



Back Up Plan

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Category: Romance, Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: When Ari and Cassie first met, falling in love was not a part of the plan.

Ari Graves used to command every room she entered. Earning the respect of her colleagues and superiors alike with her professional prowess, Ari is a rising-star at the talent agency. But when her bosses challenge her to step into a new role, she finds herself stretched too thin professionally and struggling to keep up the lies she has told about her personal life.

Cass hasn't been able to trust anyone since her manipulative ex ended their relationship. With an aversion to dating but a desire to make her now-engaged ex jealous, Cass is looking for cover.

A chance encounter at a crowded bar turns into a clear and simple solution to both women's problems. Faking a relationship for the next few weeks promises to put an end to prying questions and help them regain confidence while protecting their own hearts. But as their "relationship" progresses and they realize how much they have to learn from one another, each woman is left questioning if this chance meeting was actually destiny and how much of their feelings are fake.

Total Pages (Source): 82

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ARI

Ari had no idea what she was doing.

Even though she had been at the agency for years, she hadn't ever considered what moving up the ladder would actually look like.

And now, her newly-hired assistant was staring at her like a lost puppy craving approval, but that would've required Ari to actually give her work to do.

Half the reason Ari had hired Jess was because of her eager, go-getting attitude. It reminded Ari of herself when she'd first walked through those too-heavy glass doors. She could still picture how silly she'd looked trying to shoulder the door open in three-inch heels.

"I'd be happy to take it on if you think I'm ready," Jess continued.

Ari hesitated, tilting her head as she considered it. Jess had been making great progress and was really starting to find her footing at the agency. But, a part of Ari still feared trusting someone else with the job she had done for nearly a decade.

"Your plate seems pretty full," Ari said, offering Jess an out.

Jess shook her head, "I'm really happy to take on more."

Ari nodded, “Let me think on it more.”

Clearly dejected, Jess smiled and headed for Ari’s office door.

“You’re doing a great job, Jess,” Ari added.

She closed the door softly after a curt nod. Ari spun in her chair a few times before using her desk to still herself.

She knew that Jess was capable of handling more — it was part of why Ari hired her to begin with— but something was stopping her from letting Jess into her client list completely.

She took a deep breath and scrolled through her emails. When she was promoted, John had been more than happy to offload some of his lower-earning clients to Ari’s empty slate, and Ari’d been elated to give those clients a chance to really shine with the attention of a fresh agent.

But she couldn’t do any of that without an assistant. Just as she was getting lost in her thoughts, a gentle knock on the door drew her attention.

“Dude, you have to give her something,” Tommy said as she popped open the door.

“It’s funny, I don’t remember telling you to come in,” Ari said, raising an eyebrow.

Tommy laughed as she plopped her lanky body into the emerald, velvet chair in front of Ari’s desk, “That was brutal to watch.”

Ari rolled her eyes and leaned back in her chair, “How could you even tell what was said?”

“We work in an office with glass walls, haven’t you practiced your lip reading?” Tommy asked before adding, “You’d think you of all people would be pretty good at that.”

Ari tossed a pen in her direction after Tommy winked, “Well, it’s not like I’ve gotten a lot of action lately anyway.”

Tommy smirked, “We could go out tonight and change that streak.”

Ari laughed— the last time the pair had gone out to a club together, they had almost gotten into a fight with a stranger because Tommy liked to make moves on taken women and Ari had to drag Tommy out before she could throw a punch.

“I’m good, thanks,” Ari said.

Tommy rolled her head back and sighed, “Honestly, Ari. It’s getting pathetic. How long has it been? Like, six months?”

Ari shook her head and sighed, “If I come with you, will you stop hounding me about it?”

“No,” Tommy said, “but it will make me happy.”

Ari couldn’t resist her friend’s golden retriever-like grin. Knowing she had won, Tommy pumped her fist. She stood from her chair and headed to the door.

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As she grabbed the large, stainless steel handle, she said, “We’re getting you laid tonight.”

Rolling her eyes, Ari took a deep breath. She hadn’t been able to find time to date, or even hook up, since her promotion. Her body was craving touch, but one-night stands tended to be complete letdowns. It took a lot for her to fully open herself up to pleasure, and strangers rarely stuck around long enough to finish the job. Tommy often suggested finding a friend-with-benefits, but with the time and effort that would require to maintain, Ari figured she might as well try to land a girlfriend.

Still, her body wouldn’t let her deny her more carnal cravings.

Emerging from her haze, Ari looked at the digital clock hanging above the walnut console table across from her desk.

Before she could dive back into her emails, her phone started buzzing. Kylie Claire appeared on her lock screen.

Ari couldn’t stop herself from rolling her eyes before accepting the call, “Kylie, how are you doing?”

There was a brief moment of silence on the other end, then an audible gulp of air, “I have this stupid ADR session at the end of the week, and the technician has been a real douche about the pre-session stuff.”

“Uh-huh, tell me more,” Ari took out a notepad, scrawling the time and Kylie’s name across the top.

“She won’t adjust the schedule for me at all and keeps asking for insane hours,” Kylie complained.

Ari nodded, “When’s your next session?”

“Friday at noon,” Kylie said, the tapping of her gel-tip manicure through the phone overwhelming Ari’s ears.

“Got it, I’ll drop by the studio before then and make sure she chills out. How does that sound?”

Kylie exhaled like she had just been cleared by a doctor, “You’re the best, Ari.”

Ari gave a professional chuckle and replied, “It’s nothing. I’ll touch base with you later this week. Good luck.”

She hung up the phone and put it face down on her desk. By the time she looked up, Jess was already pushing the door open.

“Kylie again?” she asked.

Ari nodded, “Could you find me the sound tech’s name for her ADR session later this week?”

Jess nodded, excited to help, “Of course. I could make the call if you want to tell me what the issue is?”

“No, that’s alright,” Ari shook her head. Dealing with technicians was always tricky, they were experts in their fields and often overlooked, overworked, and underpaid. Their craft, replacing the bad audio from sets and re-dubbing them with studio-quality sounds, took expert-level focus and skill. They were highly sensitive to stars who

looked down on them, and Ari had watched John elegantly navigate the balance for years.

It was exciting to get to chart her own course with the techs... There was a part of Ari that felt guilty for turning Jess down yet again, but this task required a delicate hand. Kylie was an up-and-coming star, but if the industry heard she was a diva, she would be dead in the water.

* * *

By the time Ari was home, she had about an hour until meeting Tommy at Cubbyhole in the West Village. She had moved into her Hell's Kitchen apartment just a few months ago and was still trying to find the perfect pieces for the space.

She slipped off her Ann Taylor blouse, revealing a perfectly fitted black bra as she entered her bedroom. She tossed the shirt onto her bed, which had been made the first thing that morning. She took a moment to look out of her floor-to-ceiling windows. She still hadn't gotten used to the view from ten stories up. Facing the Hudson River, Ari got south-facing sun all day - even though she was barely home enough to enjoy it.

With her black trousers draping down her long, toned legs, she put her arm against the closet door frame. The subtle curve of her bicep appeared as she placed the weight of her body on the arm. Her wardrobe consisted mostly comprised of work outfits — most of her favorite going-out fits had been given away to consignment shops as her social life slowly dwindled.

But, she still had a few bodycon dresses that would do the trick. As her hand brushed the expensive fabrics draped off of her hangers, she stopped on an orange number.

She slipped the dress off its hanger and pulled it over her broad shoulders. As she

wrestled it into place, she scooped her breast up so her cleavage would spill over the front cutouts ever-so-slightly.

Ari took a step back and looked in the mirror to examine her outfit. The dress was shorter than she remembered, her upper thighs peeking out through the bottom.

Is it too much?

While she considered her other options, a text lit up her phone:

Tommy: Heading to Cubby now, see you in 20?

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“Ugh,” Ari groaned as she grabbed a pair of simple black heels from the closet. She wouldn’t have time to debate wearing anything else. She took a glance around her room — it was messier than she would’ve liked for potentially bringing someone home, but she couldn’t really care at this point.

She grabbed a small clutch from the coat rack by her front door and walked out of her apartment.

I hope this isn’t a mistake.

2

CASS

Cass’s breathcaught in her throat as she adjusted from the icy air conditioning inside the studio to the hot, city smog of bustling Broadway. The warm weather felt like a cozy blanket, albeit a smelly one, after hours in the frigid soundbooth. She checked her watch as she rubbed her shaved and bleached hair, hoping to stave off the oncoming headache.

It was liberal to call this the East Village since it had become so gentrified by the nearby university, but some of the area’s original charm persevered despite the Sweet Greens and college students.

It was eight-thirty, and the sun setting over the West Side marked another full day spent in the dark, claustrophobic editing bay. She knew it was necessary to keep the rooms well-insulated, but after a long session, she felt like a complete zombie.

All she really wanted was to grab a drink and chat with a stranger, so she headed west. The city's summer ambience was a welcome break after a day inside, micromanaging every tiny sound wave. Besides, remembering what the real world sounded like was almost akin to research for Cass.

After a few blocks, her field study was interrupted by the ring of her phone.

"Hey, Mama," she said as she brought the phone to her ear.

"Hey, Sweetie," her mom answered, "just wanted to check in on you."

"Yeah, I'm good. I'm heading out to see some friends after work," she replied. She hated lying to her mom, but it made her feel like Cass wasn't drowning herself in work.

And honestly, she wasn't. She just had a strange schedule, and her mom, who had only ever worked an office job, didn't quite understand the freelance lifestyle. "You need to spend some time looking for dates," her mom insisted.

Cass rolled her eyes, checking the street signs as she walked, "Mom, I've been single for a few months. I'm taking some time for myself."

Besides, she had more than seen what was out there. Right now, casual hookups were all she had the patience for.

"I'm just saying, all your friends are going to settle down soon..."

Before she could launch into too long of a tirade, Cass interrupted, "Mom, I'm actually about to walk in. Love you, talk soon."

She hung up the phone just after her mom returned the sign off, even though she still

had a few blocks before arriving at her usual spot.

Her mom had always tried her best, but her questions never ceased to be intrusive. Cass had intentionally hid a lot of her personal and professional... history. She couldn't help but feel like if her mom ever found out how Cass had spent her early twenties, she would be disappointed.

Lost in thought, the walk went much faster than she had anticipated. As she rounded the corner onto West 4th Street, she was surprised to see a long line outside of Cubbyhole. It wasn't ever quiet, but usually weeknights were relatively empty.

She hopped in line as she debated even going inside. She poked her head out of the line to evaluate exactly how long the wait was.

As she did, she scanned the fellow queer people in line, some wearing six inch heels, some with short cuts and Vans, and others in jeans and a t-shirt. After performing a similar mental calculation on the wait, a duo settled into line behind her, one in a skin tight orange dress and the other in a loose trouser with a barely buttoned Hawaiian shirt.

Cass's chest tightened as her eyes wandered down the brunette's exposed legs. She was stunning, her calves tensed from her heels. Cass looked at her eyes before forcing herself to face forward.

From behind, she heard them start to whisper.

"Cut it out, Tommy," the orange dress hissed.

The line inched forward, one group at a time. Cass, now standing next to the bouncer, offered a smile to the stone-faced employee. She took a look behind her, the line having grown even longer since she last took a peek.

“Is there, like, an event tonight?” Cass asked.

“Nah, just a nice summer night,” the bouncer replied.

Cass nodded, glancing once again at the stunning brunette with the high and tight bun. As their eyes met, the brunette smirked before letting her eyes drift down Cass’s body. Cass felt her body squirm under the gaze, a feeling she had become unfamiliar with since switching careers.

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She peeled herself away from the mysterious woman and faced the bouncer who was waving her forward.

As she walked, she felt a hand on her arm.

“Wait for us, you dick,” Tommy laughed, following behind Cass.

“Tom...” the woman in the orange dress tried to stop her friend from imposing.

Cass tried to hide her surprise as the bouncer waved Tommy, Cass, and the mystery brunette into the bar.

“Sorry, babe, just couldn’t stand waiting in the line any more,” Tommy said as she moved past Cass and into the bar.

As Tommy’s friend passed her, she nodded to Cass and said, “Sorry for her.”

“You’re good. I’m...” but before she could introduce herself, the woman pushed forward into the crowd.

Cass rolled her eyes, how rude.

Cubbyhole, true to its name, was a narrow bar with one path through the crowd and no room for deviation. As Cass followed behind the pair, she could feel every person scanning them over. Cass could only assume they were a couple or at least were so often mistaken for one that pretending to be one made getting into a bar far easier.

Eager to break off, Cass slipped off toward the first opening she spotted at the bar. As she tried to shoulder her way into the spot without hurting anyone, the woman in the orange dress slid effortlessly into it.

She let out a heavy sigh before leaning into the woman's ear, "Excuse me, I was going to stand there."

Surprised to see Cass again, she quickly tilted her body to create space for her.

"Thank you, god." Cass muttered as she waved the bartender down.

"I'm Ari," the woman said.

Cass looked around, "Did I ask?"

Ari laughed, "Well, you tried to." Her laugh sent a shiver down Cass's spine. Something about the deep rumble weakened her knees.

"What can I do for you?" the bartender asked as they slung a towel over their shoulder.

Before Ari could speak up, Cass said, "I'll take a vodka cran."

"And for you?" they turned to Ari.

"Whiskey sour," Ari said.

The bartender grabbed two glasses from behind the counter and poured the well vodka into one of the cups, "Together or separate?"

"Separ..."

“Together,” Cass said.

Ari, shocked by her boldness, tilted her head.

“It’s the least you can do. I got you and your girlfriend in, and then you stole my spot.” As she waited for Ari’s reply, she allowed her eyes to wander down Ari’s dress. The cutouts near her breasts framed her chest beautifully. Cass couldn’t help but wonder what they looked like out of that skin-tight outfit.

Ari nodded to the bartender, approving the purchase.

The bartender placed the vodka cran on the sticky bartop.

Grabbing the glass, Cass nodded to Ari and began to turn toward the crowd, hoping to begin her prowl for the night.

“Cass?” A familiar voice asked from a few feet away.

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She was too stunned to speak.

“Hey, it’s great to see you,” a woman with a blonde bob chirped as she leaned in for a hug. Cass reluctantly hugged back. It had been a few months since Cass had had the misfortune of running into Elle. They had broken up three times before it finally stuck.

Ari, whiskey sour in hand, turned to see what the fuss was about.

“Leila, this is Cass,” Elle said, turning to include a beautiful, short-haired woman. Elle left her hand on the small of Leila’s back, the same spot she used to hold Cass. The confusion on Leila’s face prompted Elle to continue, “Cass Owens?”

Familiarity washed over Leila’s face instantly, “Right, Cassandra. Your ex, right?”

Cass raised her eyebrows, cringing at her full name, “Sure...”

Ari laughed, drawing Cass’s attention to the stunning woman who had just bought her a drink.

“This is my girlfriend...” Cass said as she put her arm around Ari’s broad shoulders.

Clearing her throat, Ari raised a brow and whispered to Cass, “What is going on here?”

“Baby, this is my ex, Elle and...” Cass left an empty space for Leila to respond.

“Leila,” the woman extended her hand to Ari and gave her a hearty shake.

Ari nodded, quickly masking her confusion, “Pleasure to meet you both. I’ve heard a lot about you,” she added as she turned her attention to Elle. Cass registered Ari’s apparent surprise that Elle was her ex.

“I can’t lie, I’m surprised you’re with someone,” Elle said, giving Ari a once over.

Ari, not liking the way she was being examined, put her arm around Cass’s waist, pulling her closer.

Cass’s breath hitched in her throat as she felt Ari’s hips press into hers. “Yeah, well,” she managed, “we weren’t expecting it, but ya know, we’ve both never felt this way before.”

Shouting over the music, Elle said, “So listen, maybe not the best time to mention it... but...” she paused as she looked to Leila, “we’re actually engaged.”

She raised her hand to reveal a stunning, single-stone engagement ring.

“Oh, wow...” Cass struggled to respond.

Ari, hoping to cover for her, added, “Congratulations.”

“That’s...” Cass tried to find the words.

Elle smirked, “We’re both just so in love and just couldn’t wait.”

Leila clapped her hands and shouted, “You two should come to the engagement party next month! It’s just a little shindig at Elle’s place.”

“Well... I mean you don’t have to,” Elle said quickly, trying to retract the invitation.

Cass, frozen in the whirlwind of news, nodded.

“We’ll have to check our schedules and see if we can squeeze it in,” Ari said.

Elle put a hand on Cass’s shoulder and looked into her eyes, “It wasreallygood to see you.”

Cass offered an apathetic smile and turned back to the bar. Ari, watching them walk away, laughed and shook her head. “What a bitch.”

By the time she had turned back around to the bar, Cass had buried her head in her hands, “Oh my god. We broke up like, five months ago.’

Ari raised an eyebrow, “Seriously?”

Cass managed a nod.

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“Her loss,” Ari said as she took a drink of her whiskey sour. Cass peered out from her hands. Even in this moment of distress, Cass felt as though she’d never seen a more beautiful woman. Ari’s hands gripping her frosty glass were a dazzling display of veins and strained tendons. Despite herself, Cass wondered what Ari’s fingers would feel like inside of her...

Recovering her train of thought, Cass sat up. “Thanks for covering for me,” she said as she lifted her glass to Ari.

Ari avoided her gaze, “Sure thing.”

Before Cass allowed their glasses to touch, she put her finger under Ari’s chin, lifted her gaze, and lowered her voice, “Look in my eyes when you take your drink.”

Ari chuckled and obliged, watching Cass’s gorgeous blue eyes while she downed the rest of her drink.

“Superstitious much?” Ari joked.

“I’ll never risk bad sex,” Cass laughed.

Ari set her glass back down and put her arm on the bar, leaning toward Cass, “Next time, you should ask before you assume I’ll be your girlfriend.”

Cass giggled, higher pitched than was natural. Something about Ari made her giddy, and excited. And it wasn’t just her voice that felt tense.

“I just think it’s polite,” Ari argued.

Before Cass could reply, Tommy was grabbing Ari’s arm.

“We’ve gotta get out of here,” she said as she buttoned up her shirt’s top few buttons.

Ari nodded, “Danced with another taken woman?”

Tommy nodded as she eyed another woman heading toward her in the crowd, angry as all hell.

“See you around,” Ari said to Cass as Tommy pulled her toward the front door.

Cass opened her mouth to reply, but they were out of sight before Cass could even give her number.

She looked back to the bartender and ordered another drink before her phone buzzed with a message from Elle:

Great seeing you tonight. You both should come to the party, my place June 30th at 8. I want to catch up

Cass rolled her eyes, Elle always wanted to “catch up,” which almost always meant hookup, refuse to be accountable, and string her along for a few more months. But, god, she wanted nothing more than to bring Ari the bombshell to that party.

3

ARI

The whiskeysour hit Ari on the way home. She wasn’t a lightweight, but she

definitely hadn't eaten enough that day to chug a drink like that.

As the elevator ascended to her unit, Ari closed her eyes and saw images of Cass. She couldn't deny how stunning she was, alternative with a bleached buzz cut and sleeves of tattoos. She was certainly a creative.

Ari fumbled with her keys as the elevator door slid open. Her bare-bones eyeshadow and eyeliner had smudged under her eyes. The carpeted hallways of the luxury building made her feel like she was in a hotel — and not in a sexy way.

By the time she managed to fling open her door, she could barely keep her heels on, slipping them off as she headed to her room and throwing her arms over her shoulders to unzip her dress. Once she felt the metal between her fingers, she inched the zipper low enough to peel the fabric off of her body and flung herself into bed. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, but her body was overwhelmed by the memory of Cass's muscular arms draping over her shoulders and Cass' ass pressed against her hips.

Her hand fell to her thigh. Just picturing the strange woman made her clit throb. It had been so many months since Ari had allowed anyone into her bed, and Cass wouldn't break the streak. But, as her hand drifted toward her center, Ari figured it wouldn't make much of a difference to imagine what that would be like.

She rubbed herself over her black, cheeky panties, her back arching at her own touch. Grinding along her hand, she pictured Cass's smile, the way she looked into Ari's eyes as she took her drink. Her body was overwhelmed by the thought, the slight intoxication bringing her closer to climax than she could have anticipated.

Her legs squeezed together as she thought about Cass licking her nipples...

Within seconds, Ari was throwing her free hand down to the bed and clutching the

blankets for support,clenching her jaw and letting out a whimper as she rubbed her clit harder and slower.

“Fuck...”

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She could feel her lips begging to say Cass's name, but she pushed the feeling down, pictured the woman's tattooed arms straining while she slid her fingers inside Ari. Ari held the thought in her mind as she brought herself to climax.

I need to touch her...she thought as she came.

* * *

A latte with a few shots of espresso was the only way Ari had managed to get herself into the office the next morning. She hadn't been out that late in a long time. Her ex was never a fan of going out and never made her feel like she could go alone.

Ari was still learning how to trust herself after her ex had completely obliterated her heart.

She ran past security, holding up her ID card as she passed, her nude heels clicking on the stone floors. When she approached the elevator bank, she followed the green "up" arrow to an elevator whose doors were just gliding open.

Stepping to the side to allow the passenger out, Ari smiled politely before ducking in. Inside the elevator, she clicked her floor and stood up straight as the door shut in front of her.

Her coffee in one hand, Ari used the other to straighten her shirt and slick back her hair. She had taken a shower first thing in the morning, washing her shame from the night before down the drain. Her hair was in a tight, neat bun that left her hair smooth and fly-away free: immaculate.

With a deep inhale before the elevator dinged for her floor, she lifted her shoulders up and back. As the door opened, she lifted her chin and sauntered out of the elevator.

“Good morning, Agatha,” Ari said to the receptionist at the front of the agency.

“Morning, Ms. Graves,” Agatha said, looking up from her monitor to smile at Ari.

Ari headed straight back through the empty floor to her private office. She’d yet to shake her pre-promotion habit of arriving first — some of her best work was done when no one else had arrived yet.

As she hung her Cabata tote and turned on her laptop for the day, she thought again about Cass. She was gorgeous — not Ari’s usual type, but her charisma was palpable. Ari’s body immediately grew sensitive to the thought of Cass’s touch. As she readjusted in her chair, her thighs rubbed her clit and made her flinch.

This is why you can’t do one-night stands. You’re attached to a woman you onlispoketo.

Ari shook her head, annoyed with her own mind. She made a point to remind herself that Cass was pushy and made too many assumptions.

Diving into her email, Ari lost track of time, and before she knew it, Jess was waving hello through the glass walls.

Ari offered a wave back before turning back to her work. Jess usually came in to catch Ari up around ten AM, which gave both of them time to settle in and organize their work for the day.

When she was an assistant, Ari rarely checked in so late, but she wanted to respect Jess’s preferences.

A knock came from the door, and before she could answer, Tommy was shutting the door behind herself.

“Tommy, I was...” Ari tried.

Waving her off, Tommy replied, “Busy? So, what did you get up to last night after I ditched you?”

Ari rolled her eyes, “I went home.”

“Didn’t get her number?” Tommy asked, picking at her nails.

“No, you dragged me out. But even if you hadn’t, I’m not interested,” Ari said, hoping to convince herself that it was true.

Tommy scrunched her forehead, “What? She’s fucking hot. I mean hell... ifyouaren’t interested, you should’ve gotten her number forme.”

Ari rolled her eyes, “I don’t do one-night stands. I get too attached, and I don’t even like them because I don’t...”

Tommy laughed, “You get too attached because you aren’t doing it enough. Hell, maybe you should have a couple in one night... that might help.”

Covering her embarrassment, Ari laughed. She’d never been bold enough to even consider more than one hookup at a time. She craved a hoe-phase, but almost always ended up with a girlfriend before she could get started.

Tommy’s phone buzzed, and she stood up, “All I’m saying is, the next time, you’re taking someone home.”

Before Ari could get in another word, Tom was out of the door, and Ari was alone again.

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Jess knocked next, “Hey boss, could we go over the schedule?”

Ari nodded and flipped open her e-calendar.

“So, you’ve got a meeting this afternoon with the partners for your first quarter performance review. Then, you’ve got a call with Laura Connor’s foreign rights agent to discuss royalties for the newest manuscript. You should be receiving a call from the studio regarding Kylie’s next film, but they may need to push to Monday. Would that work?”

Ari tilted her head as she considered, “Tell them Monday would be tough but Tuesday first thing could work.”

“Your schedule is open on Monday...” Jess said as she looked through the shared calendar, hoping she hadn’t missed anything.

Ari nodded, “Yeah, it’s just good to seem busy.”

Jess looked confused, prompting Ari to add, “They seem to think we’ll take their call whenever they want. But by pushing them a day and giving them an early slot, we’re kind of saying ‘You’re important to us but not that important.’ They need to think Kylie is so booked that she deserves an even higher premium than her last.”

Jess nodded vigorously and took down the note.

“Not to add on, but do you want me to send you the bio of the sound tech for Kylie’s session this week?” Jess said.

Ari had completely forgotten to find out more about the over-eager tech. But really, she knew even without a bio, she'd be able to assuage the tech's excitement with ease.

She shook her head, "No, I'll figure it out later."

Jess opened her mouth to argue but decided against it and nodded before heading out.

"Thanks, Jess," Ari called after her. She checked her watch and grabbed her laptop. Her meeting with the partners was set to start in five minutes, and she wanted to ensure that she was prepped for the evaluation.

Walking toward the glass conference room down the hall, she waved to a couple of the other agents and their assistants who used to be her peers. It was strange to see how far outside of their ecosystem she'd drifted. While internally, she felt like the same-old Ari, the idea of grabbing drinks with her former peers seemed almost taboo.

She walked into the conference room and set her laptop in place, pulling up notes on recent client updates and plans for the next few months.

The long, glass table had clearly been cleaned that morning, not a single finger print smearing the surface. Ari almost felt bad touching it.

Just as she was finishing setting up, Sydney Danes, Mark Osama, and Tara Simmons waltzed through the threshold.

"Good morning," Ari said as she stood.

Each of the partners gave a polite greeting and sat across from Ari, their backs strategically to the door so that none of their subordinates could see what they were saying or doing. It conveyed a sense of secrecy and authority that they wanted to

preserve.

“Well, Ariel. How are you feeling so far?” Mark started.

Ari smiled — she never went by Ariel, but the overly-formal partners preferred full names. “I’m proud of the work I’ve done so far. My clients are fully integrated into my team at this point. We’re looking at a new studio deal for Kylie early next week, and hoping to get some deals on the other clients in the coming weeks.”

Sydney nodded, “That’s all great news. Anyone that you’re scouting?”

Ari hesitated, “Well, I wanted to ensure that all of our existing clients felt safely shepherded to my team before adding on anyone new.”

Tara shrugged, “New talent is always waiting to be discovered. You did a lot of that as John’s assistant, correct?”

“Absolutely, it’s definitely in my sights as the transition ends,” Ari said as her eyes drifted past the partners to a buzzed blonde head near reception.

Is that her?

“And how is Jess?” Mark added.

Ari stumbled, “Jess... Jess is great. Very eager.” Ari looked to the partners, trying to ignore the wandering woman who neared the conference room. As she came closer, Ari knew for certain it was Cass.

She waved to Ari as Sydney said, “Ariel, we have noticed a decrease in your productivity. It’s not uncommon for new agents to underutilize their team. Do you feel you’ve fully engaged Jess’s talents?”

