



Pile Driver

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Category: Suspense Thriller

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local bar in the evenings, and picking up extra shifts at the coffee shop

during the day. Because of her schedule, it leaves her without much time for

luxuries like dating or a social life.

When a customer gets handsy with her one night, an unlikely stranger

comes to her rescue.

It was only supposed to be drinks with his construction crew after a hard

day on the job site. But Arkin Broderick finds himself helping a feisty

waitress instead. His overwhelming need to protect her leaves him mystified

and craving more.

Neither of them were looking for love, but like lightning in the darkness,

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But no matter how perfect things seem, the past always has a way of coming

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:24 am

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chapter Arkin

“Look at the ass on her. I swear if I could just get her alone for five minutes...”

“You’d what?” I took another deep swig of my beer.

“Talk her pants off with your charming personality?” I finished my beer, nodding to the server in question to get our table another round.

“Hey, I boil my ass off in the heat all day. A man needs a girl like that to come home to.” The newest guy on our crew wasn’t leaving me with a stellar first impression.

As the foreman, I liked to get to know the guys I worked with, so usually I liked to take them out after work so we could blow off some steam and unwind.

“You gonna take her home to your double wide?” I laughed.

“That place is such a fucking mess. A girl like that would take one look at it and run for the hills.” Josh ignored me, eyes lingering on the curves of the young waitress.

“Look at her, bending over for that bottle. She’s giving me a show, boys.

” I only shook my head. I couldn’t stand a guy who wore his stereotype on his sleeve.

Cat-calling women wasn’t allowed on my crew—never was, never will be.

“Last round, and we should be heading out—dawn comes early if we want to try to beat the heat tomorrow.” My mind was still fiddling with the details of our latest job, preparing and laying the groundwork for a new business going in on the same block as this fine drinking establishment.

The server approached, our tray of half a dozen beers teetering precariously on her palm.

Her eyes were trained on the tray, a look of adorable focus on her face as she weaved through the tables to reach ours.

“Here you are, gentlemen.” She quickly set the beers at the table, scanning us once, eyes lingering on me before she finally asked, “Anything else I can get you?” I smiled casually, about to thank her for her time and request the check, when Josh, out of nowhere, spat, “Just your phone number, baby.” Glass shattered on the ground.

Oh no, that motherfucker better have not done something.

The server’s formerly friendly face twisted into one of shock and then shame.

She turned, hand sliding across her ass cheek in just the spot I imagined Josh’s big, burly fucking hand had landed.

He was already high-fiving one of the other guys, laughing as she walked away.

And I was already seeing red. I jumped from my seat, sending the chair clattering across the floor behind me.

My hands at his neck, I hauled him out of his seat—because no man would hit another man while he was sitting down—and cracked him across the head.

“You’re off my crew, you filthy fucking pig.

” I shoved him down the narrow aisle between the rows of half-drunk customers.

“You’d better hope I don’t catch you talkin’ to a woman like that again, or I’ll put your punk ass in the hospital.

” “Fuck you, Arkin. I hate being on your crew anyway,” Josh said as he rubbed his neck, eyes boring a hole into mine before he turned, shoving his way through the doors and walking off into the night.

“So...” One of the other guys lifted a beer to his lips and paused.

“Does this make you a feminist now?” The table hummed silently, the air charged with my irritation.

“You have mothers, don’t you? Sisters? You want any asshole treating them like that?”

Now pardon me, boys. I’ve got to apologize to that young lady on behalf of that animal.

” I left my beer and crew in the dust, beelining through the crowd in search of the embarrassed woman my former employee had just run off.

“Excuse me,” I said with a nod, swerving around another young server before turning down a hallway and catching sight of a pair of red Chuck Taylor sneakers behind a curtain.

I’d recognize those sneakers anywhere. “Phoning a friend for backup in here?” I snuck behind the curtain, hiding in the old-fashioned phone booth with her.

Her eyes were startled and teary as she looked up at me.

I dropped the curtain, shrouding us in darkness again, only a sliver of light illuminating her sad, tear-stained cheeks.

“Hey, I can’t tell you how sorry I am about that asshat.

” My words hung heavy between us. I swallowed, measuring my next words, wishing she’d make this a little easier on me.

I didn't have a lot of experience with things like women and emotions.

"I, uh..." I stumbled for some way I could console her.

"I don't take well to men treating women like that.

Not on the job, and not off." I paused, swallowing down the urge to push a rogue strand of dark hair behind her ear.

"I fired him." Her eyes slid up to meet mine under heavy eyelashes then.

Something about us being crammed up in this little space together had me wanting to...

protect her in some way. Shroud her from every fucking idiot in this bar.

I imagined walking at her side, arm cradling her nice and close to me, slaying all the dragons for her.

"I told him if I saw him treat a woman like that again, I'd leave him with a one-way ticket to the emergency room.

" I shifted, thinking what a terrible idea it'd been that I ducked behind this curtain at all.

She didn't want a big annoying bastard like me around her.

"I just wanted you to know that. Hopefully I ran him off for good." I pushed the curtain aside.

"I'll leave you to your space now. I just wanted to apologize on behalf of—" "What if

he comes back?” she spat fiercely.

“What?” I asked, too rattled by the sound of her soft fierceness to even register her question.

“What is he’s out there right now, waiting for me to get off my shift?

Or tomorrow night? What then?” I stood a little, stumped, before ducking back behind the curtain with her.

“I’ll leave you my number. You can use it day or night if you—” “Right, like my own personal bodyguard?” She shook her head, wiping her tears.

“Sounds like a great pickup line. Ya know, you construction workers are all the same.” “Is that so?” My voice dropped an octave, suddenly very interested in whatever this woman was saying.

“Care to tell me how I’m the same as that fucker who just grabbed your ass?

” “Because.” She crossed her arms, taking a step closer to me.

“You’re trying to leave me with your phone number.

You’re all pigs.” “Oh yeah?” I couldn’t think beyond proving her wrong, whatever it took. “Yeah.” She edged closer, arms brushing across the wide wall of my chest. “Every last one of you.” Just as the thought was runnin’ through my mind that I should prove her right and pull her into my arms and kiss her senseless, she did the opposite, tossing me the middle finger and then doing the damn unthinkable and pushing through the curtain before walking off.

“Well, sonuvabitch.” I thrust a hand over my day-old beard, leaving that crowded

little phone booth more confused than I'd entered it.

"So much for makin' things right." I walked off down the hall, waving at the boys once as I passed, not bothering to stop to tell them I was done for the night.

Pushing into the clear night air, I scanned the crowded parking lot once for Josh, making sure he'd left like I'd told him to.

Then I slid behind the wheel of my truck to wait.

If there was any chance in hell that no-good piece of shit was coming back to fuck with her again, I'd be here for it.

And then he'd regret the day he was born.

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“You need me to walk you to your car, Daph?” Will, the bartender, asked.

He was a really sweet man in his forties, running bar on the weekends to help pay his wife’s hospital bills.

I smiled at his withered face that looked much older than his 43.

“Nah, I think I’ll be okay. Thank you for asking,” I said as I put my share of tips in my pocket.

When I got outside, the night air hit my face, and I took a deep breath.

As soon as I got to my car that was parked across the street, a large hand grabbed mine.

I had my keys ready in my hand to jab the fucker in the eye just like my mother taught me, when another guy showed up and pummeled the guy onto the ground.

When I turned around, I saw the guy who grabbed my ass on the gravel parking lot and his former boss on top of him, punching him repeatedly.

“Stop. Stop. I think he may be unconscious,” I said as I tried to pull the massive man off him.

I wasn’t sure what this guy did for a workout, but it was like I was punching bricks.

I jumped on top of him and tried to pull him off, but he just got up with me dangling

from his back and pulled the other guy up with his arm, holding him above the ground.

I wasn't sure what he ate, but this was insane.

He was flinging around maybe 200 pounds between the two of us like it was nothing.

"I am going to kill this piece of shit," he yelled, and I shivered at the sheer menace in his voice.

I really believed that he would beat him until his last breath.

"Please don't. I don't want you to get into trouble," I whispered, trying to hold back the tears springing into my eyes.

I hated violence of any kind. I knew it came from my childhood, watching my dad beat the shit out of my mom.

There was something about someone getting bruised and battered that made me feel small again, hiding under the table and shaking.

"Please, I am begging you to stop," I pleaded as I climbed off his back, hoping that my now sobbing words would have an impact.

He dropped the other guy and turned to look at me, concern slowly replacing the rage that was in his eyes just a moment ago.

"I am going to sue you, motherfucker. I am going to take everything you own and leave you homeless," the pig bellowed.

My knight didn't even blink at the coward.

He just saw me on the ground, huddled and shaking.

He walked over to me slowly, hands out, gesturing that he didn't mean me any harm.

I looked up at him, and he bent down slowly so he could look me directly in the eyes.

“That whore is the reason you will lose everything. I'll make sure of it,” the pig shouted as he clutched his stomach and scooted away like a coward. My knight's face contorted, making him look like a monster under the streetlight.

I should have been scared with the anger that radiated in his eyes, but I felt a sense of calm take over me.

I couldn't explain it, but this man wasn't like my dad.

He wasn't like the pigs who came into the bar every night.

My knight walked over to the pig, bent down, and spit on his face.

“You don't scare me. You are nothing more than a piece of shit coward.

You aren't a man. You're a fucking animal pretending to be one.

Get the fuck out of here before I actually kill you,” he shouted and then walked away as if the man limping away was nothing but garbage.

He then turned to look at me, his eyes shrouded with concern.

I recognized that look well. It was the look of strangers as they passed my mother in the street and got a glimpse of her battered face.

The look of sympathy and pity. Well, I didn't want pity.

I was nothing like my mother. I was strong.

I fought. "You okay?" he asked as he offered me his hand.

He was trying to help me up, but I didn't want his help.

"I'm fine," I said as I got myself up, ignoring his hand.

No one in life had ever helped me before without wanting anything.

This man may have made me not fear him like I did most, but he was also a man, and they usually had ulterior motives.

"Are you some kind of pervert or something?" The words got blurted out before I could even hold them back.

He cocked his head to the side and smiled.

I couldn't help but think that his smile was beautiful.

It lit up his whole face and made it softer, kinder.

"No. I just was worried. Guys like Josh are bullies. I knew he would need to unleash his shame for his lack of manhood somewhere. I just sat in my car to make sure the fucker couldn't get away with anything.

I'm glad I stayed." I started walking to my car.

He followed, and I let him. I didn't want to admit it, but the whole situation had

startled me, and at least I knew this guy wasn't going to hit me or rape me.

"This is a lot of work for a phone number," I joked.

I always made jokes when I was nervous. When I was a teenager, the therapist told me it was a coping mechanism.

She said I did it when I needed to fill uncomfortable silences, which I guess made sense, because the silence in those few steps to my car was unbearable to me.

I felt like I owed him something, because the truth was, if he wasn't here, if he hadn't shown up, that fucker may have done God knows what to me.

"You going to give it to me?" he laughed.

"I knew it. You all want something," I whispered, the scared little girl coming through to protect me.

Never get too close; never get too comfortable.

My mother's came crashing into my mind. "Honest." He put both his hands up, palms up.

"I just have issues with aggressive, entitled men. Don't judge us all for the actions of some.

I am really a good guy," he stated as he opened my car door for me.

"I am not giving you my number. If you really want to get to know me, I work at Miller's Coffee Tuesdays and Thursdays.

My shift ends at 8. Swing by, and I will buy you a coffee as a thank-you.

