why have the police given up?” Wilder asks.

“You’re asking the wrong questions,” Macie says as she casually rubs her belly. I raise an eyebrow at her and she sighs. “He’s a cop, guys. He started about a year after

he raped her. His father is a detective in homicide.”

“Oh fuck,” I say.

“Yeah,” she says.

“So what now?” Jett asks.

“Let’s look at the cases first,” I say. “After that, if we are confident... we find him.”

“Did you give her the bottle of water?” Wilder asks.

“Yeah. She will be pissed when she realizes we drugged her,” I say.

“She needs sleep and you’re lucky I don’t drug your ass too,” Wilder replies. “Stay with your wife and I will handle it.”

“But I...” I start to say.

“Levi,” Jett says, and I sigh. “Be with your wife.”

“I know my little sister, and she is terrified. She also isn’t going to tell you that because she is trying to protect you from your trauma,” Wilder says. “Macie does the same shit to me.”

“I know you want to burn the world down for her right now,” Macie says. “But she will always remember who was where when she looks back. She will always see that her husband was by her side, comforting her, and her big brothers were kicking ass for her.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I would never forgive myself if something happened and I wasn’t

here.”

“Right. So, stay here. We will update along the way,” Jett says.

“Alright,” I say, giving up.

“When she wakes, tell her the truth. I don’t know how long we will be gone, but we will check in when we can. Mom and Dad will bring stuff by tonight and they will all take turns checking in and bringing food. You three are to stay in this house, no matter what.”

“Mhmm,” I reply.

“Go on then. Go rest with her,” Jett says.

“Thank you, guys. So much,” I say when I stand.

“That’s what family is for,” Wilder says. “Macie, I love you but go the fuck to bed and lay down or I’ll tell Dr. Chavez you are not listening and resting, and she will admit you to the hospital.”

“Rude. Fine, but only because I want a nap,” Macie laughs.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:44 am

Arden

I slowly open my eyes and smile when I see that Levi is on his side looking at me. He is propped up on his elbow as he gently strokes my hair. “Hey,” I say.

“Hey.” he speaks softly. “How are you feeling?”

“Perfect. I’m with you,” I say. “What time is it?”

“Ten,” he says carefully. I look around and see Wilder, Macie, and Jett are here.

“It’s morning,” I say.

“It is.” Levi says.

“What did you do?” I ask, frowning deeply at my brother as I sit up.

“I made sure you’d sleep. You needed rest,” Wilder says. “And yes, I drugged you. I’m not sorry, and I’ll do it again. Levi is lucky I didn’t do it to him too.”

“What aren’t you all telling me?” I ask. “Macie looks guilty of something.”

“Our parents got together and got our stuff here,” Levi says, taking my hands and turning me to face him. “We are going to stay here for a while so you can be surrounded by family.”

“Okay,” I say. “What else?”

“He’s dead, Arden,” Levi says gently. “Caleb is dead.”

“You?” I ask.

“No, I stayed here with you. Macie and I never left your side. She even cuddled with you for a while when you were having a night terror,” Levi tells me. “Wilder and Jett took care of it.”

“How?” I ask, glancing between Wilder and Jett.

“Wanna see?” Jett asks with a bright smile.

“Jett,” Levi sighs.

“Fuck no. She deserves to see what her brothers did for her,” Jett says, sitting on the bed with us. “Come here.”

“Did he cry?” I ask as I move closer to Jett. Levi just laughs as he pulls me into his lap so Jett can sit beside us. Macie and Wilder move in closer so we can all watch.

“Oh, it was beautiful. He even pissed himself,” Wilder says.

“How did you find him?” I ask.

“The van was registered to him. We just waited for him to leave his house, followed him until he was in an area that we could take him down, and then took him into the woods. His van is in a lake,” Jett says. He pulls his phone out and navigates to a video.