Ari replied, trying to shake the anxiety building in her chest as Cass approached, “I’m excited to involve her in more of the process at this stage. I was hesitant to call on her help too often with individual client tasks as I wanted each client to get to know me.”

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Before Cass could reach the conference room door, Jess jogged down the corridor and redirected her to Ari's waiting area.

With a sigh of relief, Ari added, "But I obviously want Jess to be well-versed in my business and get more done for my client list."

Sydney nodded, "Good. You're doing well but, as you know, there is always room for improvement."

"Absolutely. I appreciate the feedback," Ari replied.

After standing and shaking each partner's hand, Ari walked out so they could debrief in the conference room without her.

Subduing her panic, Ari made hastily her way back to her office. She straightened her blouse and brushed her pants before she was within Cass's eye-line — Ari couldn't help but want to impress her.

Suddenly aware of her outfit, Ari felt underdressed even in her expensive heels and gorgeous, v-neck blouse.

Ari tried not to think about what Cass would think when she looked at her.

"Do you ever wear jeans?" Cass asked as soon as Ari was in her sights.

Jess hopped in front of Cass and immediately started, "Ari, I'm so sorry. I told her to wait by reception, but she wouldn't listen and insisted she speak to you immediately."

Ari turned to Cass, staring into her beautiful, blue eyes. She hadn't noticed how piercing they were the night before, but daylight highlighted the color.

"That's alright, Jess. We'll talk in a bit," Ari said, gesturing for Jess to move back to her desk.

Once she was out of earshot, Ari continued, "What in the fuck are you doing here?"

"It was this or LinkedIn... well, I tried that, too," Cass laughed.

"How did you find me?" Ari said, surprised, impressed... only slightly terrified. Her terror was not calmed by Ari's nonchalant wink. "What do you even need?"

On edge as she was, Ari couldn't help but swoon at Cass's wink. Normally, she found them awkward and corny, but Cass was effortlessly cool and still stunning as ever in her white, muscle tank top and loose linen trousers.

Shaking her head with a sigh, Cass said, "So, I got a text from Elle after the bar..."

"Look, Cass, I was happy to cover for you, but..."

"She invited us both to her engagement party. And..." Cass couldn't finish her sentence before John Daniels, Ari's former boss, was approaching them.

"Well, is this the future Mrs. Graves? John Daniels," John said, extending his hand to Cass.

Cass extended her hand with a smile, "Oh it's a pleasure to meet you. I've heard so much."

"We wish we could say the same. Ari was my assistant for years and I couldn't get a

word out of her about you,” John said, throwing a familiar smile to Ari.

“Well, you know Ari. Always keeping secrets,” Cass laughed with a familiar nudge to Ari.

Ari smiled back and added, “We don’t want to hold you up, John.”

John patted Ari on the shoulder, “Of course. Oh, before I go though,” he turned to Cass, “you’d better be coming to the Gala. I want to pick your brain.”

“I’d love to…” Cass started as Ari escorted her by the arm toward the lobby.

Once John was far enough away, Ari let go of Cass’s arm and gave her a shove, hushedly exclaiming, “What the fuck?”

Cass rolled her eyes with annoyance, but she was a little surprised by how seductive Ari’s whispers felt as they walked, “Come on, you’ve been pretending to have a girlfriend to your bosses?”

“He’s actually my old boss. Whatever. How do you know this much about my job?” Ari asked.

“LinkedIn,” they said in conjunction.

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Cass stopped walking and put a soft hand on Ari's bicep. Her long, strong fingers were firm on Ari's arm.

"Look, I just think we could help each other out. You help me cover with Elle, and I'll come to your work party to woo all your bosses with my indie, alternative charm," Cass smirked.

Ari shook her head, "That's ridiculous. How would that even work?"

As they spoke, Ari could feel the entire office's eyes on their conversation, but it was clear that Cass wasn't leaving without her help. "Look, why don't we meet up for drinks later and we'll talk," Ari offered. Everything was a negotiation, and she might just be able to make this deal work for her.

Cass pumped her fist by her torso with a "yes" under her breath.

Ari rolled her eyes, what a weirdo.

Cass reached into Ari's trouser pocket and plucked her phone from inside. She held the lock screen to Ari's face to unlock it and opened the Messages app.

"What the fuck..." Ari said, giving up on fighting her on it.

Cass typed in her number and shot herself a text, "So we can coordinate."

She handed Ari her phone back and wiggled her eyebrows before turning toward the elevator bank and cooing just a little too loudly, "Bye, honey."

Ari shook her head, watching Cass as she exited the office. Her thrifted pants may have been loose, but they didn't obscure how stunning Cass's body looked underneath them.

Maybe it wouldn't be a terrible idea...

4

CASS

By the time Cass made it back home, she only had an hour before she had to turn around and head back into Manhattan.

Her trek to Astoria was long, but she hadn't ever regretted moving there.

She popped open the front door of her apartment and was immediately greeted by the clattering of her roommate, Gabby, who was fumbling around in the kitchen.

"Cass?" Gabby called.

"Hey, Gabs!" Cass yelled back as she placed her keys on the hook by the door, the scent of cooked garlic floating in the air.

Her stomach growled as she smelled what Gabby was cooking, "Oh my god, that smells amazing," she said as she made her way into the small, galley kitchen.

Gabby's face lit up at the compliment, "Really? You're totally welcome to as much as you want."

"Thanks," Cass gave her a side hug as she took a look at the bruschetta on the counter. She and Gabby had met in college, fallen for the same girl, and ended up

becoming the best of friends. They had moved in together soon after graduating and never quite wanted it to end.

Cass wandered toward the living room, the same blue couch from nearly five years ago centered in the room. Their decor was an eclectic collection of stooped and thrifted art, indoor plants, and cat furniture.

As she slumped onto the couch and pulled out her phone, she looked up the bar she was meeting Ari at. When she woke up that morning, she'd hardly believed that Ari was as beautiful as she remembered. But seeing Ari Graves again quickly proved her wrong.

Something about her tight bun, draping clothes, and powerful stare made Cass feel like she could dive into a lifetime of steamy nights with her.

But that's not what Cass was looking for. She needed to spend time on her own. Elle had wrecked her sense of self and made it nearly impossible for Cass to feel like she could trust herself, nevermind her ability to pick a good partner.

Cass shook off memories of Elle snooping through her phone as Gabby presented a plate of bruschetta on pan-toasted bread.

"Ta-dah," She said, an adorable smile plastered on her face.

Cass ducked her head — Gabby was never able to stop herself from offering people food.

"Are you sure?" Cass asked as Gabby set the plate on the walnut coffee table.

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Gabby nodded vigorously as she sat down, “Of course.”

Reaching over the mid-century modern table, Cass drizzled balsamic glaze on her piece before picking it up. The Italian bread was warm in her hand, the perfect foundation for the small mountain of the freshly-chopped tomatoes and garlic. She knew before even biting in that it was perfect.

“Oh wow, Gabs. Best one yet.”

“Seriously?!” She was elated, finally digging in herself.

They ate in the comfortable silence that only years of friendship and a delicious meal afforded.

After a moment, Gabby broke the silence, “Did you find the woman from last night?”

Cass lit up, “I did! And I asked her to come to the party. She agreed to grab drinks tonight.”

“That’s great news! Sorry that I can’t just pretend to be in love with you,” Gabby said with a laugh.

“Yeah, Elle definitely wouldn’t buy that,” Cass chuckled.

“So, what was she like in the cold light of day?”

As she tried to think of a way to describe Ari, Cass’s face went red.

Gabby's jaw dropped, "For real?"

Cass threw her head into her hands as she tried to wipe the image of Ari's gorgeous lips from her mind, "Honestly, she's one of the most beautiful people I've ever seen."

"And that's wild because you've met Fletcher in person," Gabby said, "Do you think you're, like, actually interested in her?"

Shaking her head, Cass replied, "No, she's too... corporate for me. I feel like she'd be as stiff as a board in bed."

"Too bad you don't have any experience, like... I don't know... helping people become comfortable with their sexuality," Gabby joked.

She was one of the very few people who knew what Cass had done through college and well into her twenties for work. Cass hadn't disliked her time as a dominatrix, but it wasn't something she saw for herself long term.

Plus, in her personal life, she much preferred to submit to pleasure.

"I don't know, I'm just not ready for a commitment yet. Seeing Elle..." She took a moment to compose herself, "I really wasn't prepared to see her with anyone else."

Gabby nodded, putting her hand on Cass's knee with a gentle smile, "Well, take your time. And, maybe this could just be good, ole fashioned fun."

Cass smiled as she glanced down at the time on her phone, "Fuck, I've gotta get changed."

Her hour at home had somehow compressed into five minutes. She gave Gabby a pat on her shoulder as she ran down the hallway of their railroad-style apartment and into

her room.

Messy and disorganized, Cass's room was a pool of half-dirty clothes and coffee cups. She was rarely at home long enough to clean up.

She threw open the door of her closet and rifled through the hangers until she found a knit, green crop top that lifted her boobs and exposed her toned stomach.

She tore off the muscle tank, sweaty from her time in the humid, early-June subway tunnels. As she did, her barbell nipple piercings caught on the slightly frayed hem of her shirt.

"Ouch," she yelped as she delicately unstuck the shirt.

Once she tugged the tank over her shoulders and head, she pulled the knit shirt on, more careful to carry the fabric over her breasts this time. She grabbed a pair of distressed, black jeans and slipped them over her ass. Her baggy pants, though they tried, couldn't hide her shapely figure.

She grabbed her Book Club Bar tote off the bed and threw a copy of Donna Tarte's *The Secret History* inside for the long train ride.

Cass hadn't realized that she was sweating, her palms clammy at the thought of convincing Ari that they could help each other.

But, she supposed, either way, it was a good excuse to spend a couple of hours of her night flirting with a beautiful woman.

* * *

The train ride was anything but smooth, but then again, when was it ever?

Cass exited the station and smoothed what little hair she had. Even though her head was shaved, she still felt the need to put it in place.

She trotted the block to the bar, hoping to get there quickly without working up even more of a sweat than she had in the subway. She was nearly twenty minutes late and she feared that Ari would dip before she could get there. Luckily, she knew the area like the back of her hand after years of drunken bar hopping in college and some work she had done back then too.

She descended the nearly hidden stairs that led to Antler Beer and Distillery off Allen Street. It was a quiet bar with a cozy, wine cellar aesthetic. Cass thought Ari might enjoy its more upscale feel but Cass was thrilled by the relatively reasonable prices.

As she entered the bar, she immediately scanned for Ari. She wasn't sure if Ari would've changed or come straight from work.

Her eyes crawled up the bar, stopping on Ari: now with her hair loose and wavy. It trailed down her shoulders and led Cass's eyes down her back. She could tell she was muscular even under her shirt.

Taking a deep breath, Cass made her way over to Ari and slid into the bar stool next to hers.

“So, you do wear jeans...” Cass said as she looked down at Ari’s crossed legs, “I guess you can be casual.”

Ari raised her brows at Cass and took a drink, “You’re lucky I hadn’t finished this sooner. I was going to leave.”

Cass leaned in, smelling the whiskey sour on Ari’s breath, “But, we both know you wouldn’t have.”

Her face flushed at the attention.

“What exactly did you have in mind?” Ari said, her voice shifting to negotiation.

To uncross those legs and taste you, Cass thought before she could stop herself.

Cass smirked, “I think we could help each other. We both need a partner for one reason or another. If we just play along, pretend to be what everyone thinks we are anyway, we both get out of a sticky situation.”

“And what happens after that?” Ari questioned.

“Well, we can say it fizzled out. Or we’ll both find people we’re actually interested in and bring them next time,” Cass offered.

The bartender approached and asked, “What can I get going for you?”

“I’ll have what she’s having,” Cass said with a smile, “Thank you.”

Ari shook her head, “How would we even pretend to date? Is the story that we’re in love, is it casual?”

“That’s the part you might not like,” Cass admitted as she took the freshly made drink from the bartender.

Tilting her head, Ari polished off her drink.

“We might have to... actually get to know each other,” Cass said, clasping her mouth as the words left her mouth.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re quite pushy?” Ari asked.

Cass nodded, “Often. Has anyone ever told you that you’re rude?”

Ari thought for a moment, sneaking a glance at Cass as she considered her options. Cass, wanting Ari to notice what she offered, positioned her body for Ari’s gaze, lifting her shoulder and pushing her chest towards Ari.

“They have, but I think most people can’t handle honesty,” Ari countered as she finally gave in and turned toward Cass.

“I love honesty, even if it hurts,” Cass said, taking advantage of the chance to examine Ari, who squirmed under her gaze.

Cass could sense something in her... an untapped authority that a part of Cass thought she might be able to get out of her.

ARI

“You were incredibly unprofessional today. How can I trust you around the partners?” Ari questioned Cass. She needed to take back some of her power, Cass’s gaze felt like being under a microscope.

A microscope that looked like it knew how to fuck.

“I’m not usually so needy, especially when I know my place,” Cass said, tilting her head down and glancing up at Ari. Looking into her eyes, Ari could picture how Cass would look between her legs.

Ari nodded, “Okay, we do some practice dates... and another work event.”

“Well, hang on. That sounds uneven,” Cass argued.

Shrugging, Ari said, “Well, you have something to prove. I don’t. It’s a pride event, the agency has a float and I think you should come with. It’s basically like a work party with no clients. If you can fit in there, I’ll come to your ex’s party and you’ll come to the gala.”

Cass couldn’t deny that it was a fair ask, “Deal.”

She leaned into Ari’s ear, “But, for the record, I think you have a lot to prove.”

Ari’s body tingled. She wanted to find Cass obnoxious, but she was undeniably hot and had a charisma that Ari had never quite encountered before.

Cass finished off her drink, throwing her head back to down it. Ari watched her throat as she swallowed, it was long and elegant. It made Ari want to bite her, leave her own mark.

“I’ll text you some ideas,” Cass said as she stood.

Ari asked, “Is that it? Where are you going?”

Cass shrugged and added, “Thanks for the drink.”

Before Ari could question it, Cass was exiting the bar and heading across the street. Ari watched her as she jogged to an unmarked door on the other side of the block.

Cass greeted the security outside, giving them a familiar smile and a pat on the back before he swung open the door.

Ari couldn’t see much, but a couple in full leather followed behind Cass and as the door slowly closed behind them, Ari saw a large, black and red cross.

Who is she? Ari wandered as the door slammed shut.

* * *

Ari was on her way to meet with the sound tech two days later when she still couldn’t shake the image of Cass entering the strange... bar?

It was a hot June day, the sun making taking the train nearly impossible. She watched the city blocks pass her by in her rideshare. The leather seats sticking to her exposed arms.

Thank god I wore pants.

Ari thought as she got a text from Cass:

Excited to see you tomorrow

A slight smile crept onto Ari's cheeks. Cass was a gorgeous woman and even though they had an arrangement, Ari knew she had to be careful getting too comfortable with her. It had been a while since she had let anyone close enough to hurt her, but she wasn't in a place in a career where she could afford a mistake.

The car slowed as it approached the gray, columned entrance on East 4th street. Ari had walked by the building nearly everyday when she was in college, but never even looked twice at the discreet entrance.

As the car stopped, Ari unbuckled her seatbelt and said, "Thank you so much."

She was careful not to slam the car door as she exited the vehicle and strode across the sidewalk to the limestone steps.

Approaching the doorman, Ari smiled, "Hi there, I'm here for a meeting with Last Stitch Studios?"

"Ah, Ms. Graves, they sent the request this morning. You can head right up, elevators are on your left," the doorman said as he gestured down that hallway.

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“Thank you,” Ari said as she made her way to the elevators. The building had hardly been updated since it was built, the art deco interior shining through the modern details. She clicked the up button and walked toward the open, gilded elevator.

It wasn't until the doors closed that Ari remembered that she had completely forgotten to research the technician entirely. A year ago, she never would have dreamed of entering such a confrontational meeting without a little research. But, she took a quick breath in and reminded herself that it was just a conversation.

It was a quick ride up, but she managed to sneak in a response to Cass before the doors glided open:

See you at 9, 246 10th Ave.

Just as she hit send, the elevator doors parted to reveal a carpeted hallway with a set of tall, glass doors. Last Stitch was stenciled onto the glass.

Ari reached for the door handle only for the door to swing open before she even made contact.

“Hello, Ms. Graves. Thanks for coming down,” the receptionist said as she guided Ari down a long hallway.

The office was large and spacious, mimicking a traditional SoHo artists loft, but it clearly had far more amenities.

“Ms. Owens is waiting for you in the ADR room,” She continued.

Ari nodded and followed her lead, “That’s great.”

“As you know, Kylie will be in great hands here. We’ve placed a few orders to ensure her riders are completely accommodated. We’re even including a mini fridge in the suite so she can take breaks at her leisure,” the receptionist added.

Just as she finished, the receptionist paused outside of the closed ADR studio and held her arm out for Ari to enter.

Ari swung the door open and started talking, “So, you’ve been harassing my client?”

She fell silent as the large, soundproof door slammed behind her.

Stunned by the tenor of the voice coming from behind her, Cass took off her headphones and swung around, “Who the fuck...”

“Oh fuck,” Ari and Cass said in unison.

Shaking her head, Ari complained, “Of course, you’re the tech up my client’s ass.”

“And you’re the agent who doesn’t let me do my job?” Cass questioned.

They stood in silence for a moment.

“Small world, huh,” Cass said with a chuckle.

Ari rolled her eyes and argued, “So, you stalked me on LinkedIn but couldn’t bother researching a celebrity’s agent?”

Cass shrugged, “And you’re supposed to be a big, bad agent who doesn’t even dig up some dirt on the sound tech you’re trying to intimidate.”

Clenching her jaw, Ari held her tongue. Even through her annoyance, she needed to negotiate something better for Kylie. But, her heart was racing so fast she could barely think. She hadn't been alone in a room with Cass and something about her frustrated expression made Ari want to... well she didn't quite know.

"Look. My client is frustrated and nervous, so we need to resolve this," Ari said.

Cass nodded, "Well, we've met all of her riders. What else did you have in mind?"

Ari clicked her tongue, "Some respect for one of the highest earning new-comings in the world."

Standing, Cass laughed, "There's one of those every couple years. She needs to learn how to respect the process."

"Who said the process requires overstepping your place?" Ari argued as she took a step toward Cass. She hadn't ever noticed that she was ever-so-slightly taller than Cass, though the heels certainly helped.

Cass stepped closer, matching Ari's approach. She looked down Ari's body, enjoying looking up at her.

"Are you saying I've overstepped?" Cass said, staring into Ari's hazel eyes.

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Ari, flustered, replied, “I think Kylie is uncomfortable.”

Cass nodded, “Well, I don’t want anyone to be uncomfortable. I’m happy to accommodate.”

“Good,” Ari said, looking down into Cass’ crystal eyes, “I expect to hear zero complaints about your session.”

She didn’t think her heart could beat any faster when Cass added, “Yes, ma’am.”

Ari felt her body crave to make Cass say it again. Instead, she nodded and looked around the room.

Cass leaned closer to Ari.

“What are you doing?” Ari asked, swallowing the lump in her throat as her breathing hitched.

Grabbing the door handle, Cass let a low, grumbled laugh escape her chest, “Letting you out.”

Ari nodded, turning toward the door and incidentally closer to Cass’s face, “Thanks.”

“See you later?” Cass asked.

Ari smiled, a part of her thrilled by their sparring, “If you’re lucky.”

As Ari left the studio, she could feel Cass smile as she watched Ari's ass leave the room. Ari enjoyed having Cass's attention, forcing her to see how powerful she was.

Passing reception, Ari flashed a quick wave at the woman who had walked her in. She held her composure until the elevator doors closed behind her and she let the air she had trapped in her lungs finally escape.

She hadn't felt so in control in months. Although, she was also wildly out of control of her body. Had she said the right things? Would Cass abide by her request?

She couldn't be sure, but she knew dinner would be interesting. Especially since Ari knew that Cass had a relatively boring day job... not anything nearly as exciting as an unmarked bar with a St. Andrew's cross inside.

6

CASS

Fuck me.

Cass was starting to see what Ari was hiding. She may have been a little odd and aloof, but underneath it all was a powerful woman trying to break through. And Cass's body craved seeing more of that Ari.

She sat back down in her swiveling chair and adjusted her EQ board for a moment before leaning on her hand.

If Elle was any testament, Cass wasn't very good at judging who she should date. Besides, her sex work in college didn't always make it easy for Cass to distinguish who she wanted to fuck for herself, who she thought would be an interesting project.

But, Ari wasn't the person to find out with. She needed her to come to the party.

Cass went back to work, hitting play on the track she was working on. As she tried to focus, she saw her date outfit out of the corner of her eye. Maybe it was too salacious.

* * *

Cass had to leave work with enough time to change and arrive at the restaurant promptly. She didn't want to make Ari wait, even though she was certain Ari didn't have the guts to walk out.

She tapped her Doc Martens on the cement as she crossed her arms, the breeze off of the Hudson cooling the air more than she had anticipated.

She could hear Ari's heels approaching and lifted her head, just catching Ari's eyes checking out Cass's outfit. She wore a satin, emerald skirt that fell below her knees and a Fletcher t-shirt tied in the middle.

Was Ari turned on?

"Hey," Cass said as she opened her arms for a hug.

Ari smiled, trying to wipe the excitement from her eyes, as she lightly returned the hug, "Good to see you"

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Cass's nose filled with the smell of Ari's perfume, it was something woodsy with a hint of citrus. It was fresh and seductive.

"You smell great," Cass said.

Ari stammered, "Oh, thanks. You look... nice."

Lifting her eyebrows, Cass answered, "You don't have to return a compliment."

"No, yeah. I know. You just look nice," Ari said, trying to solidify her stance.

Cass made a note that the outfit was a success. She looked up at the awning for Bottino, the restaurant Ari had suggested, "Fancy."

Ari nodded, "Yeah, the food is absurdly overpriced. So it's great for a... practice date?"

Cass laughed and Ari walked in front of her to open the door, moving out of the way for Cass to enter first.

As she walked past Ari, Cass could feel Ari taking another look at her. She knew her ass looked fantastic in the skirt. It was tight but fell off at the base of her ass, giving Ari a sense of it but not the whole picture.

Her cheeks flushed as she felt Ari's body linger behind hers.

Ari approached the hostess's stand and said, "Two, for Graves."

“Of course, Ms. Graves. Welcome,” the hostess said, attracted to Ari’s soft confidence. It was rare for someone of Ari’s status to be both commanding and warm. It was a side of Ari that Cass hadn’t seen yet. But when she felt comfortable in a room, Ari had a command of her space.

The hostess guided them to a table for two in the back of the restaurant, softly lit with fairy lights and an orange glow from candles.

Cass’s mouth fell open, “Wow.”

Ari turned around, “Is it okay?”

She could only manage a nod as a response.

Cass and Ari sat down in their respective seats as the hostess set their menus on the wood table.

As Ari immediately opened the menu and started to consider her options, Cass grabbed hers but looked around the place. It was far fancier of a place than she would’ve picked. Sure, she had money she could spend, but she was more likely to spend hundreds on a takeout feast than to sit in a stuffy restaurant.

Though, this wasn’t the worst vibe. The warm lighting cast a beautiful glow onto Ari’s already flawless skin. She really was stunning and she couldn’t lie, she had never been taken out to such a nice dinner.

Even by women who swore they wanted to make her their wife.

Ari was engrossed in her menu when Cass asked, “What’s good here?”

Ari chuckled, an almost childish laugh, “What isn’t?”

“Well, that’s what I’m asking,” Cass said, still surprised by Ari’s excitement.

She shook her head before responding, “No, I’m kind of serious. Everything is good. I’ve tried almost all of it and have yet to have something even mediocre. What do you usually like?”

“Cheap wine and Burger King,” Cass said with a squint.

Ari nodded, “Ah-ha. Well the Spaghetti Neri is really great, very home-y.”

Cass found the item and nodded, “Sure, why not? Are you an adventurous eater?”

“Well, sometimes. I used to really prefer finding one dish that I liked and sticking to it. But these days, I’ve been trying to expand my horizons,” Ari said.

What did that mean? Cass wondered before adding, “If I were going out to places like this, I would get curious too. Too many intriguing things to not take a dive.”

She looked into Ari’s eyes, wanting her to know that a part of her was wondering what hid under those trousers and blouses. She imagined it was something stunning.

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Ari looked back to her menu, hoping to hide her blushing.

“So, are you a sound tech alone? Or do you take other work?” Ari tried to ask, but her avoidance of Cass’s gaze set off alarms for her.

Cass considered the question before answering, “I used to do other stuff but honestly, I majored in Film in college and fell in love with it. So, I stopped taking other work when I got the job at LS.”

Ari nodded without asking any further.

“Is there a reason you’re curious?” Cass pushed, moving her head lower to intercept Ari’s gaze.

She shrugged and said, “We’re supposed to know each other right? I should know if you have multiple jobs.”

Cass nodded, her suspicions growing even further, “And what about you? Any extracurriculars?”

Ari nodded with a forced laugh, “No. I hardly have enough time in the day to take a shower, let alone have a hobby.”

“And that’s why you’re single?” Cass asked.

Stammering, Ari tried to answer.

But, Cass added, “You’re just the whole package from my perspective. Well-off, hard-working... gorgeous.”

“Thank you,” Ari said after she managed to swallow the lump in her throat.

Cass laughed, “That’s normally when you’d tell me I was beautiful.”

“Yeah, well you are,” Ari added, trying to recover.

“So, why don’t you know how to flirt?” Cass asked.

Ari chuckled, “You’re so forward.”

Cass looked her in the eye, “Maybe you should try it sometime.”

Before Ari could answer, the waiter arrived at the table, a white cloth draped over his arm.

“Good evening, what can I get for you?” he asked.

Ari turned her body to him and started, “Could we get a bottle of wine, whatever the chef recommends?”

He responded without writing it down, “Absolutely. And for dinner?”

“I’ll take seared Branzino, and...” Ari said, gesturing to Cass.

“I’m going to give the scallops a go,” Cass said with a smile, handing the man her menu.

He nodded, and took the menus, “Right away.”

“Thank you,” they said in unison.

Ari sighed, “I was with the same woman for eight years. We broke up when I got my assistant position at this agency. She said I didn’t have enough time for her. But, really, I think she was bored of me and wanted time to... explore.”

Cass nodded.

“And then I was actually too busy. When you’re the assistant, you have to be on call at all times. And answering a client call from Cubbyhole doesn’t exactly sound professional.”

“Got it,” Cass said, the puzzle piece of Ari’s professional command and her personal meekness starting to fit together.

Ari looked around, “But, now I’m expected to have a partner at all of these upscale events, but when was I supposed to have the time to build that?”

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Cass nodded and pointed to herself, “And that’s where I come in.”

Ari waved to her, “Correct.”

The waiter returned with two wine glasses and an unopened bottle, “The chef recommended this 2012 from the Napa Valley which will pair beautifully with the fish you’ve both ordered.”

He popped the cork and poured a gorgeous, velvety white wine into the cups.

As they raised their glasses to cheers, the waiter disappeared into the restaurant which had become quite full since they sat down.

“To a convenient arrangement,” Ari said with a smirk.

Cass laughed, “And many more.”

Their glasses clinked and before they knew it, their meals were being placed in front of them

They dug in, occasionally pausing to ask any number of first-date questions.

What Cass had learned was that Ari came from a very creative family but had never felt like she stacked up to their talent; she was funnier when she was tipsy; she knew how to tie a knot in a cherry stem and promised to show Cass sometime.