” I got into the car, and he lingered by the door.

“It’s a date.” He smiled that lopsided grin at me again.

“No, it’s a thank-you,” I whispered, shutting the door so quickly that he had to jump out of the way.

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The thundering boom of the pile driver slowed and then came to a halt, and then the operator's voice crackled over the radio. "Beers tonight after work. Whaddya say, boss?"

I chanced a glance at my watch. My eyes had been on the time all day, and now that it was approaching seven, I had to get home and cleaned up as quickly as possible.

"No, can't. Got a thing tonight." "A thing?" another one of the heavy equipment operators piped up, throwing a shovel into the bed of my diesel.

"Since when do you have any damn thing?" My grin tipped at the gentle jab.

These guys were like family to me, which meant we busted each other's balls as often as possible.

"Since now." "All right, well, guess we're free agents tonight, boys.

What final local watering hole should we grace our presence with tonight?

"I huffed, climbing into my truck. "Have fun, but keep it safe." They chimed in, calling my often-repeated mantra back to me.

My mind raced as I pulled onto the main street, truck headed for home, sweet thoughts of that pretty little waitress invading my mind.

I didn't really know why she'd gotten inside my head like she had.

Something about seeing her crumpled in the parking lot while I was feeding my fist to that fuckhead had about cracked my heart open.

And so here I was. Tuesday night, leaving work early for my coffee date.

I nearly huffed at myself. The idea that this was a date was foolish to begin with.

I didn't do dates. I didn't do dating. I didn't do women, really, ever.

I frowned at the memory of the few women I had dated in the past; I'd never found anyone I wanted to grow old with, and I guess at some point I'd given up on women altogether.

Some men liked to use women for one thing only and then discard them as if they didn't exist, I'd never been able to understand how they could treat another human so carelessly.

I all too often remembered my mother and the men who used her.

They took what they wanted, and left when they were done.

I knew from a very young age that I could never do that.

I would never be the man to take and take, and leave nothing but a broken, damaged shell behind.

I pushed a hand over my head, smell of dust and regret hanging on me when I thought of how thoroughly I'd secluded myself at this stage of my life.

I'd been so busy working, I hadn't taken a minute to bother getting to know anyone new.

Now I had a great job and a mortgage, but not even a damn dog at home to love me.

I swallowed, feeling the first twinges of loneliness pepper my veins before turning into the driveway, eager to get in the house and out of these dirty clothes.

By the time I'd reached the doorstep a minute later, I'd found myself at a roadblock.

What the fuck was a person supposed to wear on a non-date coffee date?

Twenty minutes later, I was standing in my closet, freshly showered with a towel wrapped around my torso and a problem.

Every pair of jeans I owned was worn through with holes and faded knees.

I wasn't sure at what point I'd become a slave to the job, but this was a pretty good sign it was a problem I'd been overlooking.

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I briefly ran down the list of places in town, wondering if I had time to leave early and grab something new.

With that horrible new clothes smell. “Well, fuck, here we go, then.” I gave up on giving any more fucks and pulled on the first pair that looked the least abused.

With a plain white button-down I’d had to wear for a wedding a few years ago over my shoulders, I found the fine leather shoes I’d been forced to wear with the outfit and shoved those on my feet.

I hated them instantly, yearning for the comfort of my leather work boots.

“Hell, no wonder I don’t do this kind of shit.

” But then her pretty face popped into my mind, big round eyes filled with tears and wrenching my heart like a sad puppy.

It’d only taken one look at her hiding in that old phone booth to feel something stirring in me.

I paused, taking in the tiny crow’s feet at my eyes, the laugh lines that bracketed my easy smile.

I’d spent a lot of years working hard under the harsh rays of the sun.

It always made me laugh to think of the gym rats lying in tanning beds after a workout.

I had all the working out and natural tanning I could take.

“This is it.” I slid my hand around my damp hair, frowning when it spiked every which way stubbornly, before giving up altogether and heading out.

“I should probably stop at the shelter on the way home and pick myself out a dog,” I muttered under my breath as I locked the front door behind me and then angled for my truck.

“Better than talking to yourself, you idiot.” I yanked open the door of my truck, climbed in quickly, and turned the engine over.

Just a few minutes later, I was coasting the few blocks down the street and around the corner, easing into the parking lot of Miller’s.

I jumped out of the truck and slowed my steps, wondering for the first time all day what exactly I was going to say during this little coffee date.

I pulled out my phone, swiping through the screens, eager for any sort of distraction as my brain tried to convince me to turn and get the hell out of there.

But my heart pushed me—or more accurately, her hold on it pushed me —forward.

I puffed out a giant breath, about to step across the street, when the front door pushed open, breeze catching her ponytail before she locked eyes on me.

“Hey.” She waved halfheartedly, something close to regret seeming to overtake her features.

Christ, I probably should have turned around.

Just the fact that I was drawn to a girl prone to crying in dark parking lots probably meant she carried some baggage, but call me crazy, I was still interested.

“Evenin’,” was all I said. Her eyes brimmed with emotion, jaw clenched tightly before she opened the door again, backing up the way she’d come.

“So, I guess you want coffee?” I laughed, not sure what else to do.

“What I’d really like is a few shots of Jack to calm these damn nerves.

” “You? Nervous?” She looked back in disbelief.

I moved closer, following her back into the coffee shop.

It was empty. Everyone else had already gone home, and the closed sign was already flipped.

Guess it was good I’d left early. A minute later, and I would have missed her altogether.

“Truth? I’m nervous as fuck—and not over the coffee.

” Her eyes hung on me, weighted with meaning.

“Why?” I paused, realizing this was the reason I didn’t do this.

This “getting to know someone” thing was just about torture.

Life was better when I was the boss and no one around me ever asked why.

“Because...” I hovered at the door, eyes searching the small room before finally

landing on hers.

“Because I haven’t dated anyone in ten years.

” She stifled a small laugh, eyes turning up as my most heart-wrenching dating moment up to now lightened the mood.

I chuckled with her, trying to put on the best charming smile I could muster.

“I just haven’t met anyone fascinating enough.

” “I’m pretty fascinating,” she said as she smiled, a really radiant smile.

I felt like I’d been blinded. I shrugged, glad that she seemed a little more comfortable now that I was basically a non-threat.

If that’s what it took to make her smile like that, I’d shame myself in front of her every day.

Her eyes brimmed with amusement before she gnawed on her bottom lip.

“Truth: if I have to smell espresso beans for another minute, I might barf all over those fancy shoes of yours. Maybe a short walk around the block instead?” A walk.

Or something. “I’m game for either of those things.

” I swung the door wide for her, and she breezed by me, her soft vanilla scent mixed with coffee beans and hope.

Anticipation ran red hot through my system.

She pulled out her phone, tapping out a quick message before her eyes met mine.

“I guess I should ask, who exactly am I going on a walk, or something, with?” I grinned, not wanting to be too forward and ask the same but dying to know her name.

“Name’s Arkin Broderick, founder and head foreman of Wilkins and Broderick Pile Driving and Construction.

” Her grin deepened. “For real? You’re a pile driver?

” I shrugged. “Most people prefer construction worker, but master pile driver fits the bill.” “That’s not a joke, is it?

” “Nope.” I grinned, enjoying the idea that she had a sense of humor once she warmed up.

“You can look it up, send the link to my website to your friend if you’d like.

I’m a man easily found. If I haven’t proven it yet, you’re safe with me...

” I trailed off, still waiting for her name.

She tipped her head, orange and pink splashes of evening sunshine sparkling off her hair and in her eyes like diamonds.

I stepped closer, eager to close a little more of the distance between us.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to know who I’m about to take this walk, or something, with.” Her smile faded, worry lacing her features and making my heart fall in a thud at my feet. “Daphne.” She bent her head, tapping out the rest of her message on her phone before hitting Send and shoving it into her purse. “Now I’m all yours, Arkin

Broderick, Master Pile Driver.” Her dazzling smile returned as she teased, “Just don’t make me regret those words. ”

Arkin was kind. That was the first thing I’d ever noticed about him, and it threw me off balance.

This man was nothing like the guys who showed up at the bar.

He was thoughtful, polite, and had a self-deprecating sense of humor, which I found sweet.

It’d been years since I’d given a guy my number.

With my history, a romantic relationship was not something I ever thought I’d entertain again, but there was something about Arkin.

He seemed more like the leading man in a romance movie instead of a construction worker.

That was why I’d agreed to spend more time with him than just a ten-minute cup of coffee.

I really didn’t know much about dating, but my roommate, Molly, had always told me that a coffee date was the best way to go.

A coffee date could be cut short if the guy was a total creep.

Or it could be extended all the way into dinner if he had potential.

After a lot of thinking, I’d decided that Arkin had potential.

I wasn't sure about potential for what, but he definitely had managed to charm me enough that I didn't want to run off after ten minutes.

I knew he was safe, and that was my biggest concern.

He'd saved me last night, which made him most definitely not a predator.

"We've been walking in a circle for the last hour," he said as we passed the same tree for the tenth time.

We'd been so lost in conversation that time had slipped away.

"Oh, I guess we have," I whispered as I looked at our feet.

His shoes were ridiculous and way too fancy for anything in this town, but I appreciated the effort he went to, with the expensive Italian loafers.

He wasn't the kind of man who wore lavish, European leather shoes.

My eyes slowly rode up his strong legs, examining his torn and stained jeans.

I smiled because that was more like it. Arkin seemed like the kind of guy who wore ripped and tattered jeans and worn white T-shirts.

He didn't seem stuck-up or uppity but earthy and solid.

I guess that was one of the reasons I was so drawn to him.

"Did you borrow the shoes?" I uttered and then instantly wished I could take it back.

Here he was, saving me and being kind, and I was mocking him.

He took it well, though, with a smile. “Nah, these puppies are all mine. I had to wear them to a wedding.” I liked his smile.

It made his eyes crinkle and the blue in them dance with a little bit of mischief.

“Only the best for my first date in a decade,” he mocked himself, and I couldn’t help but giggle.

Silence hung between us a few beats. I could sense him searching for his next words.

“Well, Daphne, I’m a growing boy and about starved.

Could I interest you in a meal?” Just as I was about to say no, my treacherous stomach betrayed me with the sounds of starvation.

I’d never gotten to eat lunch today since the shop was so busy.

Arkin bent, peering into my face. “I think that was a yes.” He smiled again, and his ease and comfort made me little by little let down my steely resolve.

I nodded in agreement. “Perfect. I know just the place. I would offer to drive us, but I have a feeling you aren’t the type to get into the car of a guy you just met.

” “You would be right. What did you have in mind?” I asked, digging out my car keys.

“Do you know where Reggio’s is?” I looked at him, a little startled by his suggestion.

Reggio’s was a hole-in-the-wall Italian restaurant in town.

The place was a complete dive, but it had the best Italian food in the entire world.

I'd been going there since I was a little kid.

Whenever mom had a little extra money, she'd take me out and treat me to a giant bowl of spaghetti and meatballs.

"Know it? I practically grew up there." I smiled.

I was about to drool at just the thought of that delicious sauce.

"Great. They have the best sauce in town," he stated matter-of-factly, his words full of conviction.

"Yeah, they do." My heart spun excitedly in my chest. "Meet you there," I said as I headed for my car.

"Hold up!" He followed me. "A gentleman would walk you to your car, and I'm tryin' my best to be a gentleman here," he joked, stopping beside me.

"Gentleman, huh?" I poked at him a little.

"Saving your life last night didn't clue you in?"