“Wait. Please,” Caleb begs as the video starts. He is stripped naked with his arms tied to a branch above his head so that he is barely on his tiptoes. The phone is propped up and both Jett and Wilder are wearing masks.

“How many?” Wilder demands. His voice is far deeper and full of rage.

“How many what?” Caleb asks, sniffing back tears.

“How many women have you raped?” Wilder clarifies.

“I haven’t...”

“Liar,” Jett snaps, punching him in the abdomen, making Caleb grunt as the wind gets knocked out of him.

“Sixty-five,” he mutters. “Arden... Was the only one I kept alive.”

Jett and Wilder say nothing as Wilder searches the ground. He picks up a large stick covered in bark and walks around behind him. “Let’s see how much you like someone fucking your ass,” Wilder says in that same nearly unrecognizable tone.

“Wait. Please. Please don’t,” Caleb begs. Wilder ignores him and forces the branch into his ass. Caleb instantly starts screaming, but Jett wraps tape around his head, sealing his mouth shut.

“One for every innocent life you took,” Wilder growls. One after another, Wilder pulls the stick out and slams it back in as deep as he can. Caleb screams and sobs behind the tape, growing weaker as blood leaks out of his ass. On the last one, Wilder shoves it deeper than before and leaves it inside of him. Jett comes over and pours gasoline on the stick and his crotch area.

“When you misuse it, you lose it,” Jett sneers as he pulls a flip lighter from his pocket. Caleb starts shaking his head and screaming as Jett lights it and inches closer and closer to his dick. Jett laughs maniacally as he teases Caleb with the flame, but the moment it touches the head of his dick, the fire spreads rapidly. When it reaches the stick in his ass, and both Jett and Wilder step out of the frame. Caleb screams and

thrashes as his dick burns. The last frame of the video is of Caleb's head dropping.

Jett locks his phone just in time for me to hug him tightly. Levi lets Jett pull me over to his lap when I start crying. "He's gone, Arden. You are safe now. Your baby is safe. Your husband is safe."

"Thank you," I sniffle. Wilder grabs me and hugs me so tightly that I can hardly breathe. It's his emotion that brings out near sobs as the pain of the situation unfolds in my head.

"I love you so damn much, Arden. I will do anything for you," Wilder whispers. "You supported me endlessly with Tina, so I owe you this much."

"I love you too," I whisper. "Are you going to get in trouble?"

"No, honey. Money goes a long way," he says, holding my face between his hands. "It's over and you are safe. Spend time here finding a way to navigate this and take care of my niece or nephew."

"I think I know what I want to name them," I say to Levi as I move back to sit with him.

"Oh?"

"Mhmm. If it's a girl... Charlotte Melody Andrews. If it's a boy, Charles Mel Andrews. Either way, Charlie."

Levi tears up and I turn in his lap to straddle him and hold his face as they run down his cheeks. "Why?" he asks, choking on his emotions.

"Because I want their memory to live on through our child. I might not have known Charlotte or had the honor of meeting Melody, but they still exist in you. I want our

child to know they have a big sister looking down on them. I guess that would make Charlotte like a stepmom, but either way, I truly do feel like they are looking down on us. I truly think that it was them who sent this baby to us.”

“I feel like I am missing something,” Levi says.

“Levi, man...” Wilder says. “Arden was never on birth control because she was told as a teen that she’d never conceive a baby... She was never meant to be pregnant.”

“I always knew I would get my miracle baby someday when it was meant to happen, and I really do feel like this is our chance to make sure that your wife and daughter’s memory can live on through them,” I say. “I want our child’s name to mean something and there is nothing better than to name them after two of your favorite people.”

“Fuck, I love you so much,” he says as he hugs me tightly.

“I love you too, Levi... Is that a yes?” I ask when he pulls away.

“Yes. I love it,” Levi says. “I was terrified of falling for you, but you sucked me into your orbit. No matter how hard I fought it, I knew you were it for me. I know that with you, I will never have to worry or wonder if I took a step too close.”