The waiter delicately set the bill between them as he took away their plates.

“Thank you, ladies. Enjoy your evening,” he said before leaving.

Ari grabbed the bill and looked to Cass, “Good to split?”

Cass paused, believing her for a second. Ari had offered to pay since the restaurant was more out of Cass’s way. She giggled, “So, now you have jokes?”

Ari shrugged and put her card on the tray, “Only if I like you.”

Cass raised her eyebrows, “Is that so?”

Ari laughed and stood from her chair, “Ready for part two?”

She was walking away before Cass could answer. Something about this woman made her more intrigued than ever, even though she knew she wasn’t ready for whoever Ari really was.

7

ARI

Ari hadn’t stopped being nervous from the second she saw Cass outside of Bottino. But, she had enjoyed getting to know the mysterious sound engineer.

“What’re your parents like?” Cass asked her, snapping her out of her thoughts.

“Oh, they’re... pretty good honestly. We’ve had our rough patches but we’ve always been able to smooth it over,” Ari said. It was entirely true. Even though they were still together, her parents really should have gotten a divorce years ago.

“Like what?” Cass questioned.

Luckily for Ari, they were walking up to Pier 59.

“Kind of a long story,” she said as she pulled the door open for her... date? Friend?

Cass rolled her eyes at Ari dodging the question, but ducked inside anyway, “Okay, then what are we doing here?”

Ari nodded, “Any guesses?”

Cass thought for a moment, racking her brain for what exactly the Chelsea Piers were even for.

“Oh god...” she said as Ari guided them toward the “Golf Club”.

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Ari smirked and held open another door.

“You can’t be serious? Golf?” Cass said, jokingly sticking her tongue out and faux gagging.

Ari tossed her head back and groaned, “Look, golf is fun. It just gets a bad rep from all the white, tech bros who are obsessed with it.”

“Uh-huh...” Cass said, staring Ari down.

“I’m serious,” Ari said as she gestured Cass toward the check-in desk, placing her hand on Cass’s mid-back.

Cass turned to look at Ari, clearly surprised by the familiar touch.

Before she could say anything, Ari continued, “Plus, my bosses love it and think I do too so you should learn it before pretending to be my girlfriend.”

Or being my...anything.

“Hi, checking in for Ariel Graves,” she said to the receptionist.

Exhausted from a long shift, the employee said “Great,” and reluctantly scrolled through the reservations list.

“Top floor, stall 18,” they said as they turned to grab the clubs that Ari had reserved.

Ari grabbed the caddy from them and smiled, “Thanks.”

She walked toward the stalls, Cass following behind. She was more familiar with the place than she preferred.

As they opened the doors to the piers and the driving range, Cass stopped in her tracks.

“Holy shit, it’s huge,” Cass said.

Ari laughed and shrugged.

Cass followed behind her. Ari could feel Cass’s eyes examining her straining arms. The caddy slung over Ari’s shoulder was heavy enough to require a little bit of strength. She let her fingers drape over the clubs at the front of the caddy.

Once they climbed up to the top floor, Cass’s mouth dropped open.

“This view...” Cass said.

“Yeah, sometimes the landscapes and views are the only part of golf I enjoy,” Ari admitted.

She started setting up their tee at the 18th stall, while Cass watched. Ari knelt down to put the tee in the putting green. As she did, she made a point to stick her ass out and descend slower than normal.

What are you trying to prove? She couldn’t help but ask herself. Cass’s gaze felt curious but safe. Ari normally tried to hide herself from women, but Cass made her want to display herself, to impress her.

As she stood back up, Cass offered her a hand.

Ari surprised herself by taking it, putting more weight on Cass's arms than she would've expected.

"So, what do you know about golf?" Ari asked.

"Well, I know that it's every dad's favorite show to put on while they nap," Cass said with a smirk.

Ari giggled, blushing a little at Cass's charming, loop-sided smile.

"Watch and learn," she said with a wink, trying to recover her composure. She pulled out a drive from the caddy and lined herself up with the tee and ball. Still in her heels, she knew her form was off but was only really worried about where Cass's eyes were.

Cass tilted her head to look at Ari's stance, watching her hands reposition on the club.

The tendons in Ari's hand strained as she gripped the driver, her long fingers wrapping into each other.

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“Paying attention?” Ari asked, in a low voice.

Cass managed a nod and a quiet, “Mhm,” that prompted Ari to look back at her. Looking back at her made Ari’s heart skip a beat, she rarely looked at a woman like that.

Trying to recenter herself, Ari turned her attention back to the ball and took a deep breath as she lifted her arms back. She swung, fast and confidently. The driver made contact with the ball with a crack and within milliseconds, the small, white ball was soaring down the pier and toward the Hudson river.

Ari watched as the ball landed, satisfied with the distance.

As she turned back toward Cass, she held the driver out for her.

“Are heels part of the standard golf attire?” Cass asked.

Ari whispered in her ear as she passed, “No, but they do make most things more fun.”

Was she actually flirting with this complete stranger?

Cass raised a brow and let her tongue lightly caress her own upper lip, “Can’t argue with that.”

“So, Ari is not your given name?” Cass continued.

Ari nodded, watching Cass position herself on the green – her legs limited by her

tight skirt.

“It is not. Ariel is too formal. My bosses and my mother are the only people who really say it.”

Cass shrugged as she settled her feet, “Do you dislike being called it?”

“No, it’s just like not very friendly,” Ari said, her forehead scrunching as she watched Cass have decent form.

“You’re either a great visual learner, or you’ve done this before,” Ari said.

Cass nodded and brought her hands back for a swing. There was a force to her swing that Ari hadn’t expected, she had been relatively soft with Ari even though she was quite pushy.

Ari watched as the ball landed just past her own

Cass turned and leaned on the club, enjoying the shock on Ari’s face.

“How...” Ari started.

“I’ve dated a few men who’ve enjoyed golf,” Cass admitted.

Ari nodded, “Fair enough.”

She walked closer to take her turn, putting her hand on the club just above Cass’s fingers. She expected Cass to move her fingers, but instead, she leaned in a little closer.

“Do you think you still have things to teach me?” Cass asked.

Ari's body felt a shock of electricity shoot down her chest straight to her clit. She looked up, into Cass's eyes.

"I think so. And I have a feeling you have a few things you can teach me," Ari said, pulling the club closer to herself.

Cass's breath hitched in her chest as her face turned from surprised to excited, "That's what I thought."

* * *

Once their hour of range-time was over, Ari guided Cass out of the building. It was nearly eleven pm and Ari felt like she could talk to Cass for hours more.

As they exited onto the desolate strand outside of Chelsea Piers, Ari asked, "What train do you take?"

"NW all the way to the end of the line," Cass replied.

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Ari was surprised, “That’s far out, all the way in Ditmars? Long walk, stations near Bryant right?”

Cass nodded.

“Do you want me to call you a car?” Ari offered.

Shaking her head, Cass said, “No, don’t worry about me. I like a good walk.”

“Well, I’m not going to let you walk that far alone,” Ari said.

Cass laughed and started walking, “But where are you? Is it out of your way?”

Ari shook her head, even though it was out of her way, “It’s no trouble. Besides, we still have a lot to learn about each other.”

Cass nodded as they started to walk toward the station with more purpose.

“So, Astoria. Why that far out? There’s no way Last Stitch pays that little, right?” Ari asked.

“Oh, so you wanna talk money?” Cass joked, poking Ari’s arm.

Ari, flustered, tried to recover, “No, I’m just surprised you’d want such a long commute.”

Cass laid her hand flat on Ari’s shoulder, sending a warmth through her skin that Ari

could barely handle. It felt like snuggling under a blanket in the dead of winter.

It had been years since she felt a warmth like that... if ever.

“It’s totally okay. I moved out there post-college with one of my friends... my best friend really. And she can’t afford much more – she’s a social worker. And I liked saving extra.” Cass explained.

“So, you’re a saver?” Ari asked.

Cass shook her head, “I didn’t say that. I go on a lot of trips and have other... expenses.”

Ari nodded, sensing that she should stop there.

They walked in silence for a block or two, or three. Ari couldn’t even keep track because although the silence was the comfortable kind that came so rarely, she was nervous.

She knew that the more she learned about Cass the more it would be hard for her to see their time together as a convenient solution. And she really did not have time to invest in anything else.

“Also, in case you were wondering, my full name is Cassadra,” Cass added.

Ari nodded, trying to determine what the appropriate answer was.

“And do you like that name... or?”

Cass shrugged, “Not many people have ever used it honestly. It was something Elle used to call me.”

Ari raised her eyebrows, “Your ex?”

Cass nodded and kept walking.

“Can I ask you another question?” Ari asked, hoping to take advantage of Cass’s candid mood.

“Sure, why not? You’re my fake girlfriend after all,” Cass said with a wink.

Ari laughed, she hadn’t been someone’s girlfriend in a long time, and said mockingly, “You wanna make me your girlfriend? So soon?”

Cass moved in front of Ari and put on a squinted, flirty face, “Hey girl, I like your vibe. Wanna be a mama?”

Ari gave her a light shove and kept walking, shaking her head, “Very funny.”

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They walked a few feet, both of them trying to hide their beaming smiles.

“So, the other night, at Antler? You left and walked across the street. And you went into... I guess a bar – but you seemed like you knew it pretty well.”

Cass smiled, “So possessive already, my dear?”

Ari replied quickly, trying to cover her ass, “No, no. I was just curious.”

They approached the 23rd Street station as Cass considered her answer. Ari hoped she hadn’t crossed a line.

They stopped by the subway entrance and Cass finally said, “It’s a place I used to go a lot in college. It’s kind of special.”

Ari nodded, she totally got that. She had lots of places that she wouldn’t take just anyone.

“But, I’ll tell you what. If the company Pride parade goes well, that’ll be my second ask of you,” Cass said.

“Second ask?” Ari questioned, entering negotiation mode.

“Well, you get two events. The Pride thing and the Gala. I just have the engagement party. So, you owe me another thing,” Cass argued.

Before Ari could counter, Cass continued, “ I know I was a little bit unprofessional so

I won't make you do another event. This would be more... of a personal favor and less a business exchange."

Ari sighed, she knew she didn't have time for even more extracurriculars. But, she liked Cass and wanted to know her as much as possible before the Gala and the engagement party. It couldn't hurt... right?

"Okay, maybe. Let's see how the parade goes," Ari conceded with a smile.

"Good," Cass said as she opened her arms for a hug. Ari approached, unsure how close of a hug they were going for. She was stiff.

Cass wrapped her arms around Ari, her hands sitting around Ariel's neck and shoulders. She let her hands rest on Ari's rigid back.

She pulled away and held Ari's shoulder, "Oh my god, loosen up." She gave her shoulders a shake while Ari laughed.

"Sorry, it's just new. Ya know?" Ari confessed, her cheeks flushing at Cass's touch.

Cass smiled, "Well get comfortable, because you can't hug me like that and sell that you're in love with me."

Cass went in again, this time Ari let herself put her arms around Cass's waist until they touched.

She laid her palms against Cass's lower back and set her head on her shoulder.

"That's better," Cass said in a low voice. As she pulled away, she placed a gentle kiss on Ari's cheek. Ari felt her full, soft lips press against her skin.

It only lasted a second, but Ari's body reacted immediately, feeling her pussy become wet after hours of tension.

Cass looked into Ari's eyes before letting go completely, "We'll have to work on the intimacy."

Ari nodded, more eager than she meant to, "When will I see you again?"

Looking up as she considered her schedule, Cass replied, "Next week? You can come to me."

"Sure," Ari nodded as she took one last look at Cass's outfit, "Get home safe."

Cass smiled, "I'll text you when I'm in."

Ari nodded and watched as Cass slowly descended into the station, her eyes fixed on Cass's ample ass in her tight green skirt.

The thought of what panties might be under it came to mind as she saw the outline of a thong in the silhouette. She was entering dangerous territory, but Ari liked every second of it.

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CASS

Cass hadn't stopped fantasizing about Ari's arms, her smile, her laugh on her entire commute home which ended up being nearly an hour.

When she got in, Gabby was somehow still up.

"Hey! How was it?" She asked, eager to hear the details.

Cass sighed as she set her bag down and took off her Doc's, dropping a few inches as her feet hit the hardwood floor.

"Ugh, it was good," Cass admitted.

Gabby scrunched her forehead, "And that's a bad thing?"

Cass grabbed a glass of water from the kitchen and leaned against the doorway between the living room where Gabs sat on the couch and the kitchen.

She sighed as she replied, "I mean, I'm not supposed to like her. It's a convenient arrangement."

"Would it be so terrible if it was more than that?" Gabby asked.

"I don't think I'm ready. I don't trust myself..." Cass said as she looked down to the floor noticing a dent in the wood.

Gabby nodded as Cass trailed off.

“She asked about Hedone,” Cass said, looking up from the floor.

Gabby tilted her head and crinkled her eyebrow, “How did she find out about that?”

Cass shrugged and threw herself down onto the couch, “I wasn’t careful and I went in to say hi to some of the girls when we went to Antler.”

“Got it,” Gabby nodded and asked, “What did you say?”

“That it was a place of personal significance and maybe I’d tell her about it someday,” Cass said.

“That’s not terrible,” Gabby replied.

Cass shrugged, “Well, I may have said I’d take her if the pride thing went well.”

Gabby put her head in her hands, “Are you going to sabotage it?”

Cass considered it for a moment, on one hand she would have to deal with Elle’s party alone or come up with some lame excuse to not go. But, on the other, she wasn’t ready to let someone who was essentially a stranger into a part of her past she was hesitant to share with anybody.

She had been so judged for what she had done at Hedone’s that she wasn’t sure someone as stuffy as Ari could handle it.

Although, maybe it didn’t matter. If she judged her, they weren’t meant to be together anyway.

“No, I don’t think that’s worth it. Besides, she seems like she kind of needs to experience it. She’s really buttoned up and needs to loosen up. But she’s missing that... oomph to do it. Ya know?” Cass said.

Gabby nodded, “Well, if anyone can loosen her up, it’s you.”

“Thanks, Gabs,” Cass said as she sunk into the couch.

* * *

Cass had been anxious all week about her next date with Ari, and now it was just a day away. She knew they had a lot to learn about each other before they could convincingly sell their relationship to Ari’s whole company at the pride event the following week.

She’d have to get Ari to dish about her entire life in one night.

They had been texting which helped open up their dialogue a bit, Cass had made sure to flirt and joke about what their sex would be like. But, Ari would move on to another topic as quickly as possible.

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Maybe she wasn't even into Cass, it could all be an act. After all, that was the point.

She snapped out of her haze and went back to her monitor where she was remixing a track on the Kylie project. Their session the week before had gone well, according to Ari.

The room always smelled stale, but today was particularly bad. Cass popped open the one, tiny window in the room and let the sounds of SoHo leak into the room.

Her phone dinged with a text from Ari:

What's the attire for tonight? Going to change before heading out to the backwoods.

Cass rolled her eyes. Queens wasn't eventhatfar out. Most days, she could make it into Manhattan in 20 minutes which was a better commute than most people had from the island itself.

She typed her reply:

Casual. NO heels. Stop trying to be taller than me ;)

She hesitated before sending the message, she didn't want to push Ari beyond what she was comfortable with. But, she hadn't told Ari to back off just yet. She hit send and locked her phone, turning the screen upside down as she placed it down.

Cass couldn't lie, she loved keeping Ari in the dark about the date. It was not going to be what she expected, but Cass loved surprising her.

As she worked, her phone buzzed again with a message. She smiled in anticipation but her face dropped when she read the name on the screen.

Elle: I miss you. Are you still coming to the party?

Cass tapped her leg, her stomach dropping to her stomach. She hadn't been very good at telling Elle "no" in the past and she feared she wouldn't be able to do it now.

Elle was an engaged woman. Cass was furious that she'd even consider sending her ex a message like that. Her behavior since their breakup had shown Cass that she never should have trusted Elle to begin with. God only knows what she was texting other women when they had been together.

She looked at the screen, considering before letting her fingers type:

We'll be there, Ari is excited to get to know the real you.

She sent it before she could second guess herself. It was stern but non confrontational, Gabby would be proud.

Just as she returned to her screen, there was a knock at the door. And before she could welcome the knocker in, the door swung open.

"Hey, Cass," Niamh continued as she leaned against the door, "Just checking on your progress on the Kylie project and the music video."

Cass nodded and turned to face her boss, "The ADR sessions went well with Kylie. I think we got everything we needed but we'll see. The video is good but the artists keep changing their mind which will push the deadline."

Niamh sucked air through her teeth, "Yikes. I think maybe you'll need to speed it up

then.”

Cass opened her mouth to protest but thought for a moment.

“I hear you. Do you think you could get them to settle on a final vision and I’ll make it my priority as soon as that’s confirmed?” Cass said, trying her best not to roll her eyes.

“Let me see what I can do, but really you’re going to have to settle their vision for them,” Niamh said, the condescension in her tone undeniable.

“Got it,” Cass said, hoping Niamh would leave before she lost her shit.

Sure enough, she closed the door and Cass turned back to her computer.

“What a bitch,” she whispered to herself. She checked the clock, just a few more hours before she was out of this place and off to her hangout with Ari.

9

ARI

Cass had refused to send Ari any more information than necessary. She hadn’t even sent an address, just cross-streets and to look for a green awning.

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She tried to follow Cass's instructions but she didn't really own anything "casual".

As she walked down Ditmars Boulevard toward Steinway Street, she was suddenly self-conscious of her outfit. It was a baggy tee-shirt that she had french-tucked into tight black jeans. It was the only pair she owned and she had bought them before college graduation.

She walked down each block, noticing each restaurant. Three sushi places in a three block radius, lots of bars, some Greek, and some Halal. She was starting to think Queens might have something to it.

She turned down Steinway Street and walked until she spotted the only green awning for two blocks. Her eyebrows furrowed as she read the sign: Laundromat.

Sure enough, as she crossed the street, Ari spotted Cass standing outside of an actual laundromat with a granny cart full of clothes. She excitedly waved Ari down and smiled.

"Please tell me this is some wild speak-easy..." Ari said as she looked at Cass's cart.

"A speak-easy that needs me to bring my dirty laundry?" Cass questioned.

Ari shrugged, "Maybe it's metaphorical laundry."

Cass laughed and went in for a hug, this time Ari was loose. She even squeezed Cass back, feeling her groan under her strength.

“Alrighty, in we go,” Cass said as she backed herself and the cart up the small step and into the storefront.

Ari reached down and lifted the front wheels over the edge.

“Thanks,” Cass said.

Cass immediately started loading up a large machine while Ari looked around. It was one of the nicer laundromats she’d ever seen. The bright, white subway tile interspersed with a warm green tile to give the place some character.

Ari watched Cass throw her clothes, unseparated, into the machine. Her no makeup face somehow looked even more stunning under the harsh, typically unflattering lighting.

Since she was distracted, Ari gave herself permission to look at Cass’s body. She wore a pair of booty shorts, too tight to wear outside of the house but clearly a comfort item from many years ago. Her ass poked out from under the fabric, Ari finally seeing the crease created between where Cass’s ass met her thighs.

Ari’s heart raced at her gorgeous, tight, and shockingly ample ass. Her eyes followed down her legs, her thighs soft and her calves toned. She wondered what it might feel like to feel Cass’s thighs squeezing her head with pleasure as Ari tasted her.

“Alright, let’s chill,” Cass said as she started the machine, loading in four dollars worth of quarters.

It took a moment for Ari’s eyes to lift as Cass turned her attention.

Cass licked her teeth as she watched Ari meet her gaze. She raised an eyebrow at Ari.

Naughty, Ari could basically read Cass's thoughts.

Cass led them to the back of the laundromat, where the folding tables and two massage chairs sat. She grabbed Ari's hand and held it as she walked toward the dryers. Ari's hand was dangerously close to Cass's ass, and she was certain that was no accident on Cass's part.

Taking a seat, Cass tapped the cushion of the neighboring chair.

Ari sat down, eyeing the attendant before doing so.

"Are you sure it's okay to sit here? We're not even paying for the massage," Ari asked.

Cass chuckled and looked around the laundromat, "I mean, they don't seem in high demand."

Ari exhaled a laugh and nodded.

"How was your day?" Ari asked, turning to look at Cass.

Cass nodded, "Um, it was okay. My boss is an idiot."

"Really?" Ari asked.

"Off the record, obviously," Cass said before continuing, "I just think I could manage the studios better but he's the post-production coordinator for almost every project I'm on."

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Ari nodded, "Can you go above his head?"

Cass shrugged, "I could. But, I don't think it'd go well."

"I get that," Ari said.

Cass retreated into her mind. But, Ari could sense there was something else.

"Anything else?" Ari pushed.

Cass sighed, "Ugh. No judgment?"

Ari nodded, why not? They didn't owe each other anything so she could reserve her judgment for a little while.

"Elle has been texting me," Cass admitted.

"Oh," Ari said.

Cass smacked Ari's arm. Right, no judgment.

"Is that a new development?" Ari asked.

Cass shook her head, "No. I mean we've broken up like five times and I had no idea she was seeing anyone seriously so we've like... sent some messages we probably shouldn't have. But, she messaged me and said 'I miss you'"

“Ew, really?” Ari asked and rushed to add, “Not ew to you. Ew to an engaged woman sending a ‘u up?’ text to their ex who is also supposedly in a relationship.”

Cass nodded, glad Ari clarified.

“Yeah but I don’t have a good track record of resisting her,” Cass confessed as she crossed her arms.

The pieces were connecting for Ari. Ari had been sucked back into her own long-term relationship a couple times, even though she knew it wasn’t right.

“Maybe it’s different now,” Ari said and smirked, “Since you have such a banging girlfriend.”

Cass laughed as her timer went off for the washer. Ari grabbed the metal laundromat carts and placed it under Cass’s machine as she opened the door.

“Thanks,” Cass said with a smile.

They dumped the clothes into the cart, wheeled them back to the dryers and tossed them in.

“I can’t believe you don’t separate your laundry,” Ari said as she shook her head, helping to throw the clothes into the industrial dryer.

Cass laughed, “It’s a scam to make me pay more to do my laundry and I won’t fall for it.”

Ari laughed as she finished loading up the machine.

“Besides, it’s a helpful date. You wouldn’t have known I don’t separate my clothes if

I hadn't forced you to come here," Cass said.

Ari nodded, "So that's why you dragged me out to Queens?"

"Yeah, ya know, good for us to know each other's dirty laundry and what not." she said as she laughed at her own joke.

When they finished, Ari hopped onto the folding table as Cass leaned next to her. Cass set a pile of damp, non-dryable bras, jeans, and shirts next to them.

Rolling her eyes, Ari asked, "But seriously, who even does their own laundry if they can afford a service?"

Cass scoffed and mocked Ari, "I'm Ari and I'm above cleaning my own dirty panties."

Ari tossed a damp pair of jeans at her and added, "I'm just surprised is all. You seem busy and you save all this money on rent."

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As she considered her response, “Nothing’s Gonna Stop Us Now” by Starship came on over the speakers.

“Oh, I love this song,” Cass said with a groan as she started bobbing her head to the song. Before she knew it, Ari was watching Cass dance around the laundromat and belting the lyrics. She grabbed a lollipop from the “free candy” bowl on the folding table.

Ari laughed as she watched Cass perform for her.

At a break in the song, Cass said, “If I didn’t do my own laundry, I wouldn’t be reminded of absolute bangers like that.”

Cass put herself in the space between Ari’s spread legs, leaning on the folding table. She looked up into Ari’s eyes and down to her mouth.

“But seriously, I like it. It’s a cool place and they play good music and...” she paused as she unwrapped her lollipop, “It has free candy.”

She brought the candy toward Ari’s mouth and asked, “Would you like my lollipop?”

Before Ari could even process how corny it was, she was somehow nodding and opening her mouth.

“Good,” Cass said with a smile.

Ari pulled the lollipop from her mouth after tasting it for a minute, “You’re an

interesting character, Cass.”

“How so?” Cass asked.

Ari shrugged, “I thought you’d be a little more... prissy?”

Cass laughed, “You’re one to talk, Ms. Uppity.”

Ari laughed and held the lollipop out for Cass to take. Cass looked back up at her and smiled before slowly opening her mouth and letting her tongue slowly caress the pop from bottom to top.

Ari swallowed the lump in her throat as blood rushed to her center, making her clit and entrance throb.

“Thank you,” Cass said as she grabbed the lollipop with her teeth.

Cass looked into Ari’s eyes as she sucked the pop for a moment before turning to empty the dryer. She took out her clothes and dumped them on the folding table.

Ari tilted her head, trying to snap out of her haze, “You fold your laundry here?”

Cass nodded, “Yeah well this way they don’t get wrinkled.”

“Don’t you live like around the block?” Ari questioned.

Cass raised her eyebrows, “Are you trying to come home with me?”

Ari blushed, the thought of taking Cass to bed had been haunting her mind for weeks. She managed to stumble out a few words, “No, not at all.”

“Not even a little bite?” Cass pushed, a boyish grin crawling onto her face.

Ari hopped off the table and stared at the pile of clothes.

Cass passed her a few items as she cleared a spot for herself. Ari poked through the pile and started with a t-shirt. It had been awhile since she folded her own laundry and she hardly even knew how to.

And it seemed Cass had an intricate system, rolling shorts into a perfectly contained envelope.

Ari fumbled to create an even vaguely similar end result while Cass giggled at her attempts.

“Oh, you have too much privilege. Can’t even fold a pair of shorts,” Cass said.

“I mean, I’m no Marie Kondo, but it’ll do,” Ari said as she set the t-shirt into the granny cart.

Ari stumbled upon a nylon, blush pink thong. As she tried to find the right side out, she noticed a light, white stain where she imagined Cass’s center met the fabric.

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She ran her finger along it, Cass's ass in the emerald skirt coming back to her mind. Could this stain have been from their date?

The thought of Cass just as aroused as she was made Ari's clit throb with anticipation.

"I can't tell if you're obsessed with my panties or have no idea how to fold them," Cass interrupted.

Ari opened her mouth trying to explain, unable to find an answer before Cass grabbed them from her hand and started to fold them.

Once they were neatly tucked into themselves, Cass passed the pair back to Ari and with a wink, added, "It was from the other night, if that's what you were wondering."

Ari swallowed what felt like a boulder in her throat, "Oh, got it."

Cass tilted her head and laughed, "You really do need help, huh?"

Ari put her head in her palms and laughed, while the faint smell of Cass's underwear drifted into her nose. Even clean, her smell was undeniable. Ari wanted to lick them just to have a taste. Instead, she snuck them into her jeans pocket.

Cass looked at Ari from the corner of her eye and smirked. Ari liked knowing that Cass wanted her to take them.

You're such a creep, Ari thought to herself.

* * *

She was still a little embarrassed the next day as she met with Tommy.

“Did you happen to get a look at that new writer I sent you?” she asked a blank-staring Ari.

Ari shook her head, “No, sorry. I got in too late last night.”

Tommy scrunched her forehead, “That’s not very Ari of you.”

Ari shrugged, “I’ll get to it tonight.”

She made a note in her calendar to set time aside that night to review the writing samples before their new client pitch meeting the following day.

“You know, you could let Jess do it,” Tommy said.

Ari looked out the glass door and saw Jess, diligently working at her computer.

“Eh, I haven’t solidified my clients enough yet,” Ari said.