"I grinned, shaking my head. "Right, that naturally heroic thing you do so well."
"Heroic—I like the sound of that." When we got to my car, he opened the door and let me get in.

Once I was settled, he leaned in close. And he smelled amazing.

As if my body couldn't help itself, I leaned discreetly in and inhaled, hoping he didn't notice.

The sly grin plastered on his face told me that he probably had.

“It’s just soap, Daphne. I’ll have to make a mental note to buy more.

” He winked, and a glance in the mirror showed me that my face had blushed to the shade of a ripened red tomato.

“See you at Reggio’s—let’s say twenty-five minutes?

” he asked. I just nodded, too mortified to say anything.

“This place is as good as it was when I was a kid. Reggio is a maestro.” Arkin patted his flat stomach.

“You came here as a child? Me too.” I couldn’t help wondering if the two of us could have crossed paths back then.

“Sure did. My siblings and I would eat until our stomachs ached,” he said with a smile, but this time there was no twinkle in his eyes, only sadness lurking there.

“Not fond memories?” I asked, sipping my coffee and then regretting my words as they sank in.

It wasn’t my place to pry into his past. Who knew what kind of childhood he’d had.

I knew better than anyone that not all parents were loving.

Not all childhood memories were worth saving.

“I just miss my sister.” His eyes trained out the window, he seemed to be lost in memories.

I knew that look too well. I'd been spending my entire adult life trying to escape my past. "I can't believe you ate three servings.

Where do you put it all?" I tried to change the mood, offering him an escape from the dark or lonely place his mind had wandered off to.

"I'm a growing boy. What can I say?" He moved his gaze from the window to me.

"I'm impressed and disgusted." He smiled at me, and once again I saw the light come back.

"So, can we now call this a date?" He leaned in, whispering to me across the table, "Cause I really want to do it again, but next time I'd like to pick you up and pay like my momma taught me.

" I found myself giggling at that way he had of lightening a mood instantly.

"Yes, I think I would like that."

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“If I didn’t know any better, I’d wonder if I had a stalker.” An easy grin tipped her lips when she spotted me headed for her across the coffee shop.

Barely 7:55 on Thursday, and there I was, freshly showered with an armful of fresh-picked peach roses, all for her.

“If I were stalking you, you’d know it.” I passed her the blooms over the counter.

She giggled, soft and sweet and enough to send zaps of energy into the air between us.

“At least you’re the kind of stalker who lurks in your car and attacks my potential harassers.

” “Clearing my path, that’s all.” “Path of destruction?” She untied her apron, tucking it under her arm.

“Just gettin’ rid of all the foolish bastards who think they have a shot at a kind soul like yours.

” My words seemed to strike her, ending our easy banter in favor of a small cloud of emotion.

“Sorry. I probably started this all wrong.” I grinned sheepishly, holding the front door of the coffee shop wide so she could exit and then turn to lock it behind her.

“I’d love to take you out for something to eat and hear about your day.

” She arched one eyebrow, my words seeming to rattle her again, before a soft smile crept up her cheeks.

“Every thought in my head is yelling at me to say no to you, Arkin Broderick.” I swallowed the lump of anxiety leveraged in my throat.

“But—” she tucked her nose into the blooms and inhaled “—there’s something about you...

” She shook her head, bemused. “I just can’t force the word no from my lips when you’re standing across from me with that smile, fancy leather shoes and all.

” I rocked back and forth on my feet, a very new pair of dark-wash jeans covering my thighs and those Italian leather things.

I leaned in extra close, fingers moving a wisp of her hair from her cheek.

“Since you brought ’em up our last date, figured that meant you liked them.

” Her blush deepened a lush crimson shade, the color of a ripe fall fruit.

“Pretty quick to own that date word, huh?” She seemed uneasy again, and my mind was running away with me looking for ways to make her feel a little more comfortable with me.

I didn’t know why I was drawn to her like I was, why she’d constantly lingered on my mind since our first meeting, or why I had the persistent sense of protection when I was with her.

She was hesitant, like a newborn bird, and every part of me was aware that she needed tenderness from me before anything else.

“I’ll take what I can get with you.” I resisted pressing a kiss to her pillowy lips, pulling away and regaining some of that control that’d been wavering.

“I’m happy to take you to Reggio’s again, but if you’re up for a little adventure, I’ve got another plan.

” Her eyes moved from her car back to me, as if she was warring with herself.

“I have to work in the morning, early.” I nodded.

“Not a problem. Early bedtime tonight. Got it.” She finally nodded.

“Should I follow you?” “Well, the place I had in mind is a little more rugged than the Toyota can take.” She hesitated again, shifting back and forth on her feet.

“If you want, you can follow me all the way to the last paved road, park at the pull-off, and—” “No, no, that would be silly.” She brushed my words away.

“I already online searched you anyway, I trust you.” I barked a laugh, thinking how much things had changed since I’d last done this.

“Good, I think?” Her grin brightened, like she was going to force herself to enjoy this, before she tossed her apron in the back of her car and turned.

“Well, let’s get on with this date, Knight.

” I shook my head, amused that I never could tell what might come out of that mouth of hers.

“I’ve got a few extra sweatshirts in the back if it gets chilly.

” I helped her into my truck before taking off around to the other side.

I was totally winging this second date of ours, but for some reason I got the sense that a little peace was what she needed, not another noisy restaurant.

Or maybe that was just me, wanting to dig a little deeper under Daphne’s skin.

“Call me crazy”—I turned the key on my truck—“but I was thinking we can stop at the market on the edge of town and get some stuff for a picnic.” Surprise etched her features before she nodded. “That sounds perfect, actually.”

“It’s weird how comfortable I am around you.” She sipped more of the strawberry sparkling water out of her very fancy disposable champagne flute.

“I’m a talented guy.” I shrugged, thinking how well I’d pulled off this spontaneous date. The small clearing near a lake where I’d done some fishing as a kid proved to be a surprisingly romantic spot.

“Yeah, but really. Where did you come from, Arkin Broderick?” She sipped more of the drink.

“And why did it take you so long to get here?” I laughed.

“Where’s here, exactly?” “With me,” she said, shrugging.

“It’s like, just when I need you, there you are, flying in like a superhero to save my day.

” I nodded, thinking that was a pretty good approximation of how the last few meetings with her had been.

“My Spidey sense is on point.” “I work with so many people at the coffee shop, it’s a revolving door of personalities,” she whispered thoughtfully, eyes bouncing around the constellations above our head.

“I’ve gotten pretty good at reading people.

” “What’s your read on me, then?” I lay back at her side, arms behind my head.

Her profile was silhouetted against the creamy moonlight.

“Kind.” She turned, eyes meeting mine. “Proud.” She leaned back, mimicking my pose, shoulder to shoulder.

“Bossy.” Amusement tickled her voice. “Maybe a little dark.” “Dark, huh?” I considered her words, never realizing before now that maybe I was projecting a moody bastard sort of vibe without even realizing it.

“Remember I did an Internet search. I know about the arrest.” She gazed at the ground as she spoke, and my heart stood still.

My whole body stiffened. That arrest was years ago, after everything happened.

I was a hurt and angry kid, barely twenty-two.

I didn’t regret what I did—I never would.

Because of what I did, another girl didn’t get hurt.

“It’s okay. The bastard deserved it. Do you make it a habit of rescuing women?

” she asked while taking another sip of her drink.

Her eyes were on me intently, as if trying to get an answer without making me say a word.

“Someone I love got brutally raped and killed. It triggered something. I guess I'm working through it, and I guess that makes me too dark for some people.” I looked at her, trying to see if I was a monster in her eyes, but all I saw was the color of the ocean staring back at me, wild and beautiful. “Not for me,” she breathed, “because you’re also fun-loving.” She softened, her tone shifting from serious to teasing.

She was giving me an out, and I took it.

Our shoulders and hips brushed, her skin sizzling against mine even through the cotton of our clothes.

“And so protective.” “That’s probably a pretty accurate reading.

I’ll be sure to tip extra.” She rolled over, one hand buried in her waves of hair as she propped herself on her side to nail me with her intense eyes.

“If the company is good, no tip is required.” She grinned mischievously before popping up from her place on the brand-new picnic blanket, pushing her arms at both sides and twirling softly.

The wind picked up around us, and her smile widened.

The vision of her twirling under the stars like that was sweet enough to hold me over for the rest of my life.

A slow classic love song wafted out of the speakers of my truck, and without thinking, I rose to my feet, crossing the distance that separated us.

I was drawn to her like a firefly in darkness.

She turned, and our eyes locked as we neared each other.

I paused, just at the edge of her personal space, before she pressed her fingertips to my waist and leaned in.

My heart fell a half a dozen floors to my feet, her touch sending shots of fire through every nerve in my body.

Without a word, my hands entwined with hers.

She was so soft and quiet against my chest. With every moment, she crawled a little deeper into my chest, settling herself in all of my dark places with her light.

“News to both of us...” My lips connected with her forehead.

“You’re my first dance, Daphne.” She didn’t reply, letting the music and the wind wrap us up in our own warm little bubble.

I couldn’t help thinking how easy it would be to weave this woman into my life, wake to her precious smile every morning, and kiss her to sleep at night.

If picnics and slow dancing in the moonlight was life with Daphne, what in the hell had taken me so long?

After a few minutes, I finally spoke. “We should get you home. Work comes early.” The truth was, I’d give anything to stay right here with her, all night.

“Just one more song, Arkin?” I knew then, I was a goner.

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Swaying in the dark with Arkin was perfection.

In his arms, I felt the world disappear and I was actually happy.

Happiness was something that hadn't come into my life very often, but here I was, surrounded by strong arms, and it felt good.

It was right. His hands found my hair and his fingers gently brushed through it, causing my body and soul to surge with delight. I wanted him to touch me everywhere.

"You are so beautiful," he muttered into my hair.

I placed my head on his shoulder and breathed him in.

I loved his scent, a mixture of work and soap.

It was intoxicating, and I couldn't get enough.

"I am going to kiss you, Daphne. If you don't want me to, I need you to say it now.

" His words felt hot against my skin, and in that moment more than anything, I wanted to feel the sensation of his lips against my own.

"I think I want you to, Arkin." My words came out as nothing more than a whisper dancing in the air around us.

He took my head into his hands, his touch featherlight.

He looked into my eyes, holding my gaze and locking it on to his.

I could see the passion lurking there, the desperation to keep the darkness at bay for me.

He wanted to be gentle for me. “I am not going to kiss you until your response is more than ‘I think I want you to.’” His thumb grazed my bottom lip, making me inhale a breath.

The man was good, I had to give him that.

He made me go from not wanting anything to do with him, to wanting to have his gaze linger on my lips.

“I want you to kiss me. Arkin, kiss me...” My words were firm and definite.

It was all he needed. He pressed his lips to mine, slow and gentle.

At first it was a featherlight kiss, so light that I could almost think I’d imagined it.

Then he pulled me to him with one hand on my waist while the other held my head tight, almost afraid I would move and in a flash be lost to him.

His kiss became ignited by some sort of hidden fire.

It was as if he had put every fiber of himself in this very moment.

He opened his lips as I opened mine, and the mingling of our tongues was a symphony of need, desire, passion, and most of all hope.

Hope that two lost souls could find something true and pure.

His tongue mingled with mine, creating a need that I didn't know I could find.

This man was special, and I was feeling blessed that at that moment, he was here in the moonlight dancing with me in his arms. When the kiss ended, I opened my eyes, only to watch as his were still closed.

He inhaled and a smile formed on his lips, making the crow's feet by his eyes crinkle and dance.