Tommy nodded, “So, you’re still seeing her?”

Ari couldn’t stop the smile creeping onto her face, but before Tommy could create her own narrative Ari said, “It’s just helpful for both of us to have fake girlfriends. I mean look, even while pretending to date someone, I’m falling behind on work. Imagine if I actually had feelings for her?”

Tommy laughed, “Yeah, I couldn't imagine that.”

Ari rolled her eyes and scrolled through her notes, making sure she didn't need to address anything else with Tommy.

"You do think she's hot though, right?" Tommy asked, looking down at her own laptop with a smirk.

"Cut it out," Ari said.

Tommy looked to the ceiling, "Like, wouldn't it kind of help your case to fuck? Like it would help you get to know her better, wouldn't it?"

Ari blushed, the thought had crossed her mind a few times in the last couple of weeks, "Tommy, it's not happening."

Ari had thought about it a few times. She was stiff with Cass, even after a few weeks of getting to know her. What if they couldn't pass off a real relationship? At least at her work events they had a convenient excuse of professionalism.

And ultimately, were Cass's events really even her problem?

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A year ago, she would've taken the benefits for herself and not cared what happened to Cass. But, she wanted to rub it in Elle's face and help Cass out.

"I'm just saying, friends with benefits can work out for everyone," Tommy said as she closed her laptop, "And you, my friend, really need to get laid."

Ari laughed, "And you need to stop picking fights with girls at bars."

Tommy winked, "But it's so much fun."

As Tom left, Jess appeared in the door, "Hey, just checking in."

"Would you be interested in reading this script and giving me your thoughts? I'll read it too and maybe we can consider the client together?" Ari asked.

Jess nodded and made a note, "The Greggor scripts?"

Ari looked at her email to confirm, "Yeah, that's the one. The partners want me to scout more clients so if you have any events in mind or artists who need rep, let me know. Okay?"

"Sure thing," Jess smiled and headed out of her office.

Tommy was right about one thing: Jess could help her make up for the time she was spending with Cass. And frankly, she couldn't afford to not use her assistant.

She would still read the scripts and scout her own talent, but it would help Jess feel

invested in their work and give Ari some breathing room.

10

CASS

The rest of the work week flew by and before Cass knew it, it was the morning of NYC Pride. Ari had sent the attire for the event earlier in the week and Cass had realized her usual slutty outfits wouldn't fly with the more conservative partners.

Cass may have been offended by restricting her ability to hoe-out at pride. But, she hadn't attended the Pride parade in a few years. It had become a performance for corporations to feign support and often shied away from taking a stand on the issues affecting queer people.

At this point, she could be found at Dyke March every year.

She settled for a white "Trans Rights are Human Rights" shirt and a pair of jean shorts to keep her cool in the relentless June heat. She hadn't ever been in the parade before, but if she knew anything from standing on the sidewalk, the city's cement and asphalt bounced heat straight up at the participants with little shade for protection until the late afternoon.

Cass worried she looked too inappropriate, that all of Ari's coworkers would be in slacks and button downs but Ari had told her: "As long as you're not in a mess tank, you'll be fine."

Why was she so nervous about impressing them?

She looked in the mirror and reminded herself that she needed to ace this or Ari would back out of the engagement party... and that was all.

As she left her room, Gabby was excitedly waiting in the hallway.

“Ready?” She asked.

Cass nodded, grabbing her keys and wallet from the door. To get to the parade on time, she had woken up at 7 am and chugged her coffee.

They headed outside and made their way to the train.

Gabby, chipper than ever, asked, “Are you excited? I’ve always wanted to participate in the parade.”

Cass crossed her arms, trying to warm her torso to the chilly morning that would turn to tormenting heat, “Yeah. Nervous, but excited.”

“You’re gonna do great and I’ll be there to cheer you on from the sidelines!” Gabby said.

Cass hugged Gabby from the side as they walked, “You’re the best, Gabs.”

As they climbed up onto the subway platform and boarded their train, Cass was reminded how magical Pride was in New York. It felt like every person you saw was queer. Part of her thought her community came out more in force. But, the optimist in her liked to think of them as on the train with her everyday.

It made her chest warm, to feel so surrounded by love, queerness, and community. She didn’t think the feeling would ever wear off.

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She wondered if Ari had ever felt the same way. Neither of them had been city natives, two out of town girls looking for a community in a world that felt closed off to them.

The train chugged along the elevated platform, the light of the beautiful June Sunday pouring into the car. For once, the train was running the way it was supposed to and within twenty minutes Gabby and Cass were ascending from the station, sweat beginning to drip down their faces.

Cass pulled out her phone and checked the time: 10:03 am. She was a little late to meet up with Ari.

She scanned the street signs to get her bearings in the crowded Madison Square Park. 25th and 5th was just a few blocks away.

“Where are you meeting Ari?” Gabby asked.

“We agreed to meet somewhere in the park so we could arrive together,” Cass said.

Gabby nodded, “Good cover, looks like you spent the night together,” she joked as she nudged Cass’s shoulder.

Cass blushed, “Now you’re getting it.”

Gabby hugged her and said, “I’ll be a few blocks down from the start and if you need anything, just text.”

“Thanks, buddy,” Cass said as she gave Gabby a hug and added, “Happy Pride.”

Heading toward the northeast corner of the park, Cass shot Ari a text:

Walking to the spot now, sorry I’m late.

By the time she had hit send, she was already pulling up to the spot, where she found Ari sitting on a bench staring up at the sky.

“Hey, you,” Cass said.

Ari smiled before even seeing Cass, “Couldn’t even get here on time? That’s strike one,” She said with a wink.

Cass hugged her, their arms settling comfortably on each other’s backs.

“Yeah, sorry. Hard to get out the door much faster,” Cass said, wiping the sweat from her brow. Ari’s face was glowing from the warm weather, somehow looking even more together.

Looking down Ari’s body, Cass noticed her short, thigh length skirt and ponytail. It was a departure from her usual high bun and trousers. Cass enjoyed the view of her legs, her calves toned from wearing heels.

“Nothing to apologize for, I lied about the arrival time,” Ari said.

Cass’s mouth fell open as she smacked Ari’s arm, “How dare you?”

Ari shrugged and licked her lip, “You don’t have a great track record for punctuality. Plus, I thought we could grab a coffee.”

“Fine, you get a pass because there’s coffee involved,” Cass said with a wink. Ari started walking and Cass followed suit.

Ari’s hand hung by her side and Cass reached out to grab it. She slid her fingers between Ari’s.

Ari looked down to their intertwined hands and tilted her head.

“People you work with could be around, right?” Cass asked.

“Yeah,” Ari nodded, trying to hide her smile.

As their hands swayed, Cass couldn’t help but feel like they fit perfectly together. Even on such a sweaty day, when Cass would normally hate to feel someone’s sweat mixing with hers. But, Ari’s felt like it belonged on her skin.

They grabbed a coffee from whatever city-chain was closest, in this case it was Two Brews Co.

As they approached the counter, Ari took the lead and said, “Hi there.”

The barista, settling in for a long shift of drunk parade-goers, replied, “Hi, what can I get for you?”

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“I’ll just have an iced coffee with oat milk and for you,” Ari said as she stepped to the side and gestured for Cass to order.

“I’ll take a cold brew with soy, please,” Cass said as she fished in her shallow pockets for her wallet.

Before she could tap her card on the white square, Ari’s card was making contact.

“You know, you have to let me treat you at some point,” Cass said with a sigh.

The barista giggled as Ari shrugged and added, “Says who?”

“Happy Pride,” the barista said as she turned to get working on their drinks.

As they leaned against the wood counter by the pickup area, Ari smiled.

“What?” Cass asked.

Ari shrugged, “I guess we’re pretty good at selling this whole thing.”

Cass rolled her eyes and said, “Well convincing a barista and your entire company is a little different.”

“Take the victory,” Ari said as she grabbed the finished coffees from the barista.

Cass smiled and followed Ari the few blocks to the company float’s meetup spot in the parade line. They were pretty far back in the parade which meant they had some

time before they were due to be social.

Once they arrived, Tommy approached them and hugged Cass, “It’s so good to see you again, darling.”

Clearly Ari had gotten Tommy on board with their experiment and Tommy wasn’t afraid to commit to the bit.

“Oh my god, I have so much to tell you about work this week,” Cass said as Ari put her hand on Cass’s shoulder blades. Her long, strong hands pressed in Cass’s back and guided her toward another group. Cass could melt under the weight of Ari’s firm hand.

“Cass, this is Sydney, who you met the other day,” Ari said as she gestured.

Cass nodded and stuck out her hand, “It’s great to see you again. And under less strange circumstances.”

She was sure to smile as she confessed to her odd behavior.

Sydney laughed and replied, “Well, we’re happy to have you and get to know more about Ariel’s mysterious girlfriend.”

“Oh, there’s nottoomuch to know,” Cass said with a blush.

“Help yourselves to the water and snacks. Ariel, you know the drill,” Sydney said as she moved on and greeted more employees.

Cass’s shoulders sank as she walked away, “God, she’s intense.”

Ari nodded and walked with Cass to the snack area. She tossed open the lid to the

blue cooler attached to the back of their float.

“Are the rest of the partners coming?” Cass asked as she looked around for other intimidating, older bosses.

Ari shook her head, “No, Sydney is usually the only one who comes since she’s queer.”

Cass raised her brows.

“Yeah, we’ve all thought about it. She’s hot. But she’s very professional and very stern about work-place boundaries. But it doesn’t stop Tommy from trying every year.” Ari said with a laugh.

Cass giggled as she grabbed the water bottle from Ari’s hand. The chilled plastic was already cooling her off as the June sun peeked through the Manhattan skyscrapers.

Tommy walked over and said behind Cass, “Who doesn’t love a hot, older lesbian?”

The trio hopped onto their float and found a spot with a good view of the street.

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“So, Cass, how have you been?” Tommy asked.

Cass smiled, “I’m good. You know how much I love Pride.”

Tommy nodded, “Oh definitely. Have you guys settled on where you’re going tonight?”

Ari shrugged and said, “Probably the usual places. Hopefully we can do Ginger’s, Phoenix, and maybe something else?”

“We should meet at Ginger’s then,” Tommy said.

“My friend Gabby was thinking about heading to Ginger’s too, actually.”

Ari smiled, “So, maybe that’s the move?”

Her eyes glanced down to Cass’s mouth. Cass felt like she could wilt under Ari’s intense eyes.

Cass leaned in once Tommy was distracted and lowered her voice, “Listen if you want to spend tonight elsewhere, I won’t be offended.”

Ari bounced between staring into Cass’s eyes and her mouth, “Well, thanks. But I think it’ll be fun.”

Cass nodded, feeling Ari’s reassurance deep in her bones. She could get used to being looked at like that.

The float got moving around 2 pm, and the sun was beating down on them. As they drifted down 5th Avenue, toward Gabby's position on East 16th and 5th Avenue, Ari and Cass danced to Diana Ross's I'm Coming Out.

As they danced and sang, taking breaks to drink some water, Ari pulled out a sunscreen from her bag and passed it to Cass.

Cass smiled, "You're prepared."

"The sun is a deadly laser, and all that," Ari said with a shrug.

Cass obliged, she was always forgetting to put on sunscreen. Ari watched her delicately apply the lotion to her face. She reached out and gently rubbed in a spot that Cass had missed.

"Thanks," Cass said as she swallowed. Ari's gentle touch sent a shiver down her spine, one surely the weather couldn't have done.

It had been years since Cass had been cared for like this. She had forgotten how good it felt to trust someone else to care for her.

She feared she was in danger of complicating this entire arrangement.

As she searched for Gabby in the crowd and waved to her dear friend with excitement, Ari came behind her and wrapped her long arms around Cass's stomach.

Ari whispered, "Which one's Gabby?"

Cass pointed to her in the crowd and Ari enthusiastically waved in her direction and she swayed Cass back and forth to the upbeat music.

Cass could feel herself sink into Ari's arms.

Maybe complicated wasn't the worst thing.

11

ARI

The parade had been a blast and Cass had passed with flying colors. Sydney and Tommy raved about her the entire time they cleaned up the float, once Cass had departed to meet up with Gabby, eat some food, and take a rest before the big party tonight.

Ari couldn't have been more pleased with her performance. She was professional and very good at following the appropriate boundaries. Something about the way Cass looked at Ari felt intimate and secure.

She knew it was all for show, but Cass was a damn good actor.

Ari headed back to her place to do the same as Cass: rest, eat, dress up.

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Dressing down for the parade was always nice but the feeling of putting on a slinky, slutty outfit for the following night out, felt even better.

She stumbled inside, her legs weak from standing and dancing, near 6pm. Ari's home was quiet and well air-conditioned, a welcome break from the bright, hot sun, and the noisy crowd.

She always tried to stay in the moment at the parade, enjoying seeing her community out and proud, but she couldn't lie: she was flooded with relief as soon as she came back inside.

She stood in her kitchen, her feet against the cold stone floors as she grabbed a day old sandwich from the fridge. She scarfed it down, knowing if she wanted to sleep, she'd need to head to her bed quickly.

Once she was done with her food, she tossed the wrapper in her stainless steel trash bin, somehow completely devoid of fingerprints, and headed into her room. She tore off her sweaty shirt and slipped off her skirt, throwing them into her closet as she fell into bed.

As she lay on her pillowy, king sized mattress, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She had gotten used to Cass's touch throughout the day. As she drifted to sleep, she tried to imagine what it would feel like to have Cass's arms wrapped around her as their breathing slowed and matched pace.

* * *

Before Ari knew it, her alarm was sounding from her phone. She startled awake, gulping down air as she opened her eyes.

She had passed out harder than she expected.

Maybe it was the sun exposure... or maybe it was dreaming of Cass's touch.

She didn't have time to think about it too deeply, instead launching herself out of bed and heading straight for the shower.

She needed at least an hour and half to fix her hair, put on her face, and get dressed. At this rate, she would definitely be late for the 9pm meet time. But, to be fair, she didn't expect anyone else would be on time either.

She hopped into the shower, happy to wash off the sweat and sunscreen from the day. Her body tingled as the warm water dripped down her body, it felt like a sad replacement for the touch of another woman. But it would have to do.

Looking down her body, she realized she hadn't shaved her entrance in months. After all, if no one was going to be down there, why would she bother?

She grabbed her razor, considering whether to take the time to clean herself up. But as she reached down, she considered whether she could trust herself to not sleep with Cass if she knew her body was groomed and ready.

As she considered it, she felt around her folds, somehow growing slick from the thought of Cass exploring them.

Better not, she decided, setting the razor back on its wire, black brass shelf.

Maybe it would encourage her to behave.

She hopped out of the shower and quickly blow-dried her hair, before pulling out her curling iron and getting to work.

Luckily, her intense schedule meant she had gotten pretty used to speeding through her routine. But, Pride was a special night and she wanted to look perfect. Maybe to tease Cass, and maybe to find someone else.

Once her makeup and hair were down, she headed to her closet in a loose pajama shirt. She started with lingerie, shoving her clothes hangers out of her way as she made her way to the very back where a collection of one-pieces were collecting dust.

She grabbed a red, lace teddy and held it up to her body. She had bought it after her last breakup, hoping to give her body a new life. But, she'd never felt sexy enough to wear it.

Pulling it off the hanger, she slid her body into it. It lifted her breasts, creating a subtle cleavage that would surely draw eyes to her chest.

Even if she couldn't sleep with Cass, Ari wanted to tempt her. So she chose a lightweight, white blazer and a trouser that hugged her ass. She slipped them on, leaving the teddy visible for the night out.

It was bolder than she would normally go for, but she wanted to show out for Pride... and for Cass.

As she finished off her look, she looked at herself in the mirror. She let her hand drift down her body and rest on her hips.

With an approving nod, she headed to the kitchen where she grabbed a gilded whiskey glass and poured out a portion of tequila.

She typed out a text to Tommy and Cass separately:

On my way to G's in a few.

She sent the message, put her phone down and shot the drink to the back of her throat.

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She rolled her head in a circle as she sucked her teeth of the bitter, burning flavor. She wasn't a "fan" of really any hard liquor, but tequila was a fun type of drunk. And she wanted to have a good time tonight.

She grabbed the bottle, ready to pour another pre-game drink before stopping.

Don't want to be sloppy, she thought to herself as she put the cap on the bottle and slid her bag off the counter and into her hands.

* * *

The bar was packed when Ari arrived, a crowd of queer people standing on the street smoking a joint to escape the heat of the small venue.

Ari approached the yellow facade, one that mimicked a classic Irish pub, and smiled at the bouncer.

"I.D." The bouncer, a tough looking butch, demanded.

Ari nodded and dug it out of her bag, "Here you go."

The bouncer handed the ID back and nodded as Ari walked past.

Inside, the bar was packed with every type of sapphic imaginable. Ari immediately started scanning for Cass. Even though she rarely saw women who looked like Cass in her everyday life, here, everyone had an edgy haircut.

Tommy had said she was just fifteen minutes behind Ari while Cass had already arrived with Gabby.

As she made her way to the end of the bar, Ari stood on her tip toes and searched for her blonde.

Eventually, she spotted a hand waving her down.

As she approached, Cass cackled at something Gabby had said. Ari caught the end of a slap to the shoulder from Cass to Gabs.

“Hey,” Cass said as she took a sip of her drink.

“Hi,” Ari said as she leaned in for a side hug and a kiss on the cheek.”

Cass raised her eyebrows as Ari pulled away.

She extended a hand to Gabby and said, “Hi, I’m Ari. It’s great to meet you. I’ve heard amazing things.”

Gabby blushed, “Oh that’s sweet. It’s great to meet you, Ari.”

“Your enthusiasm at the parade was much appreciated,” Ari said with a smile.

“Oh, I ship it,” Gabby joked, though the glance she shot Cass said otherwise.

Cass laughed and nudged her friend, “I’m glad you made it.”

Ari nodded, “Me too.”

Before she knew it, the bartender was taking her drink and Cass was demanding shots

once Tommy had arrived.

Ari couldn't stop herself from watching Cass's every move... the way her mouth opened to take her shot, the way her hands rested on her upper ass, the way she would look at Ari to check-in.

"So, what did Sydney think of her?" Ari asked Tommy once Cass and Gabby had gone off to dance.

"She was impressed. Obviously she's less "polished" than anyone expected but Sydney's queer and gets it. She kind of nailed it," Tommy said as she put her card down to open a tab.

Ari nodded and smiled.

Tommy turned to her and said, "So, remind me why you can't just actually date?"

Ari shook her head, "Because, I'm too busy for that kind of a commitment. I couldn't give her what she deserves."

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“Bullshit,” Tommy said, “You’re scared.”

Rolling her eyes, Ari took a gulp of her tequila sunrise – a drink choice she’d surely regret the next morning.

She looked through the crowd for Cass, who was on the dance floor smiling at another woman. Ari’s skin crawled at the thought.

Tommy leaned into Cass’s ear and said, “See, you want her. And you won’t let yourself have her.”

Ari’s heart raced, watching Cass’s body begin to move with someone else. A part of her was annoyed that Cass even had the time to entertain seeing other people. And another part of her angry that Cass didn’t want to only see her.

The bartender set down a batch of drinks.

Tommy asked, “What would happen if you just tried it?”

Ari shook her head, “You’re trying to cause problems. If you want issues, go to Henrietta’s and hit on a married woman,” she said with a wink.

She grabbed Cass’s drink from the fresh batch as well as her own and followed the path through the crowd, doing her best to avoid spilling any of their beverages.

As she walked, the tequila began to set in.

What is she thinking?

Gritting her teeth, she approached Cass from behind and tapped her on the shoulder, presenting the drink to her.

“Thanks,” Cass said as she turned back to the person who had caught her eye.

Ari rolled her eyes and took a few sips of her drink. As she stood by, watching this other woman look up and down Cass’s body. Ari felt her body tensing.

That’s mine.

She tapped Cass one more time, prompting Cass to turn with a puzzled expression.

“Can I talk to you for a second?” Ari asked, barely able to contain her frustration.

Cass smiled through her frustration and nodded, allowing Ari to guide her to a corner nearby.

“Just give me a second,” Cass called back to the person.

Once they were alone, Ari struggled to find words.

“What’s the issue?” Cass asked.

Ari shook her head, “Is it not obvious?”

Cass shrugged, “Not really.”

Ari groaned, “You came here with me and you’re dancing with them?”

Cass laughed and looked back at them. She took a deep breath, Ari's eye falling down her neck to her chest.

She leaned into Ari's ears and whispered, "If you want this to be more than it is, you're going to have to say it."

Ari considered it for a moment. She knew she couldn't make that commitment while four shots in after a day in the sun with little food.

But, she tilted Cass's head to bring her ear closer to her own mouth.

"I don't think we can sell this without at least having a taste," Ari whispered back.

Cass's face flushed pink, hardly able to hide her surprise... And her arousal.

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Ari's body was tingling with excitement, she had already felt herself growing wetter as she observed Cass's body move.

Cass laughed and licked her lips, "Then, why don't you show me?"

Ari leaned in and asked, "That easy are you?"

She turned and went back to Tommy and Gabby, to dance the night away. She liked leaving Cass hanging, making her ask for more.

12

CASS

Cass had done her best to go back to flirting with Kai, the charismatic, masc, non-binary person who had approached her to dance. But, Ari's words lingered in her head.

As she danced, now with Gabby, Ari, and Tommy, she knew that her body was more closed off to Ari than it would've been with someone she had fucked.

Still, could either of them be trusted to know when they had crossed the line?

She tried to shake the thought as she grooved to the beat of Pride classics. It was nearing three am. They group danced close but weren't forced together by the flow of the crowd, as it had been dwindling since 2.

Cass had wanted an excuse to get closer to Ari, to tease her. But, if she tried it at this point, it would've been unnecessary and clearly a ploy.

Gabby yawned as she danced.

"Are you ready?" Cass asked her across the circle.

Gabby waved her away, "No rush!"

Cass tapped Ari and said into her ear, "We should probably go, work and all that."

Ari nodded and looked at Tommy, who agreed with a simple nod.

The group began the journey toward the front of the bar. Tommy closed out her tab while chatting with Gabby.

Ari and Cass stood by the door, the alcohol still drawing them closer.

"Are you working tomorrow?" Ari asked.

Cass could smell Ari's sweat and tried to find the words, but instead she just nodded.

Liar.

"Do you wanna stay at my place so you have a shorter commute?" Ari asked, trying to hide her ulterior motives.

Cass considered it. Being in Midtown meant she'd have forty more minutes of sleep in the morning... and she could just sleep on the couch. They didn't have to do anything.

“I’ll take the couch, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Ari added.

Cass looked at Gabby, “Yeah, let me just order her a cab.”

Ari’s phone was already out and she handed it to Cass, “On me.”

“Are you sure?” Cass asked, she had the money to spare but wouldn’t stop Ari from being a gentleman.

Ari nodded and watched Cass put in her address for Gabby’s trip. Cass could feel her eyes looking down her shirt, a button down that had become more and more undone as the night progressed. Now, it was nearly down to her belly button, her navy blue bralette, completely visible as she danced.

Once Gabby approached, Cass put her arm around her and gave her a hug while saying, “I’m going to stay at Ari’s since it’s closer to work. But we ordered you a cab, is that okay?”

Gabby raised her eyebrows but tried to hide her surprise, “Totally!”

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Tommy joined them and they all made their way outside.

Having already ordered her ride, Tommy said her goodbyes and turned to Ari, “Behave yourself.”

Ari rolled her eyes, “First time you’ve ever told me that.”

Tommy slid into the cab and was off.

Gabby arrived next. She gave Ari a tight, familiar hug, “I’m so glad we got to meet!”

“Me too, we should all do this again,” Ari said with a smile.

“Are you sure you’re okay to get home?” Cass asked as she hugged her best friend.

Gabby nodded as Cass continued, “Promise you’ll text once you’re in?”

“Of course, don’t worry about me,” Gabby said as she opened the door to the cab and hopped inside.

Once the door slammed shut, Ari took a step closer to Cass.

As the car rolled away, Gabby’s window opened and she yelled, “You make a cute couple.”

Cass laughed as her face turned red. But, Ari’s didn’t. She looked strangely serene.

Their car arrived a few minutes later and they slide into the backseat, their sweaty thighs sticking to the cool leather

Cass slid to the farthest window, expecting Ari to sit opposite her. But, instead, she slid into the middle seat, pressing her body next to Cass's.

Who was this bold woman in Ari's body?

Maybe it was the alcohol, or the dancing, or she was just horny.

Cass set her hand on her own thigh, letting her pinky finger graze Ari's legs.

Touching her, even just like that, sent Cass's body over the edge. She felt the anticipation of feeling Ari's bare skin in her center, a throbbing beginning as the car blew through the normally crowded streets.

Ari placed her hand next to Cass's, their fingers lightly intertwining. But, Cass didn't want to hold Ari's hands. She wanted to move her fingers to Ari's thighs, to feel them — even if just through her trousers — on her hands.

So she did, she let her palm rest on the top of Ari's thighs, feeling Ariel's muscles tense under her touch.

She looked from her thighs up to Ari's eyes, asking Do you like that?

And Ari nodded, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

Either Ari was easily excitable or it had been a very long time since she had been touched like this.

Cass let her fingers slowly glide farther up Ari's thigh, closer and closer to her

entrance. She stopped at the very top of her thigh, just before her legs met her pelvis. As much as she wanted to fuck Ari right there in the back of the cab, she also had no desire to cross any boundaries in front of the driver.

But, as her hand rested on Ari's thigh, Cass felt the heat coming off from under Ari's panties. Ari's body squirmed under Cass's touch, almost begging for more.

She looked up to the GPS displayed on the car's center dash.

5 minutes.

Ari shook her head, the time too long for her to wait. She placed her own hand on Cass's exposed thigh.

Cass looked into Ari's eyes as her hand explored up, Ari's eyes rolling back as she touched Cass.

3 minutes.

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Ari looked back into Cass's eyes, her chest pounding with excitement. Cass couldn't help but love the power, even though she wanted to watch Ari take control.

Although, Cass always thought there was more powering in submitting to the pleasure... and the pain.

The car was slowing as they approached Ari's building. Cass hadn't really considered what Ari's apartment would even look like, but from the outside: it was very nice.

She removed her hand from Ari's thigh, letting it skim the rest of her leg as she reached for the door handle. Ari followed suit as the cab stopped.

"Thank you," they said in unison, as they nearly fell out of the car.

As Cass stood on the curb, she offered her hand to Ari as she crawled out of the backseat. Ari grabbed it with more force than she expected, sending Cass stumbling.

Ari led the way into the building, Cass following from behind as she watched Ari's ass sway with her hips.

As they sped through the lobby, the doorman attempted to greet them as he wiped his late-night snack from his mouth.

"Evening, ladies," He said with a smile.

Ari nodded and slurred, "Hey, Jerry."

Before he could say much more, Ari turned toward the elevator bank. As she clicked the up button.

Cass smiled at her as she looked around the lobby, the warm woods and cozy lighting elevating the space. She usually hated these kinds of buildings, with sterile entrances and office-like corridors. But, this was homey and welcoming; even when they were stumbling in drunk on a Sunday.

The elevator dinged and Ari grabbed Cass's hand to guide her toward the open door. Cass swooned at her attentiveness.

As they stood in the elevator, waiting as the pressure changed, Ari and Cass stared straight forward, knowing that once they made eye-contact, they couldn't stop themselves.

The display hit ten and Ari approached the doors, unable to wait for them to open themselves, she pushed the "Door Open" button repeatedly.

Cass giggled, eliciting a smile for an eager Ari.

They tried to pass themselves down the long hallway toward Ari's unit. But, their feet were drunk and hard to control.

Ari fumbled with her keys and struggled to open the door, "Sorry for the mess."

"I'm sure it's filthy," Cass said, near a whisper.

As they entered, Cass's mouth fell open. Walking through the door, her eyes were drawn to the impressive windows with an even more impressive view of the Hudson River.

She'd only ever seen views like this in movies.

Ari stood behind her, enjoying her surprise.

She gently placed a hand on Cass's shoulder and asked, "Want me to take your bag?"

Cass felt a shiver run down her back as goosebumps ran up her arms, she nodded.

Ari gently slipped the strap off of her shoulder and set her bag on the coat hooks by the door.

Her feet brought her forward to investigate the space. Ari's apartment was bare, just a simple blue couch and walnut TV stand sitting in her living room. The bare walls made the space feel incomplete. But, Cass figured it was probably Ari's taste.

She stood by the window and stared out at the shimmering water. As she watched the water roll across the gentle river, she noticed Ari approaching her from behind.

Ari held a cup out between Cass and the window, "You should drink some water."

Cass smiled and took the iced cold glass, "Thank you."

They stood there, each enjoying the refreshing water, each hoping it would break the undeniable tension between them.

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“Your apartment is stunning,” Cass said, taking the plunge and looking at Ari’s face.

Somehow in the walk into the unit, she had forgotten just how stunning Ari was: her chiseled jaw-line, high and round cheeks, and most importantly, her dimples.

Ari gulped down some water and said, “Want to see the rest?”

Cass nodded and peeled her eyes from the view. She looked at the kitchen from the living space. It was a large, galley kitchen with an island that gave a perfect view of the river. The counters were spotless, not a single item out of place.

So much for being filthy.

Ari wandered toward the bedroom door and leaned against it as Cass approached and peeked in.

It was larger than most Manhattan bedrooms, a bed with a black, leather frame at the center of the room. Her bed was perfectly made; the fluffed pillows may as well have a mint on them.

“So, this is where you’ll be staying,” Ari said.

Cass looked at Ari, who looked serious. She closed the gap between them and whispered, “You aren’t really going to make me sleep alone, are you?”

Ari looked down at her, her heels giving her a slight edge, “Is that a good idea?”

Cass shrugged, “We should have a taste test shouldn’t we?”

Ari hesitated, “I don’t want anything serious.”

“Who said anything about serious?” Cass asked into Ari’s ear, the breath grazing Ari’s cheek.

Cass pulled away, just enough to look into Ari’s eyes.

She knew she could handle something casual, but she wasn’t sure Ari could.

But, as she felt Ari’s breath on her face and her eyes on her lips, she didn’t really care. Afterall, Ari was an adult.

Cass brought her hand up to Ari’s cheek and looked into her eyes before pulling Ari’s lips into her own.

As their lips met, pushing into each other, Ari’s moaned.

Cass’s stomach flipped at her moan, a sound she had been anticipating for weeks.

Ari grabbed Cass’s hips and guided her to the bed.

Between kisses, Ari said, “I’ve been wanting you for weeks.”

“I know,” Cass said with a smile as she let her tongue slip past Ari’s lips.

Cass pushed Ari’s shoulders down, telling her to sit on the edge of the bed. She did as she was told and Cass climbed on top of her.

Ari’s eyes moved down Cass’s body as Cass settled on top of her.

Cass slipped her hands under Ari's blazer, "Can I take this off?"

Ari nodded and with a whimper replied, "Please."

Cass's hands delicately pushed the jacket off of Ari's shoulders, exposing her bare shoulders, only the strap of her red, lace teddy remaining. Bumps rose from Ari's skin as Cass's hand brushed down her arms.

Her skin was soft and smelled like sweat and tequila.

Ari wrapped her hands around Cass's body, hovering just above Cass's ass.

She could feel Ari's anticipation to grab it, and whispered, "Do you want to touch my ass?"

Ari nodded, barely able to speak.

Cass laughed and whispered, “Then do it.”

Grinning, Ari slipped her hands down Cass’s back and gripped her, lightly pulling her cheeks.

“Just like that,” Cass said with a gasp.

Ari kissed her neck, encouraged by her enthusiasm, “Fuck you feel good.”

It felt like a confession, an admittance slipped in between sensual touches and rough kissing.

Cass smirked as she started to grind her hips along Ari’s. Even without much between them, the sensation of her panties shifting along her clit elicited more moans of pleasure.

Cass brought her hand down Ari’s chest, to her soft stomach, and eventually to her center.

“Can I touch you there?” She asked.

“Yes,” Ari said as Cass’s hand slipped and began to rub her folds through her trousers.

As Ari began to moan into Cass’s chest, enjoying her face between Cass’s breasts,

Cass giggled.

“What?” Ari asked, trying not to moan.

Cass whispered into her ear, “I wouldn’t have taken you for such a sub.”

Ari, not wanting to be offended, rolled her eyes, “Who said I was?”

“You’re acting like one?” Cass teased, as she bit Ari’s earlobe, letting her tongue lick the light bite.

Ari laughed as her mouth gaped in surprise, “I was trying to be respectful.”

Cass pulled back and looked into Ari’s eyes as she kept rubbing her clit, feeling her wetness through her panties and trousers.

“And what if you weren’t so worried about that?” Cass asked.

Ari smirked and wrapped her arm around Cass, flipping her onto the bed.

“Oh, look at you,” Cass joked, but her breathing told Ari she was just as excited.

Ari placed her arms above Cass’s head and went back in for kisses, grinding her hips toward Cass’s.

Her thrusting rubbed Cass’s clit, making her moan.

“Tell me what you want,” Ari said as she ran her lips down Cass’s neck.

Oh boy, she does need help, Cass thought.

Cass grabbed Ari's head and brought it level with her own, "I want you to do whatever you'd like to me."

Nervous, Ari gasped at the thought. She looked down Cass's body and struggled for words.

She's like a dog that caught a car.

"Why don't you take off my clothes?" Cass asked in a whisper, not wanting to condescend her.

Ari nodded, beginning to peel off her clothes, kissing up her body as she did.

Cass moans at Ari's lips on her skin, sensitive and eager.

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After her shirt was off, Ari took in Cass's body as she could finally really see it. She loved feeling Ari's gaze on her body.

"Fuck, you're gorgeous," Ari managed as her hands grabbed Cass's hips.

Cass smiled, looking down at Ari's lingerie, "You're not so bad yourself."

Ari spent a few minutes running her fingers over Cass's nearly naked body, her matching Navy blue bralette and thong still lingering.

The high waisted thong sat just above her hips, accentuating the curves of her hips and ass.

After a moment, Cass asked, "How do you want me?"

Ari stumbled, "Every way..."

Without being able to stop herself, Cass giggled.

Ari pulled back from her face and rolled her eyes, "Fuck off."

Surprised by Ari's seriousness, Cass raised her brows and looked into Ari's eyes, "I'm sorry, I thought it was sweet."

Ari sat up, leaving Cass exposed on the bed.

"Look, it's been a long time. I'm a little rusty," Ari said, resting her arms on her legs.

Cass nodded, “That’s okay,” she said as she sat up and rubbed Ari’s bicep.

After Ari took a few breaths, Cass asked, “Do you want me to lead?”

Ari considered it for a moment. Those seconds felt like a lifetime as Cass’s body continued to crave Ari’s.

“Yeah,” Ari admitted with a crooked smile.

Cass smiled back and kissed her cheek, moving toward her lips.

Ari moaned, letting herself slip back into the ecstasy of Cass’s touch.

“I want you on your stomach, would you like that?” Cass asked near Ari’s ear.

Her breath caught in her throat, only able to reply, “Yes.”

Cass gently placed her hands on Ari’s hips and guided her onto the mattress, her stomach down.

“Do you have any toys that you like?” Cass asked as watched Ari lay down.

Ari nodded, “Night stand drawer.”

Cass smiled and opened the drawer. It was mostly empty with the exception of a retainer case and an air-pulse vibrator shaped like a long egg. Cass had been quite familiar with this toy, she had one herself.

When she turned back to Ari, her pants had somehow come off and her ass was up and exposed for Cass, the red teddy was the only thing between Cass’s fingers and Ari’s slick entrance.

“Wow,” she said. Ari’s ass was perfectly round and more than a handful for Cass to grab. She let her hand touch her cheeks.

Ari moaned at the touch, tilting her head into the bedding.

“Would you like it if I used this on you?” Cass asked into Ari’s ear as she positioned herself on top of Ari.

“I would,” Ari admitted.

Cass turned the toy on and brought it toward Ari’s clit, sliding the lace out of her way, her finger slick from the damp fabric.

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“Oh my god,” Cass whimpered at the sensation.

“Do you like it?” Ari asked, almost self-conscious.

Cass nodded and leaned into Ari’s ear from behind, pushing her hips in Ari’s ass, “I fucking love it.”

Ari moaned at the approval as the vibrator pressed under her hood. Cass couldn’t help but grow even more wet at touching Ari. She had a beautiful pussy, and Cass kept stealing glances as she grinded along Ari.

Ari brought her hand near her own head and gripped the sheets, “Fuck.”

Cass laughed, this time a deep growl.

Ari’s body began to tremble as Cass moved the vibrator to the perfect spot, sending pulses of pleasure from Ari’s center straight up her body. Cass moaned as Ari’s body began to push against her own.

They moved in sync, Cass beginning to kiss and lick Ari’s shoulders as they moved. The back of Cass’s hand pressed into her own clit, sending waves of pleasure through her body as she brought Ari closer and closer to climax.

“Please,” Ari begged.

“Please what?” Cass asked, slowing her grinding for a moment.

“Don’t stop,” Ari moaned as Cass increased the vibration on the toy. She could feel Ari’s wetness on the toy as their bodies shifted, forcing a groan from her throat.

She bit Ari’s shoulder as she enjoyed the sounds of her orgasm.

Ari’s moans grew louder, closer to screams as she tilted her head into the sheets.

“Do you want to come for me?” Cass asked in her ear.

Ari nodded as her body shuddered and her moans turned to primal grunts of pleasure.

“Very good,” Cass said with a smile.

Once Ari gave a final shudder and her body’s tension released, Cass pulled the toy away from her center and laid down next to her.

“Did you like that?” Cass asked in a gentler voice.

Ari nodded, and managed a parched, “Thank you.”

Cass reached for her cup of water which was set on Ari’s nightstand, passing it to her as she sat up.

Ari took a few gulps and said, “Can I do anything for you?”

Cass smirked as she considered, “Would you want to watch me touch myself?”

“Is that an option?” Ari asked, a genuine curiosity in her exhausted voice.

Cass laughed and laid on her back, her head in the pillows and her pussy facing Ari. She brought the toy to her clit, letting the pulses of air hit her clit directly.

She would've normally teased herself for longer, but it was late and she couldn't wait any longer to orgasm near Ari.

She found the perfect spot, grinding against the vibrator as she moaned. It was only a few seconds before she was gripping the sheets herself.

Ari sat between her legs, leaning lower and lower into her center as she watched Cass's body squirm under the toy.

"Fuck," Ari said, her mouth wide open with excitement.

She rested her head on Cass's thighs as she got closer and closer to climax. Ari smiled up at Cass as she looked into Ari's eyes.

Fuck she's gorgeous.

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The thought sent Cass over the edge, her legs squeezing together as she kept the vibrator in place while bringing her other wrist to her mouth, biting down on the skin.

The pain went so perfectly with the pleasure as her body shuddered and collapsed in on itself, her mouth eliciting a loud moan as she came.

13

ARI

Ari awoke as the sun shone into her apartment windows, wiping the sleep from her eyes. She gently shifted out from under Cass's arm which was wrapped around her waist. She hadn't slept much with Cass in her bed, maybe it was the nerves or maybe it was possible regret.

They had shifted their dynamic completely last night, and Ari feared that it would ruin their arrangement.

She gently brought her legs to the floor and delicately removed the white sheet from her body.

She padded across the wood floors and slid open her closet door, grabbing whatever pajama shirt was at the top of her drawers and clean pair of underwear.

Closing the door just as gently, she watched Cass sleep through each sound. Cass shifted onto her stomach and buried her head further into the pillow. Ari wasn't sure how light of a sleeper she was, but she wasn't in the mood to find out.

She needed some time to think before waking the gorgeous... and talented, woman up.

She bent down to Cass's clothes by the bedside and gently folded each piece, setting them on the yellow, velvet chair across from the bed. She leaned against the door frame and looked at Cass, sound asleep.

It had been incredible sex. Probably the best she had ever had. And, Ari couldn't lie: she had missed waking up next to a beautiful woman.

She shook the thought and made her way to the living room, gently closing the bedroom door behind her.

She threw a mug under her Keurig, throwing in a reusable pod of coffee into the machine. As the machine gurgled awake, slowly warming the water inside and preparing to make a warm mug, Ari stared out to the water.

It shimmered under the early morning sunlight, like diamonds were floating on its surface. She still hadn't gotten used to it.

The machine sputtered as the brew finished. Ari gave it another second to drip into the cup. She took a sip, too eager to wait for the coffee to be at an appropriate temperature.

She opened her phone, checking her email for any urgent tasks. She made it a habit to take the Monday after Pride off. She rarely ever used her days off, but she hated having to go into the office when she could still feel the sweat and glitter on her body.

Standing in front of the window with her coffee, she closed her phone and took a breath.

Fuck.

Ari knew she was behind on her work, she still hadn't read the Greggor scripts and she knew she should with the quiet morning ahead of her.

But, she was being pulled back to the kitchen, her body craving food.

She set her mug on the table and took a look in her fridge: it was mostly empty, a few leftovers in need of being thrown out and a few staples.

Surely, she could make something of the eggs, berries, and yogurt inside.

Was she about to make breakfast for this hookup?

Ari could basically hear Tommy telling her that's not very casual. But, Ari would've argued that she'd make breakfast for a friend staying on her couch.

But, her friends wouldn't have touched her the way Cass had the night before.

She shook her head, refocusing on scrambling the eggs in front of her and washing the mix of strawberries, blueberries, and raspberries.

As she did, she heard stirring from the bedroom.

Once the eggs were off the stove, just a little wet but perfectly seasoned and scrambled, Ari threw a new mug under the Keurig and brewed a fresh cup for Cass.

Just as the machine finished the cup, Cass emerged from the bedroom.

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“Hey,” Ari said as she looked at Cass, who had thrown on one of Ari’s large t-shirts and her dirty underwear.

“Hi,” Cass replied with a blush.

“How’d you sleep?” Ari asked as she handed her a cup of black coffee.

Cass moaned, bringing flashbacks of her pleasure to Ari’s mind.

“Not too bad,” Cass said, continuing after sipping her coffee, “When do you go to work?”

Ari shook her head and went back to chopping fruit, “I’m off today.”

Cass raised her brows, “Really?”

Ari nodded as she brought the fresh eggs and yogurt, now topped with the berry mixture and some granola.

“You made all this for me?” Cass said, trying to play off her excitement.

“Don’t get any ideas, I was hungry and it would’ve been silly to only make one portion,” Ari said, though she normally would’ve ordered something for herself. She certainly wouldn’t have delicately placed each berry to look as beautiful as possible.

Cass took a bite and groaned, “Oh my god, I’m starving. I barely ate yesterday.”

Ari smiled as she ate, not even starting in on hers. She couldn't look away from Cass's mouth as she chewed, the yogurt leaving a little on her lip for her to lick off seconds later.

"Do you need something, Ari?" Cass asked.

Ari shrugged and looked at her own food, "I'm just glad you like it."

"I liked a lot of things you did for me," Cass said, Ari's pink cheeks making her smile.

"That's good news," Ari said as she took a bite.

Cass squirmed in her seat, Ari assumed the movement must have gently rubbed her clit on the chair.

"So," Cass said, "My underwear is... a little dirty. And if I'm not mistaken, you pocketed a clean one from my laundry."

Ari nearly choked, of course she knew Cass had seen her and more or less told her to take it, but she never expected her to mention it again.

"Would you mind grabbing that for me? I could use a fresh pair," Cass said with a devious smirk.

Ari nodded and headed into her room, a part of her was shocked Cass hadn't seen them the night before, stuffed in the back of her nightstand drawer.

As she opened the drawer, she could feel Cass's eyes on her, her mouth hanging open in surprise.

She brought the pair over, holding them out to Cass.

Cass grabbed them and brought Ari closer to her ear, “You’re a dirty dog, aren’t you?”

Ari swallowed, her body immediately wanting to bring Cass back to bed.

“Have you been sniffing my panties while you touch yourself?” Cass asked in a whisper.

Ari pulled away and looked into her eyes, “Yes I have, I wouldn’t expect you to mind.”

Cass smirked, enjoying Ari’s voice. She stood from her chair and took off the still-damp pair from the night before.

She bent down to grab them, letting her ass slide down Ari’s front, the smell of her wafting into Ari’s nose.

She put the dirty pair in Ari’s hand and said, “This time when you do that, I want you to know what I really smell like.”

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Ari nodded, the feeling of the wet panties in her hand, sending blood to her clit.

“And when you’re thinking about me, I want you to think about all the things you’d like to do to me,” She added as she slid the clean underwear on.

Ari watched her ass she bent, already imagining how she’d look bent over with Ari’s strap-on inside her, begging for more.

“And I don’t want you to worry about respecting me,” Cass added as she brought her mouth to Ari’s ear and bit it, harder than Ari expected.

She grunted with pain... or pleasure. She wasn’t so sure anymore that there was a distinction between them.

* * *

It was only a few days before Ari was leaving her place to meet Cass for coffee after their Pride tryst. She checked her hair in the mirror by her apartment door. Even though it was a Saturday, she opted for a tight bun to keep her hair off her neck in the early July heat.

She had opted for a looser and more flowing skirt, nothing too sexy. A part of her was nervous to see Cass, it would be the first time since they had fucked and Ari feared their relationship would have changed too much.

She wanted to keep her walls up, to not let Cass too close. After all, Tommy was right: she was terrible at casual relationships.

She took a deep breath and relaxed her shoulders, it was just coffee.

Grabbing her keys, she swung the door open and headed downtown.

She opted for an Uber, wanting to avoid the sweltering subways at any cost.

As she hopped in the car, Ari's phone began to ring. Jess's name appeared on her screen.

"Hi Jess," Ari said as she smiled at the driver.

Jess replied on the other end, "Hi Ari. Just wanted to check in with you, Kylie emailed me and said she hadn't heard back from you about her next ADR session. She's ready to schedule but wants us to handle it."

Fuck.

She had completely forgotten about that email.

"Right, well I'll speak with the technician today and get back to you," Ari said, trying to cover her ass.

"Great, and not to over step, but you may want to give Kylie a call. I think she's feeling a little... forgotten," Jess added.

Ari, disappointed in herself, snapped, "yeah. Thank you, Jess."

She hung up the phone before her assistant could reply. She tapped her finger against the door of the car for a moment. According to the GPS, she had ten minutes before she would be at the coffee shop.

Surely that was enough time to be berated by her highest earning client.

She tapped Kylie's name and the phone rang for a few seconds before a voice replied.

"So, you have time for me now?" Kylie complained.

Ari, lowering her voice, said "Kylie, I'm so sorry I missed those emails. You know how much I value you,"

Kylie sighed, "Well, I know how much you valued me. But, I don't know what your deal has been the last few months."

"I understand that. I need to do better by you, you deserve that," Ari confessed.

"Yeah, I do. You know that I get calls from other agents every day, right? But you found me, brought me to John and you're the reason this is working out for me," Kylie said, her voice rising.

Ari nodded, mostly to herself.

"You know, I almost never have to communicate directly with any of my team. I don't even know your assistant's name," Kylie grunted, "Which, now that I think about it, feels like a red flag."

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“Right, I hear that,” Ari added.

Kylie sighed, “Like if you were doing your job, I guess it’d be a good thing. But, like, why isn’t this session scheduled?”

Ari nodded, “I’m going to meet with the tech right now, I’m in the car as we speak. I’ll fix this, and I swear I will be more on it. You’re my priority.”

Kylie inhaled, waiting a moment, “Good.”

“Take care, Kylie,” Ari said and Kylie ended the call, just as the car rolled to a stop in front of Froth NY, the coffee shop Cass had suggested in the lower east side.

It was only a few blocks from Antler, the bar they had met at just about a month ago.

Ari stepped out of the cab and onto the curb, where she expected Cass to be waiting for her. But, checking her phone, she had a missed text:

Meet me inside, already got you a coffee.

Ari walked into the shop, scanning the place as she entered. Neon purple signs lit up the space in an indigo glow.

She spotted Cass just to her left by the front door, facing the window.

“Hey,” Cass said as they made eye contact, standing to give her a hug.

As they embraced, Cass gave Ari a slow, deep kiss on the cheek.

“Hi,” Ari said, clearing her throat, still trying to shake off the call in the car.

“How’s your week been?” Cass asked.

Ari shrugged, “Fine, a little weird. I actually need to ask you about the next Kylie session.”

Cass nodded, “Okay, I’ll send your assistant my avails later.”

Ari shook her head, “Why not just tell me now?”

Cass chuckled, “Because, we’re on a date and it’s your assistant's job.”

“No, it’s my job,” Ari snapped.

Cass was taken aback, raising her eyebrows, “Why would you bother yourself with something so small?”

Ari sighed, “It’s complicated.”

Cass nodded and took a sip of her coffee, looking out the window.

“So, I want to talk about the other night,” Cass said, breaking the silence.

Ari nodded, “Sure.”

Cass looked at her eyes and tried to calm Ari down with her gaze. Ari couldn’t stop her perfect, blue eyes from penetrating her pissy mood.

“I had a really, really nice time,” Cass said, her voice lowering an octave as she spoke.

Ari blushed but gritted her teeth.

Cass broke her eye contact, looking outside, “But, I think I could help you with...”

Ari rolled her eyes, “Was I that bad?”

Cass laughed, “No, no. Not at all.”

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“Can I be honest?” Cass asked.

Ari nodded, nervously gulping down her iced coffee.

“I think I can help you learn how to... ask for what you want. But, in order to do that, you’re going to have to really trust me and I’m going to have to tell you something about my past that I’m... not ashamed of... it’s not something I tell everybody,” Cass said.

Ari wrinkled her brow, could this be the answer to the strange bar she had gone into?

“Okay,”

“Are you sure?” Cass asked.

Ari considered it for a moment, why should she trust Cass? She hardly knew this woman. But... something about her made Ari feel more comfortable than she had in years.

“We can stop at any time and you don’t have to do anything that you don’t want to,” Cass finished.

Ari asked, “Is this about that bar?”

Cass nodded, swallowing hard as she looked into Ari’s eyes.

“Okay,” Ari said. This was Cass’s second event, Ari owed her some trust and an

equal deal.

Cass stood up and tilted her head toward the door, telling Ari to head outside.

Ari did so, grabbing her coffee and following Cass's lead toward the bar on Allen Street.

Once they turned onto Allen, Cass's demeanor changed. She held her shoulders higher and it wasn't until that moment that Ari realized she was carrying a duffel bag.

As they approached the mysterious, black door, Cass walked ahead and knocked.

They stood for a moment before the door opened a crack.

"Hey, Pearl, we're here for my reservation," Cass said.

Pearl swung the door open, revealing a red-lit hallway. She was in a simple black t-shirt and black jeans but something about the way she held herself made Ari's body tingle.

"Hey girl, glad you came by," Pearl said as she brought Cass in for a hug.

Cass smiled, "This is my friend, Ari."

Ari waved and held out her hand, "Nice to meet you."

Pearl laughed and went in for a hug, "Not a hand-shaked kind of place, buddy."

Ari hugged her back and Cass proceeded inside.

Pearl held out her arm for Ari to follow.

Cass was a few feet ahead of Ari, having already passed the massive, black leather St. Andrew's Cross right by the entrance. The hallway was long, lined with matching black doors, all shut.

Ari looked at each one as she passed, unable to hear or see anything through them. Loud, sensual music blared through the place. Cass stopped at one of the rooms toward the end of the hallway.

Before she pushed open the door, she turned to Ari, "Are you sure about this?"

Ari took a breath, considering it. What did she have to lose?

"Yes," Ari said.

Cass nodded and opened the door.

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Ari stepped through the threshold into a room covered in wood paneling and a gorgeous, comforting orange glow. Her mouth fell open as her eyes darted from corner to corner.

A cage.

A cross.

A bench.

Whips. Chains. Paddles.

Cass shut the door gently behind them and set her bag on the bench.

“Where are we?” Ari asked, barely able to peel her eyes away from the various attractions.

“My old job,” Cass said.

Ari turned, shocked.

“Like, a receptionist?” Ari asked.

Cass shook her head, “This is a members-only dungeon. Domme’s work here, helping clients get in touch with their bodies, deal with trauma, and just have a good time.”

“Sex work?” Ari asked, looking at Cass.

Cass nodded, “I did it through college. It paid well and it helped me feel in control at a time I didn’t feel like I had much of that.”

Ari nodded, wandering through the room, running her hand along the various toys. At the back of the room was a glass case of dildos, strap-ons, and various bondage tools.

“Are you okay with that?” Cass asked, her voice cracking as she asked.

Ari turned around, surprised, “Of course I am. Sex work is work, and all that.”

There was a moment of silence as Cass watched Ari examine the room.

“And you think I don’t have enough control?” Ari asked, no longer looking at Cass.

Cass shrugged, “More that I think you could benefit from feeling more in control.”

Ari nodded. She took advantage of Cass’s serious tone to crack a joke, “Is this just an excuse for you to fuck me more?”

Cass walked toward Ari, “You’re very funny. But no... it’s just a convenient bonus.”

“In all seriousness, this isn’t entirely about sex. It’s about asking for what you want, what you need, and setting your expectations clearly. It’s a negotiation with both parties having equal power,” Cass continued.

“Where do we start?” Ari said, more confident than she’d felt in months, maybe even years.

Cass turned her back on Ari and walked to her duffel bag, unzipping it.

“You have to feel powerful,” Cass said.

Ari walked over to the bag where Cass had delicately packed an array of clothes: lingerie, trousers, ties, heels, boots, stockings.

“And you have to select something for me,” Cass added.

Ari raised her eyebrow, Cass was unlocking fantasies she never knew she had.

Cass looked into Ari’s eyes, recognizing the overwhelmed yet excited face. Ari’s heart was racing, her body growing excited at the thought, maybe the entire intention wasn’t sex, but that was the part she craved the most.

“I’m gonna step out and let you get dressed,” Cass said, as Ari passed her a black, lace one piece with a deep v in the front and very little to cover her ass and back.

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As she held her hand on the door knob, she turned back to Ari, “We’ll use the stop-light system for now.”

Ari nodded, that was something she was familiar with.

Cass turned back to the door and smirked, “Ari, this is your house.”

And with that, she disappeared, leaving Ari to select her own outfit.

14

CASS

Cass had given Ari fifteen minutes to pick her outfit and get changed. In the meantime, she had put on her own clothes. She slipped the teddy on, followed by the fishnets and garters that Ari had picked. The fishnets stretched over her ample legs, widening the gauge of the netting.

She gently clipped them to her garters, the stockings stopping at her mid-thigh. She slipped on the red, leather, five-inch heels she had brought for herself and stood in waiting. Cass wasn’t entirely sure what to expect.