That smile made me feel like I was floating.

The fact that he was relishing a simple kiss made me ache for how lonely he must be.

"That was like tasting a slice of heaven," he finally whispered as he opened his eyes.

"Well, I'm glad you approved. I've been very out of practice," I whispered.

"So my next question is, when can I do it again?" he asked.

"This"—he gestured between us with his hand—"is something special. When can I see you again?" he asked, lacing his fingers with mine.

"Want to come over for dinner Friday? I'm a pretty decent cook.

"My words shocked me at how brazen they were.

"You sure?" he asked. "More than sure," I said, smiling up at him.

"It's a date," he whispered to my temple before he kissed me softly.

I didn't think I had ever been as nervous as I was Friday night.

I had been in the kitchen right after work starting dinner, like a real Stepford wife, hair and makeup on point and a white frilly apron tied around my waist. I hadn't really cooked for anyone since my mother died, ten years ago.

The whole act felt bittersweet. Cooking was something I had always done when I wanted to show someone they meant something to me.

It made me feel good to take care of those I cared about, and I found myself caring about Arkin.

I'd tried hard not to, but the more I got to know him, the more I found myself drawn to him.

When the front door buzzer went off, my heart leapt in my chest. I ripped the apron off me, threw it on the counter, and ran to the intercom.

"Hello," I said. My voice sounded shaky, and I found myself suddenly nervous.

"Hey, it's me." His voice was much deeper on the speaker, and it sent vibrations through my body.

"Come on up," I said excitedly. I stood at the door like a child on Christmas morning, waiting, counting down the moments until I saw Arkin again.

Forgetting my need to look calm and collected, I flung the door open before he could finish knocking.

"Well, hello there, beautiful," he said as he leaned in to kiss my cheek.

He had another bouquet of flowers, this time bright white daisies with a creamy yellow center, and a box that looked like it came from a bakery.

“Hi,” I said as I blushed. “What is that?” I pointed to the box.

“Only the best pastries in town,” he said with a smile, a hint of flirtation in his voice.

“I really like sweet things.” A shiver of anticipation sliced through me.

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“Your pudding is silky and sweet.” The words were out of my mouth before I could think. The chocolate concoction on my tongue was smooth and decadent, just like I imagined she would taste.

“Thank you.” She sucked the remainder off the tiny silver spoon and then placed it back in her tiny cup with a clink.

My balls ached. She’d been so adorable and delightful all night, the small chip on her shoulder finally gone in favor of a flirtatious and easygoing woman I’d suddenly become obsessed with.

I couldn't deny it anymore. I was a damn puppy dog when it came to this woman. “I can only imagine one thing sweeter.” I pushed my empty cup away, standing and placing a warm hand on her elbow. Her eyelids fluttered open wide. My entire body was strung tight and aching for her. Just the thought of flipping her over the kitchen island and making a feast of her sweet little pussy was enough to make my cock leak like a faucet. “You’ve been so busy worrying about what I like,” I whispered, hand at her waist, pinning her between the counter and me.

“What do you like, Daphne?” She couldn’t speak, round little mouth panting breathless pants and making my erection pound a little harder with the need to feel this woman on another level.

“I like spending time with you.” I grinned, pride rioting through me.

“Glad to hear that.” I did the thing I’d been thinking about since she sucked all the chocolate off the spoon: I pressed my lips to hers, gentle at first and then with more

fervor.

“You don’t know what you do to me,” I breathed between kisses.

“I exhaust myself thinking of all the ways I could kiss you.” I nipped at the side of her smile.

“Make you all soft and warm in my hands...” My hands traveled up her body, discovering all the curvy new territory of her hips and waist. I tightened my hold, grinding her against my hard muscles.

“Do you want me to keep kissing you, Daphne?” She nodded softly, her tongue darting out to trace my own sensitive lips.

She tasted like chocolate and honey and a hint of cinnamon, and every second she was on my taste buds, I only wanted more.

“Say it.” She nodded. “Please, kiss me, Arkin.” Her words were all it took for the animal in me to take over.

Hands at her hips, grinding against her, I ran my tongue along the seam and then lunged.

Our tongues dancing and tangling together, I scented her deeply through my nose, the cinnamon and fire of her enough to send me into overdrive.

“You make me want to do things like protect you.” I lifted her up onto the island, her ass cheeks against the cold granite countertop.

“And say things like I do.” I pushed my hands up her creamy thighs, digging my fingertips in deep and sliding her pretty ass toward my face.

“And spend my nights buried between these beautiful thighs.” I pushed her legs apart, my thumbs stroking the wet seam of her little cotton underwear.

“So fucking soaked for me, Daphne.” I patted the damp crotch of her panties.

“I love how responsive this sweet cunt is to my touch.” She moaned, back arching off the counter and right for my mouth.

“Eager pussy we have here.” I grinned, sliding my nose against the damp fabric.

“And smells sweeter than a fresh ripe peach.” My hands crawled up her creamy skin, lifting her dress as I went and patrolling every inch of her silky property.

“Should I taste this juicy peach?” She hummed, arched, fingers meeting mine at the center of her chest. “Say it,” I ordered.

“Please eat my pretty pussy. I’m so soaking wet and ready for you.

” I growled against her cunt, pleased when she trembled against me and a fresh wave of desire soaked her little panties.

“You like that dirty talk, don’t you, my sweet peach?

” She moaned softly, trying to grind her greedy little hips against my face.

“Say it.” She huffed with irritation, fingers squeezing my hand in silent begging.

“Say it.” My cock leaked with anticipation, but my need for her to be okay with every step of this was even more powerful.

“I love when you talk dirty to my pussy,” she whispered softly.

“Good.” I dipped my nose across her leaking pussy, thinking I was about to tear those little panties off with my teeth any second.

“Now say it so the neighbors can hear you.” She paused for a moment as if pondering my words, before I left her no choice and tore at the elastic of her panties with my teeth, the treat of the fabric against her golden flesh enough to send me cumming for the next week.

And then Daphne screamed, “Oh! My! God! Arkin, yes, please, please, keep talking dirty to me. Please don’t stop eating my juicy peach.

” I laughed against her now-bare cunt, mouth watering as I gazed on her sweet, glistening goodness.

“That’s what I like, baby.” I grasped my hands at her thick thighs, pulling her dripping cunt where it belonged, against my face.

“Keep it nice and loud. It’s hard to hear when I’ve got your beautiful thighs around my ears.

” My tongue traced the seam of her lips, and she trembled wildly.

“Arkin —oh God!” I grinned, diving deeper, stabbing my tongue through her pink engorged folds and sucking with raw fire raging through my veins.

Every single one of her breathy moans registered in the base of my balls, and my cock bit against my zipper, inching closer to a release as I continued to brush against the counter.

Gyrating eagerly, I licked at her hot cunt, hands tweaking at her nipples and roaming the heavy flesh of her gorgeous tits.

I groaned against her pussy, thinking of the way she'd flashed her deep cleavage every time she'd leaned over to offer me more food tonight, and all I'd wanted to do was jerk my cock in my hands and then blow my load across her heaving breasts.

With an erotic shudder, Daphne's sweet little pussy trembled, thighs shaking at my ears before her soft pants turned to desperate cries and she creamed on my tongue.

I eagerly sucked up everything she had to give.

My own release barreled forward uncontrollably, my balls drawing up tight as the edge of the island gave just enough friction against the tip of my cock that I came in thick bursts.

The denim on my jeans dampened almost instantly, the juice of her pussy still sliding down my lips.

My gaze slid around the counter, settling on a chocolate-covered piping bag she'd used to make the pudding.

I grabbed it with one hand, pushing her dress over her head with the other, pink lacy bra and hard little nipples waiting for me.

With one hand, I piped tiny smiley faces across the cups of her bra and then drew lines down her torso with arrows ending straight at my juicy little peach.

"Now that I've had a taste of the best peach in the world...

" I licked the chocolate off her skin, sucking extra hard at the nubs of her nipples to make them stand stiff and pert, before ending at her juicy mouth, kissing sweetly and grinding my dick against her warm, silky folds.

“Sweetest pudding and juiciest peach.” I kissed her slowly.

“I may never leave.”

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“I don’t want you to leave,” I panted, the orgasm still lingering and my senses still wild with abandon. All my worries seemed to disappear, and right in this moment, the only thing that mattered was Arkin and me, right now in this space.

Arkin, his tongue, and his hands were all that I could think about.

“Sweetheart, if I stay, I’m not sure I can control myself.

” He pointed to his jeans, and I could see the small wet spot.

“It’s a little embarrassing when a man my age acts like a thirteen-year-old boy.

” He smiled. I barked a laugh and immediately clamped my hand to my lips.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh.” He pulled me off the counter and wrapped my legs around his waist, moving us to the small couch in my living room.

He fell back on the sofa with me now on top of him.

“That sweet, juicy peach feels so good against my cock,” he groaned as I rubbed down on him, getting high on the power of bringing this strong man to his knees.

He hands roamed my body, and I felt the callouses of his palms grating against my skin deliciously.

“Your skin is so fucking soft, baby,” he said as he moved his hands to my nipples.

He lingered there for a moment, as if he was waiting for my permission.

His eyes locked with mine, and I nodded.

I felt safe with Arkin. I wanted to be with him.

I needed to be with him. I needed to forget everything—all the pain all the worry.

I just wanted him. “Oh, baby,” he said, taking my nipple into his mouth and sucking me deeply.

He bit gently, grazing his teeth against my nipple and causing my entire body to shiver.

“I love how fucking responsive you are to me,” he growled before slapping my thigh roughly and then moving me off him and onto the couch.

He was up and pacing the floor a moment later.

“How about we watch a movie?” He paused at my movie collection.

Arkin was giving me whiplash. Confusion and, I hated to admit, a little rejection, simmered through me.

“Wait, did I do something wrong?” I covered myself up, suddenly feeling too exposed.

He got down on his knees in front of me and grabbed my head in his hands, making it impossible for me to look away.

“No, baby, no. I just know that you have some issues with men, and this thing with

you and me is so special, and I don't want to fuck it up by moving too fast. I'm not going anywhere.

I'm not in a rush for anything. I want you to feel good about us and anything we do.

I don't want to move too quickly and then have you scared off.

"His words were so sweet and sincere that in that moment, I wanted to be with him more than I had ever wanted anything else.

"I want you, Arkin," I whispered. "You have me, Daphne. God, do you have me, baby." He kissed me.

A kiss flavored with passion, need, want, and desperate with raw desire.

It was fueled with a type of fire that I never knew existed.

In that kiss, I felt forever, and I would do whatever was necessary to keep this feeling lingering.

I kissed him back with my own fear and insecurities, desperate to make him know that it was all okay.

We were beyond okay. "I want you, Arkin. I need to be with you. Please?" I begged, desperate for him not to turn away from me.

He growled into my mouth and crushed his lips to mine, pushing his tongue into my mouth.

"Baby, you never have to beg me for anything. All you have to do is ask and I'll come running.

No matter what it is, I'll do it for you.

You own me, Daphne. You own me more than you will ever know.

” With those words, he picked me up and cradled me in his arms. “Once we do this, there’s no going back.

You will belong to me.” His voice was firm and dominant, and I felt a surge of excitement in my veins.

I nodded slowly. “Tell me, baby. Who do you belong to?” His eyes burned into my soul.

“I’m yours, Arkin,” I whispered.

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“I want to make sure you’re comfortable with everything we’re doing here.” I trailed kisses down her torso. “I can trust you to speak up if you want me to stop, can’t I, Daphne?”