When she had worked at Hedone years before, she was the domme. She had never put herself in the situation to submit to anyone here. The few times she had been more submissive with Elle had felt... incorrect.

But, for some reason, Cass trusted Ari. Maybe it was her inexperience or her caution.

But Cass suspected it had more to do with Ari's respect for Cass and maybe the feelings that were brewing deep in her bones that she couldn't say out loud.

She looked at the large clock above the dressing room door and decided she had waited long enough.

She strutted down the hallway, letting the heels and the environment sway her hips. Her catwalk needed some work, but she was feeling sexier by the second.

When she reached their room, Cass raised her fist and knocked on the door.

"Come in," Ari said from inside.

As Cass pushed open the door, she was shocked to see Ari standing taller than ever, Cass couldn't tell whether it was her massive heels or her confidence.

Cass's mouth dropped open with excitement, feeling her slit begin to dampen as she closed the door behind her.

"Slide the lock," Ari said, firmly.

Cass nodded, pulling the bolt into place, "Yes, Ari."

She walked over to Ari, and stood in front of her, allowing herself to look her up and down. Ari had chosen a simple black, leather bra, with a loose trouser and a killer, six-inch heel. Cass hadn't thought Ari could even walk in a six-inch, but she was pleasantly surprised.

"Now, we have to set the rules," Cass said, "Is there a name you'd like me to use for you here?"

Ari considered it for a moment, “Ms. Graves.”

Cass nodded, the name sending a flutter to her clit.

“Red light, stop; Yellow-light, back off; green-light, go,” Cass said, staring into Ari’s hazel eyes.

Ari looked at her, her eyes wandering down Cass’s body. She looked like a wolf, spotting a meal for the first time in months.

And Cass wanted nothing more than for Ari to devour her.

“I don’t like being spanked with wood or metal, only leather. I’m not ready for any anal play with you. And here, I don’t want to wear a strap-on,” Cass said.

Ari nodded quickly.

Cass lowered her eyes for Ari to list her own boundaries.

She stumbled for a second, “I don’t know yet.”

Cass nodded, “That’s okay, you can just tell me if you don’t like something.”

Ari nodded.

“Okay, Ms. Graves,” Cass said as she leaned in and whispered, “Remember how I asked you to think about what you’d do with me? I’d like to know those things now.”

Ari grinned, a blush coming to her cheeks.

“I’d like you to bend over the bench,” Ari said.

Cass giggled, batting her eyelashes at Ari, “Is that a request or a demand?”

Ari waited, unsure if she should continue playing along. She broke eye contact, looking at the ground, her eyes began to flit around the room.

Fuck, maybe this is too far.

Cass considered until Ari brought her eyes back to hers, something had steeled inside her.

“Bend over the bench, now,” Ari commanded, her voice lowering.

Cass smiled as she did what she was told.

She positioned her elbows on the leather bench, her legs creating an upside-down V for Ari to place herself.

After a few seconds without hearing Ari approach, Cass turned her head to look back

at her.

Ari snapped out of enjoying Cass's ass, "Did I tell you to look at me."

Cass licked her teeth, "No, Ma'am."

She turned back to look at the wall when Ari replied, "Good girl."

Cass felt her clit throb at the phrase, she wouldn't admit it but she craved the praise.

Ari approached her, pressing her hips into Cass's ass. She gently thrust her hips into Cass, sending a moan straight to Cass's mouth.

"Fuck," Cass groaned.

Ari laughed, "Are you that easy?"

"Maybe," Cass said, turning to look at Ari again.

"I already told you not to look at me until I tell you to," Ari repeated.

Cass nodded and turned back.

Ari ran her hand up Cass's thigh toward her center, but continued up toward her ass instead, lightly dragging her finger along the curve of Cass's cheeks.

Suddenly, Ari's body heat disappeared from behind Cass, her body instantly wanting the heat back.

She snuck a peak of Ari letting her pants drop to the floor and pulling up a leather harness with a dildo already placed inside it.

Ari secured the strap to her hip, her toned forearms pulling each strap tight around her. She walked back to Cass, allowing the tip of the toy to tease Cass's entrance.

"Oh, god," Cass muttered as she felt the warm, silicone toy slipping from her entrance to her clit. She could tell how wet she was just from Ari's strap.

"I'm going to fuck you over this bench until you scream," Ari said.

Cass nodded, too tantalized to speak.

Ari used her hand to guide the purple toy into place. But, just as she was about to enter her, she pulled back and put her hands on Cass's neck. She pulled her upright, careful not to apply too much pressure.

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Cass moaned, “Green.”

Ari whispered in her ear, “Do you like the way I feel, Cassandra?”

Her breath caught in her chest at the sound of her full name. No one had used it since her breakup.

Ari, detecting her hesitation, continued, “That’s my name for you now. Not hers. Do you understand?”

Cass’s heart raced, “Yes, Ms. Graves.”

“Good,” Ari said, letting her grip of Cassandra’s hair slip and gliding her hand down her back, pushing her back down.

“Fuck,” Cass grunted as she fell back onto her hands.

Ari slid inside of Cass, grunting “Oh god. You’re fucking soaked.”

Sending a shiver through Cass’s body as she took the entire strap. She grinded her hips along Ari’s, allowing the toy to rub her perfect spot.

Ari moaned as she grabbed Cass’s hips, pushing her strap even deeper. Cass could feel every finger on Ari’s hands digging into the skin around her ass, somehow she wanted more.

“Spank me, please,” Cass begged through whimpers as she took all of Ari’s strap.

Ari considered it for a moment, and then replied, “Only because you asked so nicely.”

Cass felt like she could live in this moment forever, feeling Ari’s body against hers, feeling safe enough to submit.

Ari hesitated, unsure of her approach, but she lifted her hand and allowed it to slap Cass’s right side.

The slap made Cass whimper, the sensation turning her vocalizing into moans. Ari kept thrusting, and every few pumps added a harder... and harder spank.

Until, Cass began to increase the rhythm of their grinding with her own body. For a moment, Ari enjoyed the strap-on gently massaging her clit. That is, until she decided she wanted Cass to orgasm when she wanted.

Ari gripped Cass’s hips, slowing them to Ari’s pace.

“Please,” Cass begged as her body shuddered against Ari’s center.

Ari put her hand back on Cass’s neck, increasing the pressure to draw Cass’s eyes back to her own.

“You’ll do as I say, Cassandra,” Ari growled as Cass’s body somehow slowed even further, taking in every thrust with a deep pleasure.

“Yes, Ms. Graves,” Cass moaned into the bench. She clawed at the leather, hoping for a relief from the pure ecstasy of waiting for Ari’s permission.

Ari watched Cass’s body, her wide ass and small waist bouncing off of her as she pleased.

Cass began to scream as Ari slowly increased her pace, allowing Cass just a slight relief from the torment. She brought her hand up, and swung it down hard on Cass's ass.

Crack.

Ari hesitated, still fucking Cass but waiting for approval.

Stunned, Cass only managed, "Green. Fucking green."

Ari pulled her hips harder, moaning as sweat dripped down her face and chest, Cass's slit so wet Ari could go at whatever speed she pleased.

"I'm begging you to let me come," Cass squealed.

Ari considered for a moment, as she put her strap deeper and deeper inside Cass, "Have you been a good girl, Cassandra?"

"Yes, ma'am," Cass replied.

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“Then, I’ll allow it,” Ari conceded as she slapped her ass once more.

She brought her hand around Cass’s back toward her clit, bringing her chest against Cass’s lower back.

Ari thrust, slow and rhythmically, listening as Cass grew closer and closer to her finish. Cass couldn’t contain herself once she felt Ari’s long fingers rubbing her.

“Fuck,” Cass exclaimed as she slammed her hand into the bench.

Ari grunted as she worked tirelessly to allow Cass to finish, her skin slick with sweat.

As they moved in perfect synch, Cass began to tense, gripping any surface she could find: the bench, her head, Ari’s hands on her hips. Until, finally she gave a primal scream and her body released completely.

“Holy fuck,” she growled as she reached her climax.

* * *

It had been a few hours since Cass had left Hedone’s. Ari had held her and stroked her head gently after she had orgasmed. Then, they spent some time discussing how it had felt for both of them. Eventually, they planned their next session and of course, the details of Elle’s engagement party the following week.

By the time she was walking up the steps of her apartment building, Cass’s legs were weak and her stomach was growling.

Ari had offered to take her out to dinner, but a part of Cass needed to be home, snuggled under a blanket. And she wouldn't have complained if Ari happened to be under said blanket.

She put her key in the lock and opened the apartment to a quiet scene: Gabby alone on the couch, reading a textbook for school.

"Hey, buddy," Gabby said.

Cass could've cried at the sound of her old friends comforting voice, at their home. She had forgotten how much being submissive opened up her inner vulnerability, she would likely be weepy for days.

"Hi, Gabs," She said as she hung her keys on the hook by the front door.

Gabby patted the couch as she evaluated Cass's appearance.

"I know that look," Gabby said, a question buried in it.

Cass nodded as she sat down, "We went to Hedone's."

"Oh."

Shrugging, Cass answered, "No, it was nice. She took to the dominance really naturally and I think it could be really great for her."

Gabby nodded, letting Cass sit in her words before replying, "And was it great for you?"

Cass looked to the ceiling, knowing if she looked her best friend in the eyes that she may cry, "I mean, it was incredible. I'm just afraid..."

Gabby scooted closer to Cass, resting her hand on Cass's knee.

"Tell me..." Gabby offered.

Cass took a deep breath and said, "What if I can't pick a good one? What if she's going to be as cruel and manipulative as Elle was?"

Gabby laughed, "I'm not sure that's even possible."

Cass let some air out.

"Besides, you're smarter and older, and wiser. Ari isn't like that. Did you see something you didn't like?" Gabby asked.

Cass shrugged, "I don't think so. I just can't tell if I'm blind to it or if she's really just a good person who really cares about me."

Gabby smiled, "She wouldn't be the first."

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Nodding, Cass rested her head on the couch cushion, “Do you think she can handle Elle?”

“Well, all that really matters is if she can be there for you,” Gabby said.

Cass nodded, she was right. Cass knew that Ari cared for her, and she didn’t even really want Ari to confront Elle. She just wanted to know that Ari wouldn’t be swayed by the charm that Elle seemed to seduce everyone with.

“Do you think it’s more than casual?” Gabby asked, not wanting to cross the line.

She considered it for a moment. On the one hand, Cass wasn’t so worried about crossing into anything more than friends. But, Ari had been clear that she didn’t have time for anything serious.

Cass shook her head, convincing herself, “No, I just think I feel safe with her and that’s new.”

Gabby nodded, “Yeah, I get that.”

Cass gave Gabby’s leg a couple of pats and stood as she said, “I’m going to get some sleep, I have a job tomorrow.”

Gabby smiled up at her and said, “Love you, buddy.”

“I love you too, Gabs,” Cass said as she meandered down the dark hallway to her room.

She collapsed into her bed, staring up at the white ceilings. As she drifted to sleep, she could still imagine Ari's strong arms creating a wall around her. She had had amazing sex followed by an even more amazing snuggle. Ari made Cass feel safe, not just while they had sex, but right after when she needed that tenderness the most.

And Cass hadn't had to coach Ari on that part.

She was starting to wonder what it would feel like to wake up with Ari every morning, to commute to work together, to hang out with Gabby after a long day.

You're playing a dangerous game, Cass.

15

ARI

Ari tapped her finger on her glass-top desk, staring out her window.

Tonight was Elle's Engagement Party and Ari felt entirely unprepared. Even after a few sessions at the dungeon and more dates getting to know each other, Ari felt like there were thousands of layers to Cass that she wanted to learn.

She was beginning to wonder if she ever would know her completely.

She checked her watch, she had a lunch meeting with Tommy in a few minutes, and reception had already brought in their lunch order.

Jess had briefed her earlier on some artists she had scouted over the week, giving Ari a list of artists to check out while they were still in the city.

Feeling more equipped to use Jess's abilities, Ari had asked her to make a brief report

on each artist and how they'd fit into Ari's roster.

Cass had just replied to her text with a thumbs up and simple:

I told you I could help ;)

It had made Ari blush as she stood up from her desk and headed over to Tommy's, grabbing her salad from Jess's desk.

"I'd like those reports before the end of the day if you..." Ari stopped herself from adding an obligatory, "If you can" and instead finished with a smile and a simple, "Thank you."

Jess nodded, turned back to her desk, and started to type more vigorously on the document she had open on her desktop.

Ari walked down the hallway toward Tommy's office, looking to the conference room.

She thought back to just about a month before when her bosses had sat her down for the check-in.

It was before Cass had even entered her life, and even just a short time later, she felt as though she was a completely different person.

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Ari lifted her shoulders back and took a deep breath as she entered Tommy's office.

"Well, aren't you chipper?" Tommy asked as her friend entered.

Ari couldn't stop her cheeks from warming. She hadn't even told Tommy about the dungeon visits... or the other times she and Cass had enjoyed each other's company.

Tommy smirked as the door shut behind Ari and she asked, "So, you did it?"

Ari looked down at her food as she settled into the chair across Tommy's desk. She shrugged with a smile, letting Tommy fill in the gaps.

"Was it good?" Tommy asked, lowering her head in hopes of some gossip.

Ari shook her head and smiled, "You're such a shit-stirrer."

Tommy nodded, "That's all I needed to hear."

Tommy scrolled through her email as she opened up her salad container.

"Mm, partners are fiending for new clients, low second quarter," Tommy continued, "I found this really cool artist who has been making pieces from used toilet paper."

Ari laughed, trying not to spit out her salad, "Yeah, that sounds supercool."

Tommy shrugged, "All these art people are trying to work with bodily fluids and it's like a thing now."

“And it definitely shouldn’t be,” Ari said as she took another bite, making sure to spear an apple onto her fork. She had always loved this salad: walnuts, apples, red wine vinegar, and all types of greens. It reminded her of home, in the best way possible.

“You find anyone yet?” Tommy asked, her attempt to be gentle quite obvious.

Ari shook her head, but before Tommy could chastise her, she continued, “But, Jess saw a few and is giving me a write up of a few of the best ones.”

Tommy nodded, “I mean a win’s a win. But, shouldn’t you see them before you sign them?”

Ari sighed and finished her bite, “Yeah, ideally. But after tonight I’ll have so much more time.”

“But, aren’t you still hanging out for our Gala bullshit?” Tommy asked.

Ari nodded, “Well yeah, but the pressure will be off me.”

Tommy paused and took a few bites, “So, are you guys like dating now?”

“No,” Ari said, before adding, “Well... I don’t think so.”

“Dude,” Tommy said, rubbing her face with her hand.

Ari raised her hand to silence Tommy, “Listen, she’s great. But I’m too busy and she wants something casual.”

Tommy rolled her eyes at the same line, “Okay, but you fucked.”

The thought of Cass's body bringing all of those thoughts back to her mind. She had become accustomed to feeling Cass's warmth, her strength...

"I know," Ari said, her facade beginning to fade.

Tommy shook her head, "It's exactly as I feared... you caught feelings."

Ari hung her head, the weight of her thoughts forcing her neck to give.

"Listen, if I had the time to be with her..." Ari paused, knowing that if she said what she was thinking, she couldn't pretend it wasn't true anymore.

"... She'd be the perfect partner."

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Tommy smacked her desk, sending a jolt of surprise through Ari.

“I knew it,” Tommy said with a smile.

Ari rolled her head back, “It’s not funny. Obviously, my work quality has diminished. I can’t keep this up forever. I can get away with it for a few more weeks but after that...”

Tommy nodded and weighed the options.

“Have you heard of a healthy work-life balance?” Tommy offered, the long-standing joke drawing a chuckle out of Ari.

When they had started as assistants together, Ari and Tommy would stay late at the office together – both of them sending texts to friends canceling plans.

They had taken a lot of comfort in knowing they were both making sacrifices, hoping that it would mean that one day they could actually have a life outside of their sterile workplace.

Of course, Ari loved her work. It was why she was willing to sacrifice so much when she was younger. But, she was yet to see that return on her investment. It had felt like year after year, promotion after promotion, she was always having to work harder. And a part of her wondered when she would have to stop giving so much.

Tommy added, “Do you think that Cass would be okay with like... not having constant affection from you?”

Ari shrugged, “I’m afraid to ask.”

Tommy laughed, knowing that either answer would break something in Ari. And Ari knew it too. Even though her last relationship ended for many reasons, one of them was Ari’s commitment to work. Her ex had sworn she was okay with it, but harbored resentment about the lack of focus for years.

“Maybe it’d be worth asking about,” Tommy said, “Just to know.”

Ari raised her eyebrows, “It’s not what she wants anyway. I think she’s still in love with her ex. They’ve only been broken up for like a few months and they’re already engaged to someone else.”

Tommy nodded, “Are you nervous?”

Ari shrugged, “I mean she’s just some punk. But, ultimately, I’m nervous. She’s got a pull on Cass that I don’t understand.”

“Maybe you could put this newfound confidence to work because she’s done a number on you,” Tommy said as she sipped her iced tea.

Maybe she could, maybe she could be more than just a cover for Cass. She could finally stop Elle from harassing Cass.

* * *

Emboldened by Tommy’s chat, Ari sped through the rest of her day. Once the clock hit five, she grabbed her laptop bag and headed out of her office.

“For you,” Jess said as Ari sped past her desk.

Ari stopped in her tracks and turned in one fluid motion, “Thank you so much, Jess. I appreciate the extra effort.”

As she turned back to leave, she stopped once more and added, “Could you check in on the ADR for Kylie’s project this weekend? I want to make sure Kylie was pleased with her last session.”

Jess nodded, thrilled to have a task. As Ari made her way out of the space, she looked around.

It was a Friday evening, and nearly every single assistant was still at their desk. A smattering of agents scattered across the place, looking like zombies. And of course, the three partners were in the conference room.

Sydney caught her eye just as she was turning back toward the elevator bank, raising a brow at her leaving so soon.

She couldn’t get the look out of her mind the whole way home. The more she thought about it, the more she realized the agents still at their desks were junior agents, much like herself.

... Maybe it was a mistake to leave so soon.

But, she owed Cass a prompt, energized, and hot date to Elle’s party.

Once she was upstairs in her kitchen, she threw on a new cup of coffee and had her surround system play her Liked Songs at full blast. She wandered around her space, a few new items throughout – a poster from the MET that she had bought at the guest shop with Cass, a new yellow armchair for the living room.

And her playlist was chocked full of new songs that Cass had sent her over the

weeks. Apparently, Cass had been in a band a lifetime ago and had aspirations to be a musician.

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Ari let her feet glide across the wood floors to the beat. She gave a twirl as she entered her bedroom. She wasn't so sure why she was so excited for tonight. The thought of socializing with someone who had hurt Cass so much felt impossible. How could she quiet her rage?

She shook the thought, all she had to do was show up and be there for Cass. In fact, Cass had clarified earlier in the week that she didn't expect Ari to be overly friendly with Elle, but instead to just put on a nice face and be affectionate with her.

Ari had no problem being affectionate with Cass. Every night that they spent together had become more and more tantalizing, even the time outside of the dungeon. She was still learning how to balance her growing dominant side with the tender side that Cass seemed to adore in the real world.

She stood in her bedroom, looking toward the closet. Still debating what she wanted to wear, Ari wandered over to the large, white sliding doors.

She parted them and looked at the mass of closet in front of her. Normally neatly placed and color-coded, her closet was a jumble of clothes she had dug out from the back.

As she parsed through each piece, she considered her options. She wanted to look sexy, but not overtly. Something... *domme-casual*.

Cass was sure to wear something similar.

Ari reached in and grabbed a white shirt with the Polaroid logo from the middle of

the stack. She had brought it home from a thrift store date with Cass just about a week ago. It was something she would've worn in college: slightly see-through, vintage, and hugged her biceps in a way that made her look far stronger than she actually was.

She dug in her drawers for a bra that would peak through enough to make the worn-out look seem intentional. She selected a bright, royal blue number from the top. As she clipped it on and placed her breasts in them, hoping for ample push-ups, she looked in the mirror. The fishnet lace of the top would surely pop through the fabric of her shirt, and the strap going over her upper breast would draw even more curiosity.

As much as she was putting on a show to make Elle jealous, she also loved being under Cassie's gaze.

Her gorgeous blue eyes made Ari feel so seen, it almost made her want to shrink into herself with nerves. But, Cass would never let her do that.

A text pinged into her phone:

Cass: New Image

Ari tilted her head and opened the message to reveal a picture of Cass in a beige, body contour dress with a scoop neck and massive black heels.

Wow.

Before Ari could even fathom a response, a new text appeared from Cass:

I want you to touch yourself to me before the party. And I want proof.

Ari smirked,dirty girl.

She took off her work pants and put on the matching underwear for the royal blue bra. If she wants proof, Ari will give it to her later.

Ari lay down in her bed, the image of Cass still open. She was a beautiful woman, the picture itself would've been safe for Instagram if it wasn't for the absolute "Fuck me" eyes Cass was serving.

She pulled out her rabbit toy from her drawer, which she had rarely used before she and Cass began fucking. She used to have a very "Get the job done" philosophy about touching herself. But, Cass made her want to take her time.

She laid on her back, spreading her legs and gently rubbing her clit with the rabbit, letting the silicone tease her.

Ari closed her eyes, the image of Cass's hips, waist, and breasts burned into the back of her eyelids. But, Cass's intention forced her eyes open. She looked down at the picture, looking at Cass's neck and her immaculate collarbone.

She allowed the toy to slip closer to her entrance, feeling herself getting more slick by the second. But, she wasn't ready to have the long, two, pronged toy enter her just yet. She clicked the vibration button and let the motion massage her clit.

"Oh..." she gasped as she grinded her hips along it.

Back to the picture, Ari's eyes focused on her cleavage. Cass's round breasts sitting comfortably inside her dress, Ari just now noticing she wasn't wearing a bra. Her eyes peeked at Cass's nipples, the long barbells more noticeable than she anticipated.

She started to feel her dampness spread to her legs as they squeezed together, the

thought of the cold metal in her mouth sending a wave of pleasure through her body, straight to her clit.

As Ari teased her entrance, she looked back at the picture. A banner appearing at the top of the screen:

Cass: Don't forget to say my name when you make yourself orgasm. I want to hear it.

Ari whimpered, her demands to be included turning her on even more.

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She opened the message, tapped the voice memo, and set her phone next to her.

The toy was slick with her lovely moisture as she let the toy push inside her slightly.

“Oh god,” she moaned, turning her head to the phone. She wanted Cass to hear her pleasure.

Her mind brought back the picture: this time, Cass’s toned arms drawing Ari’s eyes to the line created by her strong forearms. It felt like the line drew her eye further to Cass’s hands.

“Fuck, I miss your fingers,” she moaned as she brought the toy back to her clit. The sensitive hood sent a wave of tension through her body.

Ari bit her lip as she thought about Cass’s body on hers, “I miss you inside me,” she whispered.

She thought back to watching Cass touch herself on this bed. Ari pictured her beautiful folds as she slid the toy back inside her, this time allowing it to push deep inside her, rubbing her perfect spot.

“Oh, baby,” Ari groaned with pleasure.

“I need you to spank me,” Ari confessed as she gently pushed and pulled the toy. She increased the vibration, eliciting another deep groan.

She rocked her hips on the toy, her hands unable to keep up with her body’s urges.

Ari let herself picture Cass standing over her, a flogger in her hand. She had been pleased to learn that Cass enjoyed spanking her as much as Ari liked to receive it.

As she adjusted her hands, her fingers became slick with her own enjoyment.

“I’m so wet for you,” She growled, shocked by her pleasure.

Ari’s body began to take over, grinding on the toy and thrusting at its own will. She moaned along as she got closer and closer, she felt herself tensing under the toy, something holding her back.

She brought her mind back to the picture of Cass as she rode the rabbit, imagining it was Cass’s strap.

As she did, she remembered Cass’s instructions: don’t forget to say my name.

The thought of saying Cass’s name aloud brought a wave of pleasure to her center.

“Cass,” she whispered at first, keeping her head near her phone so she could hear Ari’s confession.

Her body opened at Cass’s name, still craving more.

She grabbed a fistful of sheets, thinking about Cass’s fingers massaging her clit.

“Let me finish, Cassie,” Ari begged as she pushed the toy as deep as it would allow.

She closed her eyes, picturing Cass’s body on top of hers, her breasts rubbing against Ari’s chest.

“Oh, god, Cassandra, I lo-” she cut herself off, or maybe it was the stiffening of her

entire body that closed her mouth. Ari slammed her hands down and grunted as her body shook.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” She said as her hand let go of the toy and her body tensed around it, the vibration bringing her to climax.

As she took the toy out and set it down on the bed next to her, she reached to stop the recording.

What if Cass could make out what she almost said?

The thought sent a wave of panic through Ari, destroying her post-orgasm glow. But, as she scrambled to grab her phone, her finger grazed the screen and sent the voice memo before Cass could delete it.

She sat up. Well, there was no changing it now.

16

CASS

She hadn't been able to calm her body down since Ari had sent her message. Cass had sent a simple reply:

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Heading out now, and will listen to all of this later. But I'm glad you followed my instructions.

Cass's body had been invigorated all over again. She hadn't had time to do anything with the message that she had wanted to but she was saving it for later, a treat for the end of what was guaranteed to be a difficult night.

She waited around the block from Elle's place, at the Jefferson L stop in Brooklyn. She rarely made a trek all the way out here, but surely it would be worth it to rub her new... whatever it was, in Elle's face.

What Cass hadn't told Ari was that Elle had been engaged a few times, despite only being in her late 20s. She was quick to the punch and was always convinced that each new relationship was truly The One. But, Elle couldn't stop being selfish enough to actually keep any of her incredible past partners. Cass included.

As she checked the time, she started to worry Ari wouldn't make it. They had agreed to arrive forty five minutes late, not so rude that they would be actively disrespectful but rude enough to show Elle that she had better things to do.

Ari had suggested they get tipsy on the free booze, get loose with their hands, and head out early.

Cass shook her foot, the heel of her Doc's clicking against the cement.

From the subway, Ari appeared.

Shocked, Cass scrunched her eyebrows and said, “I’m sorry, is that Ariel Graves leaving a subway station?”

Ari blushed, a giggle squeaking out, “Hey, I take the subway. Okay?”

Cass brought her in for a hug, kissed her on the cheek, and said, “Defensive much?”

“Just a little sensitive,” Ari confessed.

Cass smiled, happy Ari could tell her how she really felt. She slung her arm around Ari’s shoulder, bringing her into her warmth, “Well, then get in here.”

They started to walk toward Elle’s apartment. After about half a block, Cass took her arm away and Ari offered hers to interloop.

Cass felt like such a lady in Ari’s arms. She hadn’t even stopped to look at her outfit. Her tight fitting t-shirt, one they had picked out together and briefly argued about who should keep it, framed her body perfectly, hiding and revealing so much at the same time. Cass’s eyes fell to the bright pop of color under the shirt.

She lifted her eyebrows, distracted by how good Ari’s breasts looked.

“You’re a little pervert,” Ari leaned in and whispered in Cass’s ear.

Cass laughed and looked into Ari’s hazel eyes, “Was that not obvious from my requests?”

“More like demands,” Ari said with an eye roll.

“You like when I’m demanding,” Cass said, pouting and giving Ari her best puppy eyes.

Ari smiled, “How was work?”