My fingers locked with hers, sucking the flesh at the dip of her waist as I waited for her answer.

“Yes.” She sighed breathlessly. “I thought so.” I continued kissing across her hips, landing at her core and licking softly.

“There’s never been anyone else,” I hissed between licks.

“After everything fell apart, I was so busy trying to survive every day that I never gave a spare thought to another woman. I’m clean, Daphne, and I don’t carry condoms on me.

” Her fingers tightened in mine, soft mewls now tumbling from her lips as my words vibrated off her engorged pussy folds.

“Oh my God, Arkin. Me too. I never even had a boyfriend in high school. I was so messed up by the craziness that my dad brought to our family, I just...I just couldn’t bring myself to trust anyone else with that.

” The knowledge that she was truly mine for the taking brought a sense of soul-crushing connection descending upon me.

She was meant for me. She would only ever be mine.

“When I came here tonight, I didn’t expect this to happen.

But God forgive me, I want you bare.” I kissed her clit softly.

“I don’t want a single thing between us.

” Her other hand pushed into my hair. “When I said I didn’t want you to leave, I meant tonight and I meant my life.

” Her eyes boring into my soul like that about made me doing the wildest thing I’d ever thought of doing and stopping right here to beg her to take me, now and the next thousand tomorrows.

“Please, take me.” I about creamed my pants then, the tip of my cock darkening the already damp spot as I fumbled with the button on my jeans and then shoved the denim down my thighs as quickly as I could.

“Waited long enough for you.” I caught her lips with a kiss, sliding the hot flesh of my cock through her warm and silky folds.

The searing hot touch of her skin against mine sent balls of fire rattling through me, every nerve in my body charged and waiting to blast off.

“So sweet and juicy for me.” I slowed my movement against her, angling my leaking tip at her entrance, hovering just at the edge before kissing her long and slow, making sure she knew this counted, we counted.

“Every moment we spend together is the best moment of my life, and then comes the next day,” I whispered, pressing a little deeper into her, “and somehow it gets better.” She sighed softly, my hands cradling the soft round flesh of her breasts as I tried to kiss away the pain of my thick intrusion.

“I’m going to do my best to make this amazing for you.

” I slipped my tongue against hers, driving a fraction deeper until I came against the soft barrier that signaled her virginity.

I nearly growled, something primal urging me to take what was mine and then lick her to a thousand fierce and trembling orgasms when I was done to make sure she was soft and relaxed and ready for me next time.

“I’m ready,” she whispered, as if reading my mind.

I gulped. “I’m so damn ready for you too, precious baby.

” I pushed, sliding past the thin membrane with ease and deep inside her ripe body.

Growling out loud, the animal inside me took over, and I thrust with wild ferocity.

“Every smooth ridge, I can feel the end of you. Feel your pulse quickening around my dick. Your clit swelling against my pelvis when I grind into you,” I whispered before shaking overtook her body, clenching around my cock, her legs quivering, nails digging into my back as her release shot through her.

“I’ve waited so long...” she murmured between pants.

“For what, baby?” Speech was difficult as I thrust in and out of her, hit the end, and swirled my hips, causing her to moan repeatedly.

She was losing herself. Losing herself in the pleasure.

I could see it in her eyes—the way her neck arched, the way her nails clawed at my back, my arms. She was ravenously seeking me, and it was the hottest thing I’d ever

seen.

“For you. I’ve been waiting so long for you,” she murmured as I took her.

My heartbeat quickened tenfold as my eyes widened at her words.

I searched her beautiful face, held taut with ecstasy, her full lips red and swollen from my kisses.

She pulled one elegant arm up behind her and held on to the bedpost. There she was, taking my fucking breath away.

The way she gave herself over to me. By giving me everything she had, she owned me.

Everything snapped into focus—life with her.

Our kids. Our grandkids. She and I. My world shifted, and now she was my axis.

I revolved around her. I would do anything for her.

“I’ve never felt this way, Daphne. I was born to make you happy,” I professed between thrusts as she began to clench around me again, the nails of one hand digging into my bicep, the pain radiating through my body, landing at my balls and throttling my pleasure up another notch.

“I can’t stop thinking about cumming deep inside this juicy little peach of mine.

” I caught her earlobe with my teeth. “I can’t stop thinking of planting my seed inside you, seeing what beautiful babies we’d make.

” Daphne’s arms snaked around my neck, hips rocking against me before I sucked one of her pebbled nipples into my mouth and she nearly came unglued.

With the throatiest, sexiest moans I’d ever heard, her body began to slowly tremble until she was cumming and crying out in waves of sweet pleasure.

“That’s it. Coat my cock with all that sweet juice.

” Before I could register what was happening, her tiny little fingertips were dancing between her thighs and tickling my balls in the most delicious and elicit ways.

The air vacated my lungs as my own release rocketed through me at her unexpected touch.

I came in thick jets, unable to even think about pulling out of her before she’d wrenched the cum right out of me.

“You’re magic.” My strokes slowed, lips sliding against hers as I eased in and out of her.

Caging her in my arms, I hovered over her soft form and kissed her until we were both gasping for breaths.

“We’re gonna have to talk about exactly what you meant when you said don’t leave.

” I slid to her side, twisting her into my arms perfectly so I could wrap one hand around her waist and slide my finger around her juicy clit and sink into her from behind at the same time.

She clamped down on her lip, eyes flickering open finally and landing all around the room, anywhere but me.

“Well,” she sighed as I stroked a little quicker, intentionally trying to fuck her breath away.

“Well?” I tweaked her nipple, eliciting a sexy sigh.

“I guess in the moment, I was caught up and thinking...” I was rubbing her clit with renewed speed, sensing another impending orgasm coming from her body.

“Uh-huh...?” I fucked her a little deeper, stroked still faster.

“Well, if you keep doing that...” Her knees trembled, a new orgasm taking over her.

“Is forever asking too much?” I laughed, stroking her creamy skin and trailing kisses along her shoulders.

“Exactly what I was thinking, Daphne.” I placed a kiss at the base of her neck.

“I’m disappointed it took you so long to ask. ”

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Waking up in Arkin's arms made me feel alive.

For the first time in my life, the air I inhaled felt clean, not clouded with the pollution of my past. As I lay there staring at the ceiling, a smile formed on my lips.

Here I was, actually smiling. Arkin made me want to do this life in a whole new way.

I never thought it was possible to feel hope, but my heart was so full in that moment.

When you spend your whole life in fear and doubt, feeling joy is like learning to fly.

Arkin had given me wings, and now I wanted to soar.

I looked at him sleeping soundly. He looked so sweet, His dark lashes fluttered while his lips were slightly open.

I appreciated that he didn't snore. It made the entire fantasy of him that much better.

I was the heroine in a romance, and he truly was my knight.

His arms reached up and came around me. I felt his hardness stir, making me giggle.

Here I was, giggling—which was insane to me since I hadn't even giggled as a small child.

"I like waking up hard with you beside me," he whispered as he pulled me closer.

My hand came up to caress his face, tanned and weathered from working in the hot, blazing sun day in and day out.

“I like it too. But I do have to get ready for work.” “It’s Saturday,” he protested, his arm vise keeping me immobile.

“I work in a bar and coffee shop, two business that unfortunately never close on weekends,” I said, kissing his nose.

As soon as I did it, I regretted my decision.

Arkin growled, rolling on top of me. He pulled my bottom lip with his teeth and nipped gently, making my heart beat rapidly.

My need for this man seemed to overwhelm and consume me.

“You see how hard I am?” He placed the tip of his cock to my entrance.

My legs opened of their own accord, not willing to resist the feeling of his penetration, needing to feel him deep inside.

“Is my peach hungry?” he asked, teasing me, a lust-filled smile forming on his lips.

“Yes,” I said, under his spell. He growled and pushed inside me.

I loved how full he made me feel. “I love how wet this pussy is for my cock,” he grunted as he increased his rhythm.

“Who does this pussy belong to?” he demanded.

My mind had become fuzzy, and all I could concentrate on was the pleasure he was

giving me.

And then the unbelievable sensation stopped.

“Arkin, don’t stop,” I begged. “Answer my question.” He used his cock to rub my juices on my clit.

“Whose pussy is this?” he asked again. “Yours,” I breathlessly whispered.

“What do you want me to do to my pussy?” he asked, continuing the assault on my clit.

“I want you to fuck it.” The words were out as if I couldn’t control them.

I only had one thing on my lust-filled mind.

. My eyes shot open, and I looked up into his face.

“Please, Arkin,” I pleaded. That was all he needed.

He thrust into me hard and fast. He looked wild and out of control, and that only made my own passion ignite.

Seeing this man lose all control for me was sexy, and it gave fuel to my own desire.

“God, I love your tight little pussy. It feels so good, baby. I want to cover you with cum, mark you like a damn animal.” He sat us up, pulling me on top, still in me and moving me up and down on his cock.

My head fell back. He felt larger in this position, the slight pain only enhancing the pleasure I was pulling from both of us.

“That’s it, baby. Work my cock. Take everything you need so you can give me that sweet juice.

I like how juicy this peach gets for me,” he encouraged, wrapping my hair in his fist and pulling it back.

“Yes, baby. Your tits look so good bouncing like that.” He slapped my breast, and I liked the sting.

“You liked that, didn’t you? You like a little pain with your pleasure, baby?

” he asked and did it again. “Yes!” I screamed, feeling myself flood even more.

“I think you might be into a little pain. Are you my little pain slut?” he whispered as he grabbed my nipple between his thumb and index finger and pinched it hard before pulling on it.

“It’s our little secret, baby. Give it all to me.

” That pull was all I needed. My back fell back, giving him more access to those nipples.

He leaned in, taking one into his mouth and using his teeth to bite.

This bite wasn’t a nip. It was harder, and that was all I needed, screaming as I rode his cock to my own orgasm.

“Fuck. Baby, I am never going to get sick of hearing you cum. I love how you soak my cock.” He grunted, thrusting into me with speed.

“Get ready, baby. I-am-gonna-fill-you-with-my-seed.” Each word was punctuated

with a grunt.

His muscles tensed and shook, and his thick seed poured into me in pulsing waves before he rolled off and pulled me to him.

“You okay?” He placed a soft kiss at my shoulder.

“More than okay. Sex with you feels beyond anything I could imagine even existed before. Not just physically, but in my head and heart too,” I said, smiling into his chest. “So it sounds like you’re saying I fucked you into another universe.

” He trailed kisses down my arm, doting on me with his lips.

“I think that makes me your sex god, Ms. Madden.” “Then sign me up to be your slave.” “Did we do anything that was too much for you?” His hands pulled my head gently up so he could look into my eyes.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I liked it. It felt amazing. I’m not sure what that says about me, though.

” Shame crept into my mind. “There’s nothing wrong with you.

It’s fucking sexy as hell. Over time we can explore more things together.

” He kissed the top of my head and then hauled me on top of him.

I heard the pounding of his heart against my ear, letting the peace and calm of this man shroud me in warmth and acceptance.

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“You really surprise me, ya know, Broderick?” I grinned, taking her bait. “Yeah, how’s that, Peaches?” Her eyes cast from the starry night surrounding us down to my worn

leather boots. “No snazzy Italian loafers tonight. I’m not even sure what to think about the quick change.”

I hadn’t even thought about what I’d pulled on before we left the house. The idea to go to the traveling carnival in town was a last-minute one. Now, we sat side by side on an old Ferris wheel, wobbling in the breeze. “Forgive me. I was distracted by a beauty with pouty lips and a great ass.”