Cass smiled and laughed, “I got an email from Ms. Graves’s assistant, Jessica.”

“Well, ya know, conflict of interest and all,” Ari said, lifting her hands up in defense.

Cass prodded, “Are there conflicts of interest in working with just friends?”

Ari smiled but pulled back. Cass had crossed a line she hadn’t known had been drawn.

“Sorry,” she offered.

Ari shrugged and smiled, trying to recover the nice walk, “No, you’re alright. I’m just touchy.”

Cass nodded, wanting to believe her answer.

Was she starting to feel something more than casual?

She didn’t have much time to consider it before they would be ringing the buzzer of Elle’s stoop. Instead, she focused her mind on seeing her ex.

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As they arrived, looking up at the building and seeing dim lighting, and hearing loud music from Elle's unit, Cass stopped in her tracks.

She looked up at the unit, one she had spent a lot of time in... far too much in fact.

Ari slid her hand from Cass's bicep down to her hand and held it in her own, "Listen, it's not too late to just ditch. You don't owe her shit."

Cass's breath hitched. But, she forced a gulp of fresh air into her lungs.

"It's not too late for you to dip either," Cass offered, "I'd still come to your office thing."

Ari laughed, "I mean we could just go get some pizza and watch a movie on your couch with Gabby."

Cass laughed, looking into Ari's eyes made her heart melt. She let her head rest on Ari's strong shoulders, not even worrying about rubbing off her foundation.

Ari shook her head, "But... on the contrary... wouldn't it be so much more fun to go in there, make her jealous as all hell, and then get pizza and a movie?"

Cass scrunched her nose, considering it for a second before nodding, "Hell yeah."

They moved toward the door together and rang the bell for Elle's unit.

The apartment was on the fourth floor of a walk-up, leaving both Cass and Ari out of

breath at the top of the stairs. They agreed to wait to catch their breath before knocking.

“I never got used to that,” Cass complained through gulps of air.

Once they had, Cass knocked on the door – skipping over the entirely useless doorbell. There was a moment of calm before the door swung open, music pouring out of the space.

“Hi!” Leila exclaimed as she saw Cass.

Cass offered a smile and a handshake, but was quickly overpowered and brought into a hug, somehow, Ari ended up in the mix too.

“Come on in,” Leila said as she walked back inside. Cass and Ari squirmed through the crowd, holding hands as they went single file through the crowd.

Within seconds, Cass was being recognized by old mutual friends, some of whom she still spoke to and some of whom Elle had turned against her. Cass still found it laughable that Elle eventriedto turn them against her, considering they broke up on relatively decent terms.

As the music flooded their ears and the dim lights made faces nearly indistinguishable, Ari tried to keep up with Cass as she rapid-fire greeted each person who recognized her.

It was clear to Cass that it had been a long time since Ari had gone to a house party, something Elle had never quite grown out of.

Cass turned to look at her, asking “You good?” with her eyes. Ari nodded as she kept pace. The narrow hallway made way to a large living room with strangely high

ceilings. It was more decorated than Cass remembered it, with some items that were definitely not to Elle's taste.

Perhaps they had been true to sapphic stereotypes and already moved in together. Cass shivered, the thought giving her the ick, knowing that Elle had sent her explicit messages while her soon-to-be fiancée was living in the same house.

Before she could even consider whether to tell Leila that, Elle was heading straight for them.

She moved in for a hug and before she could make contact with Cass, Ari had placed her hand in front of Cass.

"Good to see you again, Elle," Ari said, clenching her jaw.

Cass put her arm around Ari's again, hoping to stop any potential engagement from Elle.

Elle nodded, "yeah, I'm so glad you guys could make it."

Cass smiled and waved, "Us too."

She made a point to look at Ari after saying "us". It felt natural, real now. And when she looked at Ari, who was doing her best to keep Cass safe from what she could, she was starting to wonder if maybe something serious wouldn't be the worst thing.

Elle gave Ari a slap on the arm and said, "Have to make sure you're good enough for my girl."

Ari almost bit back but Cass added, "Well, what's on tap?"

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As Leila launched into the diatribe of what alcohol and snacks were available, Cass squeezed Ari's arm. She appreciated the help but still needed to stand on her own. If anyone was going to tell Elle off, it was her.

After a few minutes of awkward conversation, Elle and Leila headed to greet another partygoer.

But, before turning completely, "Oh, if you need anything, Cass should still remember where everything is."

Elle winked and disappeared.

"What a fucking dick," Ari said, maybe a little too loud.

Cass laughed and set her head on Ari's shoulder, "Thank you for coming... and for running interception."

Ari nodded, "You know I've got your back."

Cass looked up into her eyes, letting them swallow her whole. Before she knew it, she was leaning in and giving Ari a kiss. Maybe she wanted Elle to see, or maybe she just couldn't wait to put her lips on Ari's again.

"Can I show you something?" Ari asked, in a low seductive whisper.

Cass nodded, unsure what surprise awaited her. Ari looked around for the rest room and brought Cass inside.

Once the door was shut and Ari had clicked the lock, Cass said, “You know I’ve been thinking about it and that recording you sent earlier... it’s not so convincing.”

Ari raised her eyebrows, “Is that so?”

Cass nodded and bit her lip.

“Well, lucky for you, I have something that may be more convincing,” Ari said, bringing her finger to Cass’s nose.

Instead of simply smelling it, Cass opened her mouth and put Ari’s finger inside. She gave it a long, suck before allowing it out. She knew the taste immediately.

“How about that?” Ari asked, watching Cass’s mouth.

Cass thought about it for a second before answering, “I mean you could’ve just stuck your hand in your panties before you saw me.”

Ari rolled her eyes, “Why bother convincing you anyway?”

Cass put her arms around Ari’s neck and laughed, “Because, you’re a good girl who wants her credit.”

Ari smirked and reluctantly nodded, “I have one last thing that may change your mind.”

She grabbed Cass’s hand from behind her neck and led it to her pants. Ari brought Cass’s hand down to her panties, the same royal blue ones that she had worn earlier.

“I left a little something for you,” Ari confessed.

Cass's breathing hitched as she put her hand deeper into her underwear, until she reached a spot, now only slightly damp. But, she knew that it meant Ari had been soaked. She moaned as she touched it, her eyes rolling back.

"How about that?" Ari asked into Cass's ear.

Cass dug her nails into the back of Ari's neck, "I need more proof."

Ari nodded as Cass turned her fingers around and felt Ari's slit.

She gasped, "Oh god."

"Better?"

Cass couldn't find the words, only nodding while letting her finger slip inside Ari's entrance, her own clit throbbing. Of course, she knew Ari had done as she was told. But the evidence of Cass's effect on her would keep her turned on for hours.

"You're so wet, I could fuck you again right here," Cass moaned.

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Ari grabbed her wrist and pulled it out, bringing Cass's wet finger to her own mouth. She looked into Cass's eyes as she sucked her own pleasure off of Cass's finger.

"You're so cruel," Cass groaned as she let her head fall backwards.

"More later?" Ari asked as she smiled and kissed Cass, the taste of Ari's center passing from her mouth to Cass's.

Before Cass could say anything else, Ari flung the door open and walked out to the party.

As the party got on, Ari and Cass got swept into a few different conversations. At some point, while Ari was deeply engaged in a conversation about the Writer's Guild's most recent strike, Cass offered to grab her a drink and headed toward the kitchen where a smattering of mediocre liquor rested.

She knew Ari would probably prefer a wine but this was not that kind of party.

Once she reached the kitchen, Leila was making herself a drink in the corner.

Cass smiled at her as she saddled up next to her, "So, are you excited?"

Leila lit up at the thought, "Oh my god, totally. I've just never had someone care for me like Elle has."

"I'm glad," Cass said, trying to hide her disappointment that Elle was capable of caring for at least someone.

“So, when did you start seeing each other?” Cass asked, pouring too much tequila in a cup for Ari.

Leila turned her full attention to Cass, excited to dish on all the details of their relationship, “So, we started dating seven months ago. And it all happened so fast, we just never felt so strongly about one another. I moved in about a month and a half later, which was so exciting.”

Cass nodded along, trying to ignore the fact that Leila’s timeline would’ve meant Elle was seeing Leila long before they had officially broken up.

“And the rest is history, she proposed, I cried, and now we’re getting married!” Leila exclaimed.

A part of Cass didn’t even want to say what she knew, knowing it would shatter this excited woman’s entire world.

But, she knew she had to say at least something.

“Oh, that’s so interesting. Me and Elle must have broken up... six months ago,” Cass said, looking at Leila, who poured more alcohol into her cup.

Leila nodded, “Yeah, I mean I guess my dates could be wrong. It’s such a whirlwind.”

As Cass thought back to the nights she had relapsed – so to speak – on her breakup, she started to recognize which items Leila must have moved in.

Leila was quiet, waiting for Cass to leave.

“So, were you guys exclusive from the start?”

Leila shrugged, “You know Elle, hates labels.”

Cass nodded, “Yeah for sure. I think I saw her last a couple of months back.”

Leila nodded, downing what was in her cup, “Yeah I love that she can be so close to her exes.”

Normally, Cass would have agreed but not if that “ex” still thought you were dating.

Cass smiled and added, “Well, listen. If you ever need anything, please feel free to reach out. And congratulations.”

Leila plastered on a smile and hugged her, “Thanks so much!”

Once Cass had turned to leave and melded back into the crowd, she looked back at Leila, who was in some ways just as naive as Cass had been back when she first met Elle.

Leila’s smile had faded and she stood staring down into her cup which she swirled vigorously in her hand.

Cass tried to tell herself that she had done the best she could and if Leila needed any more details, she knew where to look as she approached Ari who was just wrapping up her pro-Union rant.

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“I had no idea there were really people who didn’t believe unions were a good idea,” Ari said as she shook her head, “Who are these people?”

Cass exhaled, Ari’s presence bringing her back to earth, “Weirdos.”

Ari smiled and put her arm back around Cass.

“Are you okay?” Ari asked, lowering her voice.

Cass nodded, “Just calculating how much longer I have to stay here.”

Ari looked at her, “What happened?”

Cass leaned into her ear and whispered, “I’m pretty sure Elle cheated on me with Leila... and that she cheated on Leila with me.”

Ari’s forehead scrunched up, as she gritted her teeth and growled: “Are you serious?”

Cass nodded, unsure where Ari’s frustration was coming from.

“I’ll fucking... I’ll fucking kick her ass,” Ari said, scanning the room for Elle.

Cass stepped in front of her, meeting her eyes, “Listen, I don’t want a scene. Honestly. I kind of want to cash in that rain check for pizza and a movie, though.”

Ari took a deep breath, she wouldn’t do anything that would embarrass Cass.

“I’ll grab our stuff from the room,” Ari said, gently squeezing Cass’s arms as she turned to leave.

As she walked, Cass watched Elle spot Ari and begin to move toward the coat room. Before she could intervene, an old friend stopped to chat with her. From the corner of her eye, she watched Elle prowl toward an unsuspecting Ari.

17

ARI

She could hardly believe Elle’s behavior. She had not only played Cass for a fool but was still treating women the same.

Ari couldn’t lie, she had hoped Cass was the last woman Elle would hurt like that. But, she couldn’t say she was surprised, given how often she’d been in contact with Cass since they broke up.

She was making her way to the coat room — which was really just Elle’s bedroom — hugging the wall to avoid displacing too many people. The party was just beginning to kick off, the initial cordial greetings and congratulations shifting into taking shots and dancing.

Ari was never one for a party, and the thought of a warm pizza and Cass’s laughter was more than enough for Ari to be ready to leave.

She walked into the room, the only space with an overhead light on, and began digging through the pile of jackets and bags. Once she had found them, she was surprised by how many items had piled on top of theirs despite having arrived so late.

As she stood up and turned around, a familiar voice came from behind her.

“Leaving so soon?” Elle asked, leaning against the doorway.

Ari felt her body clench, what could she possibly want from me?

“Yeah, we’ve got another party to stop into,” Ari said, stepping toward the door.

Elle stepped forward and looked around, “I’m surprised you could manage to drag Cass to a party.”

Ari laughed, “Well, some people do change.”

Elle made another step closer, trying to intimidate Ari, “Do they?”

Ari looked out of the bedroom door, making sure no one was coming in, before stepping closer to Elle. Standing in front of her now, just a foot away, Ari could see how short Elle was. She looked down at her and sized her up.

“I know what game you’re playing,” Ari said.

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Elle laughed and took a step back, space that Ari was quick to take up.

“Look, me and Cassandra go way back, I can do...” Elle started.

Hearing this woman say Cass’s name, felt like a whole other disrespect. Ari walked toward her, pushing her chest out and forcing Elle closer to the wall by the bedroom door. She had cleared a path for herself to leave.

But, she wasn’t ready to let Elle get away with this. She wanted to respect Cass’s wishes, but no one would see or hear what happened in this room.

With Elle up against the wall, Ari took a slow breath in and said, “Don’t you ever call her that again. You lost that privilege a long time ago. Do you understand?”

Elle tried to laugh it off but when Ari’s gaze persisted and she stepped closer, now inches from Elle’s face.

Elle nodded, “Sure, pal. But, she’ll be back for me. She can’t help herself.”

Ari laughed a deep, low grumble.

“She’s mine now,” Ari said, looking Elle up and down one more time before chuckling and walking out.

She strode out of the room to find Cass waiting by the hallway leading out, she waved Ari down and smiled. Ari’s heart melted at the sight of her. She never wanted to see Cass get hurt. And she needed to do whatever she had to in order to do that.

Cass looked past Ari toward the bedroom door as Ari approached, watching Elle slink out from the room.

“You okay?” Cass asked.

Ari smiled and put her arm around her lower back, bringing her in for a kiss. Their lips met and Ari was reminded of how sweet Cass tasted. Her body felt like it was on fire after talking to Elle like that, she’d never felt more powerful.

And all she really wanted was to be in Cass’s bed, intertwined, and asleep.

* * *

When they got back to Cass’s place, pizza in hand, Gabby was already halfway through a generic rom-com. Ari and Cass popped open their pie on the coffee table and dug in, enjoying the guessing game of the film's plot.

As they sat next to each other on the couch, Cass extended her arm along the back so Ari could crawl into the warm space just in the crook of her arm.

Ari felt like she could lay there forever. Her eyes grew heavy as the film played on, her stomach full of pizza.

Before she knew it, Cass was stroking her hair and whispering, “Do you wanna go to bed?”

Ari forced her eyes open and looked to the TV, the credits scrolling across the screen. She nodded and Cass shifted, picking herself up and holding her hand out for Ari.

Cass led the way to her room, their apartment still unfamiliar to Ari after only a couple visits. She held Ari’s hand in hers and pushed open her door. The warm light

from Cass's vintage bedside lamps, making the room feel like a cozy, mountain lodge.

She could only manage to take off her shirt and drop her pants before crawling into the bed. Ari inhaled, wanting to breathe in all of Cass's smokey, earthy scent.

Cass took off her own skin-tight dress — her nipple rings visible for just a moment before she threw on an oversized t-shirt and hopped in the bed.

Ari rolled toward Cass, prompting Cass to become the little spoon. As she moved into position, Cass brought her ass to Ari's pelvis. Instinctually, Ari pushed herself closer to Cass.

A low groan escaped Cass's mouth.

"Ariel, we're supposed to be sleeping," Cass said with a giggle.

Ari smirked from behind her, putting her hand on Cass's hips, "I'm just enjoying the way you feel."

Cass began to grind her ass in time with Ari's light thrusts. They both started to moan, low and quiet.

Ari snuck her hand from Cass's hips down her hairy, unkempt pussy toward her folds. She lightly caressed Cass's hood, allowing her fingers to part it ever so slightly.

"God, Ari," Cass whimpered.

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Ari shushed her, not wanting to wake her roommate.

Cass shook her head and brought her hand around to Ari's panties. She began rubbing Ari's clit through them, loving that Ari's hours-old leftovers were still there.

As they touched each other in sync, they both struggled to keep their ecstasy to themselves. Cass pulled her hand from Ari's center and grabbed a pair of airpods from her nightstand, passing one to Ari. She took off her shirt, revealing her breasts.

Ari raised an eyebrow and whispered, "What are you doing?"

Cass rolled onto her stomach and pulled Ari on top of her, "I want to listen to you touch yourself while you fuck me."

Ari's heart skipped a beat, a smile creeping onto her face.

Cass found the message in her phone and clicked play, Ari began kissing Cass's body, intermittently kissing and biting her stomach.

She made her way down toward Cass's lips, using her hand to part some of her luscious hair. Ari let her tongue slip inside Cass's folds just as the audio recording hit Ari's first "Fuck."

Cass's body shuddered, whether it was from the audio, Ari's tongue slipping inside her or both, Ari wouldn't tell.

She let her tongue explore, slowly. She felt like every moment with Cass's body was

precious and she didn't want to waste it.

As she licked Cass, parting her hood to allow her tongue to lightly apply pressure to Cassie's clit, Ari listened to her own moans.

Everytime Ari made a noise, Cass's moans grew. As Ari led her tongue down to Cass's entrance, Cass squirmed with pleasure, the anticipation for her entrance building. Ari smiled as she let her tongue inside, feeling Cass's warm tunnel flex under her tongue.

As she did, Cass's moans grew too loud. Ari lifted herself from Cass's legs, used her fingers to wipe around her face, and cleaned off her fingers with her mouth. Cass looked at her with surprise.

Ari put her hand back down to Cass, gently massaging her clit, as she brought herself closer to her face.

"Tell me what part of me you thought about," Cass begged.

Ari nodded, listening to the audio for a moment to take herself back.

"I started with your neck," she said, bringing her free hand to Cass's ear and letting it drag down until she hit...

"Then you're collarbone," she continued, kissing Cass's collarbone, letting her free hand rub the cold, metal barbells and the tip of Cass's nipples.

Cass moaned, as she rocked her hips against Ari's hand.

Ari brought her hand to Cass's mouth, lightly cupping it, and shushed her, "Listen to me."

They both listened as the message moaned: “Oh god.”

“Then I thought about your arms,” Ari said as Cass brought her own hand back down to Ari’s center, sliding her panties to the side.

As they kept touching each other, Ari continued through quiet moans, “And... your...”

The message: “I miss your fingers.”

Prompting Cass to smirk and rub Ari’s clit with more pressure, circling it with wide strokes.

Ari let her fingers slip from Cass’s top toward her entrance where she let her fingers lightly massage.

“And then I let my toy tease my pussy, like this, while I thought about your lips,” Ari said as she touched around Cass’s channel.

Cass moaned, bringing her spare hand to her mouth, biting it to avoid screaming.

Ari smiled as she did, the recording was increasing in tempo, Ari nearing her earlier climax.

“I thought about you using that red leather flogger on my ass,” Ari confessed as she moaned in Cass’s ear.

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“Oh fuck,” Cass cried.

Ari let two fingers slip inside Cass’s soaked entrance.

“And then, I remembered your demand,” Ari said, pulling back to look at her face.

She’s fucking stunning, she thought as she rode Cass’s hand, which was drifting down to her already sore pussy.

But, she was still craving Cass’s touch, her toy wasn’t close enough to being fucked by this stunning woman. So, she positioned her pussy closer to Cassie’s hand.

“Ari, say my name,” Cass whimpered.

Ari smiled at the request, as the message neared Ari’s climax.

In both of their ears, a whispered “Cass” as Ari moaned.

They both increased the pressure on each other’s spots, Ari plunging her fingers deeper inside of Cass.

“Let me finish, Cassie,” the message blared.

Cass closed her eyes and breathed hard, moaning into Ari’s ear, “Ariel, I’m begging.”

Opening her eyes, Cass stared into Ari’s huge, hazel eyes.

As she her body tensed and Ari's along with it, reacting to the mere thought of Cass finishing with her fingers inside of her pussy.

Just as both of them were reaching their peak, their bodies thrusting and grinding along each other's hands harder and faster than they were before, the message blared: "Oh, god, Cassandra..."

They both gave a primal grunt as they looked into each other's eyes as they tensed on each other, their bodies shaking with pleasure.

"Look at me," Ari said, "Look at me when you come."

Cassandra obliged, her face scrunching as she gave in to the pleasure. Her hand was still rubbing Ari, sending them both into a fevered finish.

After their last gasps, Ari climbed off of Cass, letting her head rest on Cass's now naked chest.

"Are you okay?" Cass asked as she kissed Ari's head.

Ari nodded, "Are you?"

They looked into each other's eyes.

"Never better," Cass said as she rested her head on top of Ari's.

18

CASS

At some point in the night, Ari had removed her bra and panties, leaving her naked in

bed next to Cass.

When the sun peeked through her windows and the sounds of birds chipping filled her room, Cass's eyes peeled open. She and Ari had barely had anything to drink the night before but she felt almost hungover.

The emotions of seeing Elle and spending the night fucking Ari had worn her out. She rolled over, facing Ari who was still asleep on her back.

She rested her head on Ari's chest, letting her hand rest on her gently rising and falling stomach. As she nestled in, Ari stirred, enveloping Cass in a bear hug. Cass giggled it was a level of affection Ari would have struggled to allow awake.

Cass enjoyed being wrapped in her arms, the smell of her sweat and shampoo filling Cass's nose, for a brief moment before her phone vibrated from the nightstand. Delicately, she rotated her body and reached her hand out to check the message. As she did, Ari flung herself on to Cass's back, burying her face in Cass's spine.

Cass giggled as she opened her phone.

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Elle: I think we should talk.

Cass rolled her eyes, she felt like she had gotten this text from Elle once a month for nearly a decade. Clearly, Ari had done a good job convincing Elle she was out of Cass's mind because Elle was panicking to hook her back on her line.

She set her phone down and settled her head back on her pillow, Ari's breath in her ear. She had a moment of peace before her phone buzzed again. Sighing, she grabbed the phone without lifting her head off the pillow.

I'm serious. I owe you an apology but I need to talk to you.

She set her phone upside-down, it was a problem she'd deal with later. As Cass took a deep breath and closed her eyes, Ari tightened her grip on her.

As much as Cass loved this feeling, the warmth of a person she truly trusted, it was a comfort she had become too reliant on in the past. And, after last night, she wasn't sure she could trust herself yet. After all... maybe something did happen.

* * *

Cass walked down the block toward the coffee shop a few blocks from her house, the next day. In her Doc's and cut-up t-shirt, she was sweating profusely. She did her best to wipe the beads from her forehead, not wanting to arrive at the coffee shop so disheveled.

She hadn't told Ari what her plans were for the day and a part of her felt sneaky. But,

she had to remind herself that they were casual, they hadn't even discussed what sleeping together really meant.

But, if Ari's position was still the same, she didn't want anything serious anyway. And Cass was starting to think she needed more time alone, to rebuild the trust she had lost in herself.

Even going to this coffee shop, to see Elle, made her doubt herself.

As she pushed open the glass door, she looked around the shop, not spotting Elle anywhere.

She headed toward the back of the shop, where a garden patio door was left open. Before ordering herself a drink, she took a peek outside and saw Elle.

As soon as she saw Cass, she stood from her table and beamed.

"Hey, you," Elle said with all the innocence in the world.

Cass was about to reply when Elle continued.

"I hope you don't mind, I already grabbed you a drink," Elle gestured to the lavender, iced latte in the chair across from her.

"Oh, thanks," Cass smiled, she never ordered those anymore.

She approached the table and Elle stretched out her arms.

Cass obliged, giving her a weak hug that Elle held onto for a few seconds too long.

As Cass settled into her seat and looked at the markings on the side of her cup, Elle

watched her intently.

“So, did you have fun the other night?” Elle prompted.

Nodding, Cass twirled her drink, “Yeah, it was nice to see some of my old people and get to know Leila a little bit.”

Elle looked down at her drink, “I think everyone missed having you around.”

Cass raised her eyebrows, of course, it was Elle who had convinced them that Cass had broken up with her. She hadn’t gone anywhere but they had sent her away.

“So, I should say,” Elle started, “I’m really sorry for how everything went down. I can see where you feel I turned everyone against you. And I’m sorry for that because I really never meant to do that.”

Cass nodded, “Thanks.”

Elle exhaled air, “And Leila told me about your conversation.”

Surprised, Cass looked around, “How do you mean?”

“Well, she told me that you seemed confused about when mine and Leila’s relationship started and when ours ended,” Elle clarified.

Cass chuckled,yeah... I'm confused.

“But, listen, I could see where Leila thought the “start of our relationship” was actually us becoming friends,” Elle said, adding, “Which would've been before you and I broke up.”

Cass nodded,sure.

Elle was scrambling, “And you know, she always thinks we moved in together in January but we didn't actually move in until February.”

“And that's why her stuff was in your apartment when we hooked up after your birthday?” Cass asked.

Elle laughed, “I was holding some stuff for her because her roommate was stealing shit and selling it on Marketplace.”

Cass nodded, “Listen, I don't need to hear all of this. You said you needed to tell me something. So, why don't you get to that?”

Elle nodded and leaned forward, “I just wanted to tell you about a conversation I had with Ari last night.”

Knew it, she thought, trying to play along.

“We were talking in my room, I was just saying goodbye and it was nice meeting her. And that I'm glad that she seems to be able to take care of you. And, she backed me

up against the wall and told me to never speak to you again.”

Cass tried not to laugh. As much as Ari was coming into her own, she knew that Ari wouldn't have escalated a situation to that level if she wasn't prompted. But, even still, Cass had asked Ari to play nice and if even a nickel of this was true, Ari hadn't.

“And you said nothing else?” Cass asked, her hand resting on the table by her untouched coffee.

Elle shrugged, “I mean, I wasn't sober so I guess it's possible. But, Cassandra, that's not where I am anymore. I love Leila.”

Cass nodded, she wanted to believe Elle had changed. They had spent so many years together, but looking into her eyes, Cass still couldn't tell what was a lie.

Elle reached out her hand and rested it on Cass's, “You know, a part of me will always wonder about us...”

Cass couldn't bring herself to pull her hand away, Elle's sharp blue eyes drawing her back in. Was there still something between them?

She tried to shake it off while Elle continued, “Maybe, if the timing's right, we'll fall back into place.”

* * *

“Ewwwww,” Gabby exclaimed as Cass imitdated Elle's attempt to rekindle their relationship.

Cass nodded, “Gross, right?”

Gabby shook her head in disgust, “Dude, she’s engaged.”

Cass nodded, pacing across the living room in front of their TV as Gabby followed her with her eyes.

“Do you think anything she said was true?” Gabby asked.

Cass shrugged, “I mean, instinctually no. But, there has to be an inkling of truth in there because she knows I’m going to ask Ari about it.”

“So she underplayed her hand and overplayed Ari’s?” Gabby asked.

“Maybe?” Cass said, she hated feeling so much doubt about herself.

Gabby nodded, “Okay, but that’s okay, right? Like, Ari made an oopsie but not terrible.”

Cass shook her head, “But, she didn’t listen to me. I asked her not to say anything and she did.”

Gabby pouted, “Yeah. But maybe, it’s not unforgivable?”

Cass groaned and looked out the window, it was a beautiful Sunday. And she had been able to ignore Elle’s insidious plea for attention, she could’ve spent the day at a picnic with Gabs, or out with Ari. Instead, she was back to pacing in her living room, trying to decide what was real and what wasn’t.

“What are you thinking?” Gabby asked.

Cass sighed, “I don’t know if I’m ready to trust someone again. I can’t even break away from Elle entirely and I’m somehow supposed to believe that Ari isn’t lying to me or breaking my trust?”