Her grin finally split. “Truth is, I think your work boots are hot. I like the reminder of what a hard-workin’ man you are.

” My cock throbbed at her words. “Good, because when we get home, I’m gonna make you strip and wear nothing but my boots when I fuck you.

” The little heartbeat at her throat quickened, and I ducked, licking at the creamy exposed flesh.

A flurry of goosebumps erupted in my wake.

I slipped a hand between her thighs, rubbing at the seam of her cutoffs.

“I can feel your pussy humming for me underneath your shorts.” I rubbed at her aching core.

“Aren’t you still sore from earlier?” She clamped down on her bottom lip and nodded.

“Yes, but I still want you.” My inner ape beat his chest. “If I had another minute, I’d fuck you with my fingers until you creamed all over this seat.

” The Ferris wheel shifted forward again, causing our cage to jerk gently.

“You’re a dirty, dirty man.” I moved away with a smirk.

The scent of her pussy filling the air was enough to make me think I couldn’t be trusted out in public with her yet.

The urge to drop and fuck her up against anything available was still too strong.

I cast my eyes out to the twinkling golden lights that dotted the carnival grounds, tiny little specks of people shuffling around below us.

“How crazy would you think I am if I said I’ve never been on a Ferris wheel before?

” She popped a cloud of pink cotton candy into her mouth and smiled.

“I’d say you’re bat-shit.” I squeezed her thigh, our bodies pressed close as we sat suspended atop the carnival grounds.

“And I’d say what kinda childhood did you have if you’ve never hung in a metal basket above a crowd at deadly heights?

” I grinned, thinking that despite whatever else, it felt so damn fun to experience the silly side of life through her eyes again.

I'd grown up with a pretty stable childhood in every way, aside from a few traumatic moments.

I didn't carry much from my past, but there was something a little darker that clouded Daphne's eyes sometimes.

"There wasn't a lot of room in the budget for things like cotton candy and carnivals and—" her eyes averted, taking in the nighttime crowd below us "—laughter." "It's a good thing you found me, then.

" I snaked her fingers in mine. "I think you found me." Her bright smile returned.

"This big fluffy elephant you won me thanks you too." She petted the soft gray stuffed animal in her lap.

"I've had so much fun tonight." She popped another cloud of periwinkle cotton candy into her mouth and savored it as it melted on her tongue.

"I don't think I've ever had this much fun at a carnival.

" The metal cage we were locked in shifted into gear, moving us slowly around the wheel as riders exited at the bottom.

"The last time I was here, I had pimples and Coke-bottle glasses." She burst into a quiet giggle.

"I can't imagine you with nerd glasses." "Good. Don't ever try again.

I've long buried all the photo evidence.

" "Surely I can sweet talk your mom into sharing the goods?" She was teasing, but it

sparked a thought in my mind.

“Hey, why don’t you come the next time my mom does family dinner?”

” Her eyebrows rose, eyes swirling with some inexplicable emotions.

“And like”—she tipped her head adorably—“meet your people?” “Yeah, I guess that’s what I mean.

” The Ferris wheel moved forward a few more places.

“Are we really ready for that step?” She was kidding me, I could tell, but I liked it.

I adjusted in my seat. Just the act of her bare thigh being pressed against mine for the last ten minutes of this ride was enough to remind me what she tasted like riding my tongue.

“Oh, we’re definitely ready, Peaches.” The pad of my thumbs settled on her full bottom lip, gently sliding across the tender flesh before I pressed our lips together in a tender kiss.

I didn't give a damn if we did look like lovestruck teenagers. I was lovestruck, well and twisted head over heels for this woman. “You make me so happy, Arkin. I didn’t know it was possible to feel so —” she licked her lips “—safe.” My heart collapsed at the use of the word safe.

It wasn’t the first time she’d expressed sentiments like this one and wasn’t the first time I’d wondered about the details of her life before I’d come into it.

“I’m vowing to you right here and now, on my word as a man, you’ll always be safe as long as I’m around, Daphne.

You never have to worry about that.” She nodded, happiness splitting her cheeks in a grin.

“You keep proving that to me, over and over.” “I’m a man of few words but a lot of action.

It takes some getting used to.” “Not for me.” She spread her palm on my cheek, her thumb tracing the arch of my cheekbone.

“It’s just one of the things I love about you.

” “Mm.” I placed another hungry kiss on her lips.

“Let’s talk more about all those other things you love about me.

” The rusted metal door creaked on its hinges as a teen carnie swung the door wide, gesturing us out.

I clasped her hand, and we ran out and down the steps, laughter and the scent of fried dough filling the night air.

“The comedy show just started at the stage. What do you say we throw popcorn at him every time he cracks a corny joke?” “Sounds like the best idea yet.” She grinned up at me, eyes dancing with fire and amusement and everything sweet in life that I wanted more of.

Whoever had wronged this woman in the past would have a one-way ticket to hell if I ever crossed their path.

Pushing my fingers into her hair, I held on to her for extra-long beats while the chaotic world spun around us, lost in her hair, her eyes, down deep to her sweet soul.

“It’s weird when I’m with you... I’ve never felt like more a changed man and my true self at the same time.

” Her eyes hung heavy, silence weighted like raindrops as we lost ourselves.

“I’ve never been the kind of person who needed other people to make me happy, but you make me laugh, and smile, and want to dance and sing and every other crazy thing on earth,” she confessed.

“And eat cotton candy in bed every day.” I snagged a pink tuft, dusting it along the button of her cute nose and then teasing it at her lips.

She nipped it, and it dissolved on contact, turning her lips a deeper shade of pink than before.

“Here. Let me get that.” I darted my tongue out, licking away the sugary sweetness.

She groaned, thighs shifting restlessly.

“Maybe it’s time we go home.” “Mm, I like the sound of that even more,” I growled, lifting her easily and spinning her, our lips connected the entire time.

“Wait!” She pulled away from my lips, giggling.

“I dropped the elephant!” I turned with her in my arms, bending quickly to swipe the elephant into my hands while keeping her safely secured in my embrace.

“I vote we name him Peaches.” I dusted him off on my thigh and then passed it to her.

But her eyes weren’t on me or Peaches. They were trained over my shoulder, round

with quiet horror.

“Babe?” I breathed, trying to get her attention.

“Look what he’s doing,” she mumbled, fear and anxiety rocketing through her words.

“Who?” I spun, sliding her down my body as my eyes scanned the crowd.

“Him.” She pointed, and there across the dusty aisle, shrouded in shadows, an man was yanking on a young lady’s arm.

The carnival drowned out their voices, but the woman looked scared of the tge on his face.

Before I could even register what to do next, the man released the woman’s arm and then shoved her forcefully into the dust before looking over her, his arm cocked back.

“Oh, fuck no,” I spat, crossing the distance in a flash and hauling that useless fuck away from the woman.

I shoved him, over and over, until he was pressed up against the brick wall of a utility building, my hands shaking as I convinced myself why it would be a great idea if I didn’t throttle this motherfucker into the hospital.

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Not just any slap but enough to knock his fucking teeth out and leave him with a knot on the back of his head when it smacked against the brick wall.

I loosened my hold on his neck, and he whistled and gasped for breath, his fingers at my throat, clawing to release him completely.

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“He’s been on my ass for weeks, begging me to take him back.

” I shook my head, eyes refocusing into reality as I took in her anxious features.

“You may want to check on your girl, though. She doesn't look too good.” My mind raced, for the first time turning to lock eyes with Daphne. Except she was crumpled on the ground, face in her hands. My heart fell. “Oh, Jesus.” I rushed to her side, lifting her face in my palms to take in her features. “Are you okay, baby?” She shook, every muscle trembling as she barely shook her head. I swallowed the lump of fear in my throat, adrenaline still running through my muscles after throttling that fuckhead, and now here she was, expecting me to be the tender man to rescue her. I stalked

straight toward the parking lot, piling her into my truck and locking her up safely with the seat belt before I roared off back to my house. We were pulling into my driveway less than five minutes later, and I was carrying her into my bedroom, sliding her into my bed, and murmuring softly in her ear. “I’ve got you, baby. I’m right here.

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I woke up secure in Arkin's arms. He was in a weird position, all twisted, making sure I had all the room I needed while his massive frame just took up a sliver of the bed.

Seeing that girl get attacked last night brought me back to being a little girl, crouched up in the closet, hiding, while my father repeatedly assaulted my mother.

Some days it was just a few hits from his belts, but some nights, when he was drunk, it was much worse.

I closed my eyes, desperate for the images to vanish, for the feelings of fear to let go and finally allow me to breathe. Arkin helped with the fear. Being here in his arms, I actually felt safe, maybe even a bit brave.

His phone buzzed again. It had been going off every ten minutes for the last hour. Whoever it was, they weren't leaving him alone. I decided to wake him in case it was important.

"Arkin," I whispered gently in his ear. His eyes shot up and his body stiffened, as if he was on defense. "What is it? You okay?" he asked, searching my face, looking for any

kind of distress. "I'm fine." I smiled, trying to reassure him.

"Your phone has just been going off constantly.

You should call back whoever that is. It must be important.

” I handed him his phone. He took it from me, kissing my cheek, and sat up on the edge of the bed.

“Shit,” he said, calling back whoever it was.

“Hey, Mom,” he said as he looked at me sheepishly.

He stood there silent for a few moments, smiling.

I found it sweet that he cared so much about his mother.

The smile on his face told me they were close.

“Mom...okay, okay, I’ll ask her.” He looked at me, apprehension in his eyes.

“Love you, too,” he said and then disconnected his phone.

“Ask me what?” I asked, rising up on my knees and putting my arms around him.

“Well, my mother would like to meet you. Obviously you don’t need to go.

She is just really excited, since I’ve never mentioned a woman before.

” “I’d love to.” I kissed the side of his face, feeling the rough stubble tickling my lips, unable to imagine a greater happiness.

Arkin’s parents’ house looked like it came out of a Hallmark movie, complete with white picket fence and bright blue shutters. It made me realize how different our childhoods really were. Arkin must have noticed my apprehension, because he grabbed my hand and squeezed it.

“We can turn around. My mom will have to understand,” he said as he brought my hand to his lips and gently placed a kiss on my palm.

“Oh no. She may tell you that she will understand, but women never understand those things. Besides, I am excited to meet the woman who raised the man I love.” The words were out before I could stop them.

Yet, I didn’t want to take them back. I loved Arkin, and it felt right for him to know.

“I love you too, Peaches. I love you more than I ever thought loving someone could be possible. You’re the air that I breathe.

” He kissed the corner of my mouth. “Without you, I think I would die.” He held my face in his hands and looked at me, making sure I understood that for him, I was everything.

He made me feel like I was his universe.

He let go of my face and walked around the car, opening the door for me.

He grabbed my hand again as he helped me out.

“Let’s go meet my mama,” Arkin said. For the first time in my entire life, I felt the holes in my heart start to heal and the nightmares of my past start to fade away.

Before we made our way to the door, it was flung open and a delicate woman came barreling at us and locked her arms around Arkin.

“My baby is home!” she chanted before looking at me.

“And this is the woman who makes my baby happy. It’s so nice to finally meet you,

sweetheart.

I'm Deborah, Arkin's mom. But you already know that.

"She smiled warmly. "Come in, come in." She grabbed my hand, pulling me into the house and leaving Arkin on the steps laughing.

"Mom, I want to keep this one. Please don't scare her away.

"Arkin chuckled, following us in. "I baked some cookies. Sit and have a few with a cup of hot tea. Dinner will be another hour." Deborah gestured to the stools beside the island and to the cookies nearby.

"They look delicious." She pushed the plate to me.

I grabbed one and took a bite, feeling like I'd gone to heaven.

"These cookies could make you a fortune at the coffee shop," I said with my eyes closed, devouring the sweet concoction.

"Mom makes the best desserts," Arkin said, patting his stomach.

"It's a good thing I don't live here anymore, or I would be a big fat man.

"He took a bite of a cookie and winked at me.

My eyes started wandering around the room, when a picture caught my eye.

It was a blonde girl, with long, loose curly hair and bright blue eyes that looked hopeful and full of love.

She looked like Deborah but much younger.

“Who is the pretty girl in the picture?” I asked, pointing at the picture in the frame.

Arkin’s smile faded, and he looked at the picture with sadness.

“Layla. My sister. She died ten years ago,” he whispered.

“I’m so sorry.” I reached out to touch his hand.

Deborah brought the frame to us. “It was a senseless act. She was only nineteen. She and Arkin were Irish twins. So close. He took her death harder than all of us. For a while I thought I was going to lose both of my children. My sweet Irish rose... She was walking home from the university, and some animal—” Her voice cracked, and tears slowly rolled down her face.

“Some animal violated her and took her life.” My world froze.

My nightmares consumed the room, taking up all the oxygen.

All I could see was my father’s face, the horror of my past, staring me in the face.

I had nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. “I’m sorry.

I have to go home. I just— I don’t feel well.

” “Let me drive you.” Arkin stood from his chair.

“No, stay. Enjoy the time with your mom. I’ll order an Uber.

” “Let me wait with you, then,” Arkin said, his face laced with worry.

“No please. Stay,” I said as I rushed out of the house, needing to put as much distance between myself and Arkin as possible.

As soon as I got outside, the tears streamed violently down my face.

In that moment, I knew no matter what I did or where I went, I would never escape my father and the sins of his life.

“Was it something I said?”

I shook the fog from my head as my mom’s voice across the room finally landed on my ears.

“No, I don’t think so, Mom.” I pushed a hand through my hair, uneasiness settling in my stomach.

“Maybe she doesn’t like Irish stew? Oh dear, I really should have okayed the menu with you both first.” “No, Mama.” I paused, eyes scanning the room and settling again on my mom’s concerned face.

“I’ve got a gut feeling about this.” I crossed the space and placed a kiss on her worried forehead.

“I think I’m gonna check on her. I just don’t feel right about letting her leave unaccompanied like that.

Would you mind if we rescheduled dinner?

” Her gentle old smile lifted. “My boy, such a gentleman. I’m so proud of you, son.

” She squeezed my arm. “Now go take care of your girl.” I nodded, thankful I had the kind of understanding mom who didn’t mind if I ran out on dinner last minute.

A few quick strides and I was out of the house and climbing into my truck, reversing out of the driveway and hot on Daphne’s heels.

It only took me a few minutes to cross town and turn down her quiet street.

I frowned, pulling into her driveway to find all of the curtains still drawn, the house looking vacant.

I turned off my truck, taking my time as I climbed out and formulated the words in my head.

By the time I reached the porch and was knocking, I was met only with silence.

“Daphne?” I called, worry starting to simmer.

“You in there?” I shuffled my feet at the door, wishing like hell I’d insisted on a key to her house before this moment.

Hindsight... Always a bitch. I jiggled the lock, affirming it was secure, before bending over the railing of her small porch and trying to peek through the folds of the curtains.

A dash of movement caught my eye from the darkness inside, a shadow playing tricks, maybe, or the woman of the hour.

“Daphne...” I went back to tapping at the door with my knuckle.

“I see you in there.” The door rattled. The sound of a body sinking down the length of the door and landing on the floor was unmistakable.

“Come on. Please don’t lock me out. Is it something I said?”

I don’t give a rat’s ass if you’re mad at me.

Ream me up and down if you have to, but don't lock me out.

" I pressed my forehead to the door, hovering my hand at the knob and willing her to open it.

"I'm sorry I ran out on your mom." Her tiny words squeaked through the wooden cracks. My heart sighed with relief, my body sliding down the door until I was ass on porch. "She doesn't mind. She's just worried about you.

I am too." Soft sobs sank into my ears, and my heart broke.

"Daphne, please tell me what's wrong and what I can do to make it better.

" "Nothing." Her cries turned up a level.

"The damage is done." "Damage? Baby, what damage?" She didn't answer, but I waited.

I waited and I listened to her tears, because even if I couldn't hold her, I could let her know I was there for her.

She could lock me out all she wanted, but I would never leave.

"Arkin! Oh my God, are you crazy? What are you doing out here?" An angel's voice melted the sleep from my mind as I came to, early morning rays of sunlight streaming through the eaves of her porch roof.

"Morning, sugar." I pressed up off the tiny welcome mat I'd been huddled on, one ear pressed to the door all night as I faded in and out of sleep to the sounds of her soft sobs. "I was prepared for at least a few more nights out here, if that's what it took."

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My eyes trained on hers, red and watery and ravaged with all the feelings.

“You’re a sight for my tired eyes first thing in the morning.

” I trailed my thumb across her temple, thankful for her skin against mine.

“It was a long damn night without you in my arms.” Her forced smile fell, eyes dropping to our feet.

“Would you mind if we made a cup of coffee? Help get the kinks out of these old bones before we have a talk about you locking me out all night?” “You don’t want to have coffee with me, trust me.

” She shook her head, backing off. “Like hell I don’t.

” I caught her hand, swirling her back into my chest where she belonged.

“I was just offering you a chance to collect your thoughts before we get into the good stuff.” I clasped her fingers with mine, dragging her into her tiny house alongside me.

“I may not look like the smartest tool in the shed, but after Layla was gone, Mom insisted I get myself into some grief counseling. I hated it at first, but it grew on me.” I paused, cupping her chin with my finger and forcing her gaze to meet mine.

“I learned a few things: that talkin’ is the only way through a problem, and that grief takes many forms.” The soft hollow of her throat moved as she tried to force down her emotions.

“You deserve the best, Arkin, and I’m not it.

Your family deserves better. Mine is a... nightmare .

” “Hey, I’m not interested in your family.

I’m only interested in you and me. There isn’t a thing you could say that could scare me off now.

” My teasing grin ticked to one side. “I slept on your front porch all night. I can’t imagine it gets much worse.

” Her gaze lingered, as if she were debating her next words.

“You wouldn’t say that if you knew.” “Try me.” I guided her to the couch, settling her beside me.

She pressed her lips together, hands twisting in her lap before she looked up, crestfallen expression on her face.

“I...I don’t know how to say this...” She looked like she was in physical pain.

“My family... My father...he was a monster.” I nodded, clasping a reassuring hand on her knee.

“He did a lot of things, bad things, and nobody knew he did them until one night when he was finally caught.” My brows furrowed together, trying to make sense of her words.

“Apparently college campuses were my father’s favorite place to hang out.

One night he assaulted a girl, and she fought back and I guess it made him angry.

When my father got like that, he...he became a monster.

” She was crying again, violent tears washing down her cheeks.

“That night was the eighth of September, exactly ten years ago, and that girl lost her life at my father’s hands.

” My face fell, shock turning my blood cold as I registered the details of her story.

“Th-That’s the night my sister was murdered.

” Daphne nodded, hands trembling. “I knew as soon as I saw her face... Her pretty, smiling face brought everything back to me. My mom tried to keep the newspaper headlines from me. She kept me in the dark mostly, but I remember seeing your sister’s face on the news when she was only a missing person.

” My heart clenched with the memory of the sadness in my mother’s eyes and the terror that burned behind my father’s.

“I’m so sorry, Arkin. My father stole your sister’s life, and you don’t deserve to be reminded of that pain every time you look at my face.

My mom changed our last name after it happened to try to escape it, but there’s no escaping the past. I understand if you never want to see me again.

” She jumped off the couch, running as fast as her feet could carry her in the opposite direction from me and down the hallway.

“Daphne, wait!” I shot off the couch after her, following her into the bathroom, where

without thought, she flipped on the shower nozzle and thrust her body into the cold spray.

“I wish I could wash myself clean. I want to be good enough for you, Arkin. Your mom is so sweet and loving, and my family ripped your world apart. I can’t let you take care of me and pretend to love me—how could anyone love the daughter of a murderer?”

” I yanked her into my arms, letting the water beat down on my back as I shielded her from the chill.

“Jesus, Daphne, how could I not love you?” I pulled her out of the shower, cutting the water behind us before I wrapped her in a towel.

“Apparently I haven't done my job very well.” I rubbed at her shaking shoulders. “What job?” she asked on a sob. “Of showing you every single moment of every day that you mean more than the world to me.” I caught her face, forcing her to look at me. “You make me a better man, and nothing makes me happier than showing you how much I love you.” I placed a tender kiss on her lips, my own emotion leaking at the corners of my eyes. “You scared the hell out of me—had me sleeping on the damn porch all night in case anything happened. I'm a controlling man and I'm working on that, but damn if I'll have you suffering and in pain without me by your side doing everything in my power to make it right.” “I don't deserve your love.

” She tried to squirm away. “You're just too nice to see it now, but you will.

The resentment will build up—” “The hell it will. Lock me outside on the porch again all night, and then we can talk about resentment. Hell, woman, can't you see, the flood waters could be nippin' at our ankles and I'd still rather be by your side, paddling our boat to the nearest safe haven.

” I shook my head, wiping at my own stubborn tears.

“You’re my safe haven, Daphne. And I want to be yours.

” With my heart thundering a million fucking miles a second, I did the thing I’d been planning last night and dropped to one knee—both of us sopping wet and shivering with tears in our eyes.

“You aren’t your family, and you sure as hell aren’t your father.

” I gazed up at her, heart lighting on fire when our eyes caught.

“Our pasts brought us right here, but the past doesn’t have a damn thing to do with our future.

I love you so much it scares me, Daphne.

Nothing else matters but that fact.” I slipped the glittering diamond ring from my pocket, sliding it over the knuckles of her left ring finger, exactly where it belonged.

“Please, please, be my wife.” She was already crying fresh tears, bending to shroud herself in my body, arms trembling wildly around my neck.

“Say yes and promise me from this day forward you’ll never lock me out again.

” She was nodding as one of my hands swirled at her back in soothing movements, the other catching her chin to force her eyes on me.

“Say it.” Her grin split wide, eyes shimmering with radiance.

“Yes, I would love to be your wife, Arkin. I would love to be yours forever.” I

clasped her face in my hands, and freezing cold on our knees, we kissed passionately.

“Forever, Peaches.” F I R S T E P I L O G U E

Daphne – Three Years Later

“I

can’t take another round of this, Arkin,” I said, my voice shaky as I tried to hold my tears at bay.

For the last two years, we’d been trying to conceive a baby without any success.

We’d done two rounds of IVF that had been failures, and now we were waiting for the results of our third and final round.

I had three viable eggs left, and the doctor had planted them all in hopes that one of them would take.

“We can always adopt. There are kids out there who need a loving home, and we have love in spades,” he said, bringing a hand to his lips and placing a gentle kiss on my palm.

I knew that he wanted children more than anything.

The funny thing was that I never wanted any until he came into my life.

Now, with this man by my side, I wanted it all.

“Mr. And Mrs. Broderick, the doctor will see you now,” the nurse said.

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We followed her down a sterile, white hallway to the very last room on the right.

“Arkin, Daphne, it’s wonderful to see you again.

” Dr. Keven Richards gestured to the seats in front of his large mahogany desk.

I looked around the room at all the happy couples holding beautiful infants, all proof of the miraculous work the good doctor had done through the years.

“Well,” he said with a somewhat dramatic pause.

Arkin and I squeezed each other’s hands, waiting for the fate of our lives to be laid before us.

“The embryos took. Congratulations,” he finally said with a giant smile on his face. Relief flooded through me. I felt completely floored at the revelations. Never in a million years did I think those words would be the ones I would hear. “We’re going to have a baby.” I looked at Arkin, “You’re going to be the best daddy,” I said, leaping into his arms. “Three, actually,” the doctor said as I put my head on my husband’s shoulders, now cradled in his arms. “Pardon?” both Arkin and I said at the same time.

“Triplets. All three eggs took. You’re having triplets.

” The doctor smiled. “Well, looks like that love may be spread a little thin,” Arkin joked, kissing me right there, completely forgetting that Dr. Richardson was still in the room with us.

“Arkin,” I said with an embarrassed laugh, gesturing toward the doctor.

Dr. Richardson just smiled and waved my concern away.

“Don’t worry about it. You two are tame compared to some of the joy these walls have seen.

I’m just going to step out and give you a minute,” he said before standing and heading to the door.

Once he’d shut the door behind him, I turned back to my husband.

“Arkin,” I said, my voice laced with trepidation.

“What is it, baby?” He moved a loose strand of hair from my face and tucked it behind my ear.

“I still want to adopt. I know with three kids it will be crazy, but I had a bad childhood, and if we can give a kid like me a home, a safe haven, then I want to try,” I said, searching his eyes to really gauge what he thought.

“Okay,” he said softly, wrapping me tighter in his arms. “Let’s adopt a couple.

All of these kids will be lucky to have you in their lives.

I know I sure as fuck am. I want a fucking football team of little Brodericks running around.

” “I love you, Arkin,” I whispered. “I love you, Peaches.” S E C O N D E P I L O G
U E

Arkin – Three Months Later

“Hang on, Peaches.” My hands locked with my wife’s as I dragged my lips across her wet skin. She was soaking wet for me, our bodies already slipping and sliding together in the morning shower. “I need a taste of you this morning.”

I pressed my broad chest against her body, the cool tile wall behind her back making her squirm and squeal. “This morning and every other morning.”

“Mm, I can’t help it.” I plunged my tongue in and out of her mouth, relishing in the sweetness only she could give. “You know it makes my cock leak to see you all soft and full with my babies.”

My heavy tip was nudging at her entrance now, anxious to touch the promised land.

I’d never been able to get enough of her, but when Daphne said I do, all bets were off.

We’d fucked anywhere and everywhere as often as we could, and I’d imagined that honeymoon period would wane— especially with babies on the way.

But I couldn’t have been more wrong. Daphne pregnant was another level of beauty I’d never been able to fathom.

Her skin glowing and dewy, the dips and hollows of her waist turning to gentle curves and soft edges, begging for my hungry hands to eat, suck, and devour all of her...

And then her tits had grown three sizes bigger than the day we said I do, and I was a complete goner.

“You don’t say? The new, no-clothes-in-bed rule clued me in pretty quickly to your thought process, babe.

” My grin crooked to the side. “I need constant access to please you.” I pinched at one of her tightly puckered nipples, eliciting a delicious little squeak from her lips.

“I want to please you...” Her eyes hooded over before she slid to her knees, taking my throbbing cock in her dainty little hand and licking her lips eagerly.

“No, no, no, Peaches.” I pulled her into my arms, melding our bodies together, lips first. “I can’t stand to see you on your knees when you’re growing my babies inside you.

” “But I love the feel of you in my mouth—” “That’s the hottest thing I think I’ve ever heard you say.

” I nudged my cock at the vee of her thighs, running out of patience, and lifted her into my arms, careful of her sexy belly, round and soft with my triplets nestled safely inside.

“You’ve been so needy for me, baby.” I slid into her tight body, our breaths syncing as we rocked in tandem.

“Let me hear how hot my thick dick makes you.” Her tiny hands trailed up my biceps, curving around my neck and pulling my ear to her lips.

“I can’t get enough of you, Arkin. I wake up soaking wet because I can feel you beside me.

Not feeling you all day is torture.” I swirled my fingers between us, grazing her aroused clitoris and licking the droplets of water that sprayed down her skin.

“Oh, Arkin, Arkin...” Her neck arched back and gave me the perfect opportunity to latch and suck.

I sucked deeply and slowly at her juicy skin while I fucked her hard and rough with my cock, my hands holding her waist against me securely as we moved with practiced strokes.

“I’ve never been able to get enough of you, baby.

From day one, you consumed my mind and stole my thoughts like a thief.

” My orgasm barreled up in me all of a sudden.

The way her delicate pussy fluttered around my dick lit me on fire, and my lips roamed her skin as I swirled and sucked at everything I could find.

“One look and you nailed me, Peaches. I never saw you coming. I should punish you for taking me by storm like that.” “Punish me, then.” Her voice was whispery, pleading.

“I love your punishments.” I could feel the cum rocketing up, gathering momentum with every one of her decadent little huffs.

Tension burned through my muscles when her orgasm unleashed and she panted an incoherent string of pleases in my ear.

Cum spiraled out of the tip of my cock, burying my seed deep inside her, the only place it belonged.

“Baby, you don’t know what you’re asking when you beg me to punish you like that.

” “Try me...” She was still panting, nipples still perky.

I ducked, doting attention on each of the soft little peaks between my words.

“You’re fragile cargo, my love. I can’t go punishing you right now.

You’ve got the lead pitcher, catcher, and hitter of my little baseball team in there.

” Is that so?” She caught my lip in a kiss.

“I’ve already decided on a franchise name.

” “Oh yeah?” She was rocking her hips again, insatiably horny for what only I could give.

“What’s that?” “The Pile Drivers.” She erupted into a fit of giggles, dousing her arousal nearly instantly.

“You’re quite the tool, Mr. Broderick.” “Don’t forget...

” I thrust my cock against her damp skin.

“I’m the only tool to satisfy all of your needs, Peaches.” T H I R D E P I L O G U E

A r k i n – Ten Years Later

“L

ord help us, boys.” My oldest son breathed at my side, his identical brother shaking his head.

“Well, no stopping them now.” I sucked in a fortifying breath as the pack of women in my life huddled close together with excited grins on their faces.

Thirteen years of marriage with Daphne, and every damn day I was still surprised. Especially with triplets and three adopted siblings we’d welcomed into our home not long after the first three were born.

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Daphne and I were on the ride of our lives, not a single day the same.

“This doesn’t seem like a very good idea.

” One of my boys tipped his head to one side, stripping out of his shorts and down to his swimming trunks anyway.

“Woohoo!” He ran shrieking off by the girls, covering them in a splash when he cannonballed into the chilly pool.

“You’ve got a wild one there.” My mom patted my back, happy smile on her face.

“I’ve got a whole baseball team’s worth of wild ones, Mom.

” She shook her head. “So were you, my son. So were you. I just put the baby down for a nap. Thought she’d never settle down, but then I sang her that song I used to sing to you when you couldn’t sleep at night.

Do you remember it?” “How could I forget?” Happy memories of the childhood she’d given me passed through me and into how I loved these little humans every single day.

She leaned into my body, and I wrapped her in my arm, thankful I could give my mom the kind of joy I saw on her face on the daily when she spent time with my kids.

“There they go,” my oldest boy uttered at my side.

His sister launched herself into the pool and shrieked when she hit the cool water.

“They’re nuts,” my littlest adopted girl, Emma, whispered, wiggling her hand into my big paw.

“I’m with you, girl.” Daphne surprised the hell out of me and launched herself into the pool next, smile spreading her cheeks when the rest of the girls followed her.

The boys shuffled at my side, restless as they seemed to consider how cool the temperature might really be in our new outdoor pool in the beginning of May.

“Ah, I’m in,” one of the boys said. The remaining kids launched off the stone and into the crisp water.

The group of them splashed and laughed, my wife at the center of all of that fun, just like she always was.

She brought so much love and life to my world.

I was the luckiest guy on this earth to call her my wife.

“You’re not gonna let them show you up, are you?”

” My mom arched an eyebrow in question. My eyes locked with Daphne’s across the pool, my love and need to feel her against mine, drown myself in her in every way, stronger than even a cool pool could deter.

“Fuck it,” I whispered, launching myself into the pool and swimming underwater directly for my wife.

When I finally reached her, I latched my arms around her waist, punishing her with deft strokes against the tiled wall and caging her against me.

“I want to slip inside that swimsuit and fuck you right here, right now,” I whispered before nipping at her ear.

“But your mom—” “Mom encouraged me to get in here,” I huffed, grinding my cock against her soaked little pussy that called to me every day of my life.

“I doubt that.” She giggled, and the movement against my dick made me hornier than ever.

“If you’re not careful, we’ll find ourselves with another little one.

” “Good.” I kissed at her neck, making sure I was blocking the booing kids behind me with my broad back.

“Come on, babies. Grammy’s got towels and some lunch.

Give your mom and dad some alone time.” The kids booed harder, clapping and splashing at my back, but still, I persisted.

“I love nothing more than seeing you pregnant with my baby, Daphne.” I locked her fingers in mine, pushing her hands behind her back to rest on the edge of the sunken pool.

“I don’t know if I could take another one of your babies.

” She laughed before I nipped at her lip to chastise her.

“You’ll take as many as I want to give you, woman.

” She grinned. “Is that so?” “Pizza and snacks inside!” my mother called from halfway across the yard, the wet trail of my offspring following her in a dutiful little line.

I kissed my way down Daphne's body, traveling lower and lower the farther away they got.

By the time they'd reached the steps of the house, my hand was inside her swimsuit and we were pressed into the far corner, her hips working against my hand as I swirled her to a fast and ragged orgasm.

She sucked in soft breaths, legs wrapping around my waist and kissing me with soft, tender licks.

"My sweet little lamb," I whispered, sliding my cock out of the waistband of my shorts just enough to slip under the elastic of her suit and edge at the entrance.

"You know I'd do anything to keep you safe, right?"

"I rocked against her, grunting as she swayed her hips.

"I'd do anything to make you happy," I continued.

"Babies, puppies, sports cars... You name it, and it's yours.

"Her smile was soft against mine as we hung breathless together, cool water licking at my balls and creating a wild rush of pleasure and pain that added to the sensations chugging through my veins at that moment.

"I don't want any of that, Arkin." Her body began to shudder softly, waves overtaking her muscles as I stroked deep inside her hot slit, the walls of her pussy a perfect fit for my cock.

"I got my life back the day we met." I didn't have words, only a deep sense of gratitude that I'd found this woman, the only one I needed to live and breathe.

“Peaches, you take the breath out of me from the balls up,” I husked as release tunneled through my spine, running wild through my balls like bolts of angry lightning before firing through my shaft like a fire hose.

I shuddered and sucked on her skin, forcing myself to hold us both steady as my world crumbled around me.

“Marrying you was the best day of my life.” I slow-dragged from her heated pussy with instant regret for the loss of her around me.

“And bringing home each of those babies, it got even better.” I kissed my wife, adjusting the elastic of her swimsuit back into place before giving her beautiful ass cheek a squeeze underwater.

“I’d be the happiest man alive if we brought home a dozen more.

” “A dozen more?” She giggled. “Now you’re really asking for trouble.

” I caught her lips in a kiss, mumbling between pecks, “I’m down if you are, Peaches.
”