Gabby nodded, “You’ve been through a lot. It would be okay if you needed more time.”

Cass ran her hand through her short, stubbly hair, the feeling of fuzz bringing a grounding sensation to her hand.

“But, I really like her,” Cass said.

Gabby nodded, “If I was Elle, I’d say,” she turned to a mocking, bro-ish voice, “Babe, if it’s meant to be, babe, it’ll be.”

Cass laughed, Gabby always knew when to crack a joke.

But, maybe she was right. If Cass needed more time, maybe Ari did too. Maybe they could take a step back and still find their way back to each other.

However, Cass needed to know what really happened that night in order to even consider something with Ari in the future.

ARI

The weekend had worn her out far more than she expected. By the time her mid-week meeting with the partners rolled around, Ari hadn't had time to see any of the artists Jess had suggested. She had barely even squeezed in the report in her commute to the office.

As she got into the office, she stopped by Jess's desk.

"Jess, thanks for the report. It's very helpful," she said.

Nodding, Jess smiled, "I'm glad. Did you get a chance to see any of them?"

Ari hesitated, "I looked around at their digital presence."

"Would you like me to add their events to your calendar?" Jess asked.

Ari nodded, "Please, I'll see what I can get to this week. Which ones do you think best fit with the agency?"

Jess shrugged, "I was hoping you could tell me that."

"Right," Ari said, realizing that Jess was still learning what kind of client list Ari even wanted to build. After all, most of hers had been inherited and she still had a chance to choose what her new clients looked like.

She headed into her office as she said, "Thank you."

She had about fifteen minutes to actually look into what each client's work was like, and hopefully it would be enough to bring something to the partners.

But, a cursory look at their Insta's and websites, wouldn't do the trick. Besides, what did Ari even want her list to be? Most of her clients now were up-and-coming artists that John couldn't handle with his already established clients.

And if Ari kept taking on up-and-comers, she would end up with far too much work for just her and Jess to handle. Besides, the path forward for that talent was always pretty clear. From indie films, to blockbuster, to an oscar winner, and then to whatever paid the highest while maintaining their reputation.

As she tried to think, she thought Cass. Someone with immense talent, but who had taken gigs to make money and was never able to move up in her career.

Ari had texted her a few hours ago and hadn't gotten a response.

Jess turned and waved for Ari to get headed to the conference room. She closed her laptop and walked down the hall toward the conference room.

All of the junior agents were piling inside, Tommy included. Ari took her seat a few places from Tommy and tried to scan more of the report from Jess. She had done a good job creating a diverse portfolio of options. Poets, actors, musicians, established authors looking for a new path. But, Ari wanted to bring the partners something special.

Just as she settled on her front-runner, an actor who had recently finished a tour as a Marine and was beginning to make waves Off-Broadway, Tara, Sydney, and Mark made their way inside.

"Morning, everyone," Mark started as they took their seats.

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They sat in the middle of the table, in the same seats they had when Ari met with them last month. Her life felt so wildly different since then and somehow, exactly the same. She was still at this table, struggling to keep up with her work. And even though Jess had become more of an asset to her, she was failing to do her share: the parts that really requires her help

Hopefully, when she saw Cass next, they could work out a way to spend less time together. Although, the thought of being away from her, shattered something in Ari.

The agents started to pitch their ideas, some had new clients ready to be signed and most had big plans for their catalog.

Ari looked back at her notes and studied her pick Andrew Darwin. He was a strange guy, taking bizarre roles as abrasive men but was largely regarded as a kind and gentle soul. He would do the trick.

The conversation made its way around the table, finally reaching Tommy who started her pitch.

“I’ve had a wonderful time seeing a few shows Off-Broadway starring this young guy, Andrew Darwin. He’s got something special and I think I could really bring him up,” Tommy said.

Fuck, Ari thought as Tommy kept speaking of his accomplishments.

Tara chimed in, “That sounds wonderful. With your client list, you should be able to introduce him to some mentors who made the transition from stage to screen. He’s

got a very leading-man quality.”

Sydney nodded, “Well spotted, Tommy.”

Tommy nodded and made some notes on her laptop, cordially thanking the group for their time.

Ari scrambled to find something, someone else to pitch.

But, when her turn came, Ari defaulted, “I’m just working on getting Kylie’s next project. There’s a studio interested in signing her for a comic book series that we may go for.”

The partners waited for more. When Ari offered nothing else, Mark said, “Thanks, Ariel.”

Without another word, the meeting continued on. Though, Ari could feel Sydney’s eyes on her. She looked at her laptop messages, a Slack note from Tommy in their private chat:

Sorry dude, I didn’t know you had eyes on Darwin.

Ari smiled her way and wrote back:

No worries, I should’ve asked for your thoughts.

Soon enough, the meeting was adjourned and Ari packed up her things. As she stood, Sydney said, “Ms. Graves, hang back for a moment.”

Tommy looked back as she exited the room, pouting at Ari.

Once the room cleared a deafening silence filled the space.

Mark cleared his throat as he looked at Ari, “So, Ari. We’re glad Kylie is doing well.”

Sydney and Tara nodded, no one saying anything.

“I’ll jump right in,” Sydney offered, leaning forward and crossing her hands.

Ari felt a lump in her throat, one that felt like a boulder trying to slip through a drain spout.

“We are all quite disappointed in your scouting. It’s come to our attention that your assistant has been compiling lists for you and you haven’t been going to see any of them,” Sydney said.

Ari nodded, taking a breath to respond when Tara added, “What we need to reinforce is the importance of showing up for these showings. If talent sees your assistant coming to a few shows and then you not following up, they’re going to feel burned — not just by you — but the entire agency.”

Ari crossed her hands on her lap and slowed her breathing. They were right, it was unprofessional and they hadn’t seen the half of it.

Mark said, “Ariel, we promoted you because we believed in you. You stayed late every day, you were bringing John clients that make us hundreds of thousands a year. And that was as an assistant.”

“Promotions cost money,” Sydney said, “And in order to justify the expense, we need to know that said promotion and raise is going to be lucrative. Even if that investment takes some time to pay out.”

Tara nodded, “And we need to shore up our investment in you.”

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Ari couldn't find the words.

Sydney stood, prompting the other partners to follow, "This will be your final warning Ariel."

As they approached the door, Mark added, "We'd like to see a fleshed out, two year plan for your entire client list — signed and not — by the gala."

Ari nodded, standing as they exited. When they left, the room filled with the sound of clicking keyboards and ringing phones. And Ari's phone buzzed in her pocket.

Can we meet tonight? Highline?

Ari liked the message and closed her phone. Maybe her concerns about a relationship were right all along, she didn't have time to be in lust... or in love with anyone. She knew what she was going to have to do.

* * *

Having silenced her phone for the rest of the day, Ari had been able to make serious headway on her plan already. The gala was two weeks away and she needed some serious scouting to happen before she could really know what was next.

Jess had been in and out of her office all day, bringing Ari coffee and helping her schedule showings for the next week.

But, as it grew closer to seven and the office began to empty, she'd grown anxious

about leaving the office to meet Cass at the highline.

She hadn't known what was so urgent, but ultimately Ari needed to use the meeting to set some new boundaries.

As she worked, Jess stayed diligently stationed at her desk as the sun began to lower in the sky. Ari tried not to think about how much of her own life Jess would lose waiting around this office for Ari.

The clock hit seven and she grabbed her purse, putting her laptop inside and knowing she would need to work when she got home.

"I'll see you first thing tomorrow, Jess," Ari said as she walked past her desk, "And set a meeting with the author who reached out about wanting to switch agencies."

Jess nodded, trying to hide her doubt about the potential new client, and began typing an email for availability.

It was a quick walk to the highline's end on 30th Street and 10th Ave. Ari used to take her lunch breaks there when she first started at the agency.

Now, she rarely ever stopped by, despite living just a few blocks away.

As she climbed the steep stairs to the platform, Ari thought about seeing Cass. A part of her feared she wouldn't be able to set a boundary with Cass, she had grown to crave Cass's presence; not just her looks or her body but her spirit, her voice, her humor. Ari knew deep down that the words she had almost slipped in her saucy audio message were ringing true.

She headed south, toward their meeting spot near the 23rd street entrance. As she walked she steeled herself, lifting her shoulders back, and holding her head high. Her

job had been the priority from the start, it was why she even agreed to fake-date Cass: she needed her bosses to see her as more than just an assistant.

And now, she had swung too far in the opposite direction and course-correction was the only way forward.

Nearing the 23rd St entrance, Cass's signature buzz-cut made her an easy beacon for Ari's scanning gaze.

As she approached, Ari gave her a soft smile. One that she was surprised to have returned from Cass. Ari's chest grew tighter, as she got closer. She could tell something was wrong and she felt immediately defensive.

The feeling only grew stronger as she approached and Cass didn't offer a hug and instead started moving toward a bench hidden away behind some long grass.

"How are you?" Ari asked.

Cass nodded, "I've been better."

They sat down next to each other but a foot of distance remained between them.

"So, I actually have something to tell you," Ari started.

Cass interrupted, "I'd actually like to say something first."

Ari nodded and sat straighter, unsure what she was preparing for.

"I saw Elle on Sunday," Cass said.

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As soon as the words came out of her mouth, Ari knew she should've seen it coming. Of course, Cass would start seeing Elle again.

Cass waved her hand, "We're not like... seeing each other. She said she wanted to tell me something and I agreed to meet her."

Ari nodded, taking a deep breath and looking to Cass.

"But, before I say what we talked about, I want to know what happened when you grabbed our bags at the party," Cass said, meeting Ari's gaze.

She nodded before starting, "She kind of appeared behind me, trying to block my path. And was insinuating that you weren't ever going to stop having feelings for her."

Ari paused to read Cass, "And she said your full name. And I got defensive."

Cass nodded, "What did you say?"

Ari looked down and took a deep breath, "I walked toward her, and she moved away from me, toward the wall. And I told her she had lost the right to call you that."

Cass's face was impossible to read.

"She said you'd always come back for her, and that she's never let you go. So, I kept walking closer to her until she was against the wall. And I told her, you were mine and that she was going to back off. And then I left." Ari finished, her heart racing.

She had felt like it was the right thing to do in the moment — but now she couldn't be sure it was.

Cass sat back and looked out over the river, the sun setting over it. The sky glowed with hues of orange, pink, and yellow.

"I asked you not to confront her," Cass finally said.

Ari nodded, "I know. But, she was disrespecting you, to my face."

Cass nodded, "And you knew that was a possibility when you agreed to come with me."

Ari shook her head, "I didn't do anything when anyone was around, I know you didn't want to be embarrassed. But, I'm also supposed to be convincing her that I'm in love with you. And I would never allow anyone to speak about you like that."

Cass crossed her arms, "You said I was yours. Like I'm property. You didn't do that for me, you did that for your ego."

Ari stumbled for words, shocked that Cass was so hurt.

"I needed you there for my sake, not to convince her of anything," Cass said, looking at Ari with hurt eyes. at

Ari nodded, "Well, I'm sorry I misunderstood what you needed.

"Thanks for saying that," Cass muttered to the wood panels under their feet.

There was a silence, the crickets on The High Line ramping up their chirps for the night and filling the void.

Cass nodded, “I don’t think I can keep seeing you. I’m not ready to trust someone again.”

Ari shook her head, “Cass, we don’t... we haven’t even...”

“I’ll still come to your Gala if you want, but...” Cass trailed off.

Ari nodded, steeling herself, “You know what? Actually, I think a step back is a great idea. I need to focus on work, I’ve been too distracted. And I think you are better off with someone who can give you more reassurance. I’m gonna be so busy and I don’t think I have time for a relationship like that.”

Cass laughed, “Okay. Cool.”

They sat there, both of them waiting for the other to apologize and take it all back.

Finally, Ari stood and said, “I’ll see you around then.”

As she stood, she added, “And don’t worry about the Gala, I’ll just think of something else.”

Ari could feel Cass’s eyes on her as she walked away. Her chest heaved with pain. She clenched her jaw trying to swallow the tears welling in her eyes, not wanting to give Cass the satisfaction.

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But, the truth was: she had fallen for Cassandra Owens. And she wasn't so sure you'd be able to get over it.

20

CASS

Over a weeklater and Cass still couldn't get Ari's words out of her mind.

What gives her the right to tellmewhat I need?

Cass had done everything in her power to go back to her single life. She had gone out most of her nights off and managed to have a few decent hookups.

But, on a night like that, as she walked herself home from the train station, her makeup smudged under her eyes, she still felt like something was missing.

Most of her forays would find herself bar crawling in Chelsea, maybe a part of her hoping a beautiful brunette in a tight orange dress would appear behind her and ask for forgiveness.

Even though Cass was still certain that she couldn't be in a healthy relationship. Elle had taken that from her and she needed to find it again. And for a moment, she had thought Ari might be the one to show her.

The city felt empty with Ari, the streets were silent, and the bars were boring. But, Cass was certain she could find that again if she just kept making herself try.

She turned on to her block, moving off the sidewalk and onto the empty street. She had gotten in the habit of walking on the road after spotting one too many cockroaches on the sidewalk.

She laughed to herself, the image of Ari jumping up and running from them seared into her mind. She had always acted so tough but around Cass, Ari would melt into a softie.

More than happy to be at her front door, she swung open the door to hers and Gabby's unit and slammed it behind her.

"So... was it the best sex of your life?" Gabby called from the kitchen.

Cass laughed and thought, No, I've already had that.

"Not quite," she said as she came into the kitchen and wrapped her arms tight around Gabby.

Gabby nodded as she washed some dishes, "Maybe next time."

Cass wedged herself between Gabby and the sink, taking over the dishes.

"You don't have to do that," Gabby insisted.

"If you keep feeding me meals, I'm going to keep cleaning up after them," Cass countered.

Gabby rolled her eyes and leaned against the couch, "Not to touch on a sensitive topic..."

Cass scrunched her face, "Yes?"

“Any word from Ari?” Gabby asked.

Cass hung her head, “No, Gabs. I think she’s too egotistical to apologize.”

“What’s she gonna do about the Gala?” Gabby continued.

“Probably just say I was busy and then quietly announce a breakup later on,” Cass said. It sounded like the simplest explanation to her. No one would ask too many questions and Ari would be back on track at work so no one would care.

Gabby looked at the floor, “Do you think she wants you to go?”

Cass shrugged as she watched the soap rinse off of a now-clear pan.

“I’m sorry buddy,” Gabby said as Cass got closer.

She grabbed a dish towel and wiped her hands, “It’s alright. If it was meant to be, it would be.”

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Cass pulled Gabby into a hug and said, “I’m going to bed. But, I’ll see ya in the morning.”

Gabby nodded, squeezing her friend tightly before releasing her and watching her saunter down the hallway.

“Love you,” Gabs called after her.

“Love you too, Gabs,” Cass replied as she shut her bedroom door.

She could hardly bring herself to take the last few steps toward her bed, instead opting to lean against the closed door.

Finally, she peeled herself off the door and laid in bed. She knew it was bad to sleep with makeup on, but what was the point of growing out of acne if you couldn’t skip a face wash every once and awhile?

She laid down, staring at the ceiling. Her mind wandered to the night Ari had stayed over and they listened to her message together. She knew she shouldn’t be thinking about it, knowing it would hurt her heart too much.

But, as she thought about it, she remembered a moment she hadn’t fully heard. It had sounded like Ari was about to say something but the sounds of their collective ecstasy stopped her from hearing it.

Tapping her finger on the mattress, she tried to convince her out of it. But not hard enough to stop herself from picking up the phone and opening the message.

I'll just skim through it, listen to that part, and then delete the message.

After all, it would've been gross for her to hold onto any of those messages from, what she guessed would be considered, an ex.

She shook off the feeling of guilt and skimmed the message, doing her best not to picture Ari's face or the way her body looked when she was nearing climax.

Instead, she got to the end of the message. She would just listen to those last 15 seconds and then delete it forever.

As Ari's moans escalated, Cass listened closer.

"Oh, god, Cassandra, I lo-," Ari's voice cut off as she moaned louder.

Shocked, Cass played it again.

Did she say what she thought she said?

"I lo-," it repeated.

She had to stop herself from saying it back, her body wanting to Ari more than her mind would allow.

Cass shook her head, closing her phone and looking back to the ceiling, her eyes wide.

There were very few other words that she would have meant to say. Was Ari feeling the way Cass had been?

ARI

Ari had forgotten how good heartbreak was for her work. All of the memories of Cass in her apartment made her want to avoid it entirely, and just stay in her office until she couldn't focus her eyes anymore.

But, she'd also made a point to see some shows and scout the talent she had been neglecting.

The day before the Gala, Ari's plan for her client list was finally fleshing out. She started to focus on some of the agencies, and the world, most under-considered talent: those who had been successful but whose management had let them slip into oblivion despite the artist's best attempts to have a renaissance of sorts.

She had named it: The Client Assist Serve and Survive Plan. She couldn't lie, Cass's dreams of her own promotion played heavily in her decision. How many other artists were there who were trapped in the minutia of paying bills and didn't have representation that would bring them artistically rewarding and financially responsible work?

Jess had helped her research well-awarded and fiscally successful artists who had slipped away from the public eye and those who had sent inquiries throughout the agency for a transfer from their current agents.

And she was just about ready to present the project to the partners the next morning. Jess was making some final adjustments to the pitch deck and Tommy had come in to help them finalize the details.

"I can't lie, Ari, you've got me looking at my own client list and feeling guilty," Tommy said as she sat across from Ari, flipping through a binder of paperwork.

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Ari nodded, “And that’s the goal, how many of our clients have we just forgotten about because younger, shinier talent showed up at our doorstep? We’re sitting on decades of gold that we’ve covered in dirt.”

Tommy smiled, “Look at you.”

Ari shrugged.

Without any warning, Tommy asked, “Did you reinvite Cass?”

Confused, Ari shook her head, “Why would I do that?”

“You named your career making client overall after her,” Tommy said.

Ari rolled her eyes, “We’ve been over this Tommy. I’m only able to do this kind of work because she’s not around. I couldn’t be there for her the way she needs.”

Tommy nodded and sipped her coffee, “And when did she say that was an issue?”

“She has trust issues, big ones. And a partner who stays late at the office almost every night and has to take clients to expensive dinners doesn’t instill a lot of trust,” Ari said, convincing herself.

Tommy shrugged, just about ready to drop it, but not without adding, “She just never seemed like the jealous type.”

Turning back to her computer, Ari thought about it more. She did miss Cass. But a

part of her still hoped they could be friends eventually. If Cass could ever forgive her for confronting Elle.

Maybe it was Ari with the jealous streak...

By five, the deck was done. Jess was off to the printers to get the finalized edition prepared for the partners meeting.

As Ari looked around, she couldn't find much else to do. Her inbox was clear, her schedule was double-checked. All that was left was for Ari to head home, get a good night's sleep, and prepare for her big day. With the presentation in the morning and the Gala at night, she was sure to be exhausted.

She grabbed her bag and headed for the door. Making sure to say good night to Agatha, who was surprised to see her leave so early.

As she exited the building and made her way toward home, she took a deep breath. She hadn't been outside during daylight hours much in the last two weeks. Even on the weekends, she found herself taking calls from clients and sitting in dark theaters.

Wanting to make it last just a bit longer, and truthfully, wanting to avoid going back to her empty apartment, Ari made a stop at a dollar pizza shop.

Though, calling it a dollar pizza shop was no longer accurate since you couldn't find a slice for less than \$1.50, the name still stuck. Ari ordered a slice of plain and handed the cashier three bucks.

She took her pizza, paper plate and all, and continued her walk. The mid-July air was hot, but the breeze off of the river kept her cool enough.

Finishing her slice in a matter of minutes, Ari only had a block or two before she was

turning toward her building.

“Hi Jerry,” she said to the doorman, “Any packages?”

He shook his head, “No, ma’am. Glad to see you home so early. Any plans with the missus tonight.”

Ari smiled, “No, we actually aren’t seeing each other any more.”

Jerry frowned, “Sorry to hear that. I’m sure you’ll find something better soon enough.”

Ari shrugged, “Probably not.”

She tapped the front desk and headed toward the elevators, “Thanks, man.”

He waved after her as she disappeared and headed upstairs.

Lucky for her, an elevator was already open when she approached. She stood still in the elevator, watching the numbers climb to nine. It couldn’t move fast enough, memories of Cass holding her hand flooded to the front of her mind.

She shook it off and exited once the familiar ding flung the doors open. Strolling toward her door, she looked around the hallway, reluctant to dig her keys out of her bag.

A part of her hoped she’d left them in the office so she wouldn’t have to go in just yet.

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But, when her hands met the cold metal buried deep in her bag, she knew she had to go in.

Opening the door, she stepped inside and looked at the empty unit. Even with the additional decor, it somehow felt like the setting sun was a spotlight on how little life was in the place. She set her bag down and flipped on the kitchen light, the sterile, fluorescent overhead lights blaring. She rarely ever used them and now she remembered why.

Ari tossed open her fridge and found a few day-old fries to snack on. She pulled open her phone and refreshed the tracking on a package.

Reloaded, the page read:

Expected Delivery: Friday, 10am.

Just under the wire, Ari thought. She still wondered why she'd even sent the package, after all, she never wanted to make Cass feel pressured. But after the time they'd spent together, it felt only right to give Ari a parting gift.

22

CASS

She had booked the day off about a month ago. And although she had considered booking a client just to distract herself from the day she wasn't having, Cass had decided it made the most sense to take the day to reset a little bit.

She smeared some avocado spread on a piece of toast, sprinkling some salt, pepper, goat cheese, and red pepper flakes on top. It was a nice breakfast that she barely ever made for herself.

Gabby had gone out to work and Cass had the place to herself.

Just as she was sitting down in front of the TV to watch some Lust Isle with her toast and a coffee, the door buzzer rang.

Who the fuck?

Checking her mental list, she couldn't recall ordering anything. But, maybe Gabby had and she had forgotten to mention it.

She walked to the intercom and said, "You can leave it there, thank you."

Cass tossed on her outside Crocs and ran downstairs, not bothering to lock the door behind her. The box waiting outside of the building was a short, large rectangle; definitely not your average Amazon package.

She inspected it for a label as she headed up the stairs, nearly tripping up the steps as she read: Cassandra Owens.

By the time she was back inside, slamming the door behind her, she could barely wait to open the box. Her fingernails, though longer than most sapphics, weren't long enough to slice the box open.

Instead, she grabbed the kitchen scissors and sliced open the tape along the edges.

Inside, was a white box that was perfectly nestled in the brown shipping package.

She tried to slide the white box out but it was really stuck in there. Cass flipped the box upside down allowing the second box to free itself.

Thank god for gravity.

Normally one to break down her cardboard immediately, Cass tossed the box to the side and sliced the small piece of plastic sealing the white box before flipping over.

As she lifted the lid, a note lay on top of some tissue paper:

Cassie, it felt like a waste to return this. I hope you can put it to good use, consider it a parting gift. - Ari

Cass's breath caught in her throat, they had ordered the dress together a month ago. Ari had insisted on paying for it even though it would be the most expensive item in Cass's wardrobe.

"It's a fancy event, I couldn't ask you to splurge out for one event," Ari said.

Cass had offered to leave the tag on and return it after. But, Ari had held her hands and said, "It's the least I can do. You've done a lot for me and I'm really appreciative."

Cass's heart ached at the thought of their time together. Even now, she could still feel how Ari's hands felt in hers. Cass knew she needed to learn to trust again before she could ever be a good partner, but she couldn't help but wonder if Ari had been made for her.

She looked at the clock. The Gala would start at seven, just as the sun was setting. She knew the view from the top of the Whitney would be immaculate, especially with Ari by her side.

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After all, Ari had bought her a beautiful gown. And still sent it even after a bitter fight, with no strings attached. Maybe she was different from Elle. Maybe Ari wasn't trying to claim her but instead, protect her and let her flourish.

Her heart began to race. Was she really going to do this?

23

ARI

"I know this plan will not only bring a number of fiscal benefits, but will increase our reputation as the most caring and competent in the industry," Ari concluded.

Jess clicked onto the next slide and the presentation was complete.

The room filled with silence as Ari stood in waiting.

Sydney nodded, "This is exactly what we were looking for."

"Something fresh, innovative, and special," Mark added.

"That special Ariel Graves touch," Tara concluded.

Ari couldn't stop herself from beaming, "Thank you."

The partners exchanged looks and Sydney spoke, "We promoted you because you had something unique to offer and none of us were quite sure what that looked like.

But the picture you've painted demonstrates a prosperous future."

Ari nodded, "If you're all on board, I'd like to circulate the presentation to the other agents and offer to handle their clients who they feel could deserve another shot but that their current agents don't have time to offer."

Mark made a note in his journal, "Absolutely. Remind them that as much as we are always hesitant to shuffle clients, this is a chance to bring the agency more revenue and prestige."

Ari nodded to Jess to make a note for her later.

"And would you be willing to share any resources on finding artists like this? As far as I know, no other agency has an objective quite like this. I'd like to set our agents up to find forgotten talent in every corner," Sydney added.

Ari smiled, "Definitely, Jess has already put together a list and would be happy to circulate it."

The partners stood, invigorated, each shaking Ari's hand as they made their way to the door.

"Well done, Ariel," Sydney said with a wink as she shook Ari's hand.

Once all three had left the conference room, Ari gave Jess a pat on the back.

"You've done great work, Jess," she added, "Do me a favor, pick out a few of those locations and set them aside just for me. I don't want to give them everything."

Jess nodded and smiled, "Understood. And, congratulations."

Ari headed out of the room and stopped, “You’re heading out soon, right? You’ll be at the Gala?”

Checking her watch, Jess shrugged, “I’ll be there but I’m going to get going on those emails.”

Ari nodded, wondering for a moment if she should stay and help. But, showing up for the Gala was part of her job. A number of clients would be there, including some she hoped to bring into her plan.

“I’ll see you there, then,” Ari said as she headed back to her office and grabbed her back.

* * *

Several hours later, after a hair and makeup appointment, Ari arrived at the Gala. The event photographers’ cameras were snapping pictures as soon as the elevator doors swung open.

Normally camera shy, Ari was immediately ready to pose. Cass had convinced her to wear a tuxedo instead of a gown. She had pointed out that it was the outfit that had made Ari the most confident in and that she would look hot in it.

And, Cass had been right. Ari’s suit jacket broadened her shoulder while her trousers showed just a hint of the red heel. It had been a perfect match to the gown Cass had settled on.

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But, Ari tried not to think about the perfect pairing as she entered the event. Her hands were already getting clammy as she started shaking hands.

A few of her fellow agents congratulated her on her presentation and expressed their gratitude to her for pointing them to resources. Of course, there was always a layer of vitriol and jealousy under these types of compliments. Ultimately, each agent was working for themselves, trying to earn the highest commission.

Each of the agents would surely be invigorated by Ari's initiative, prompting a competitive few months. The thought made Ari's heart race, she was ready for a good fight.

As she walked through the event, settling at the bar for a glass of champagne, Sydney approached.

"Where's the lucky lady?" She asked.

Ari turned and shook Sydney's hand, "She had a work emergency unfortunately."

Sydney nodded, "Well, maybe the end-of-summer party. That's more informal anyway."

Ari nodded and clinked her glass with Sydney's.

The thought of having to tell everyone they weren't seeing each other any more made Ari feel emptier, which she hadn't thought possible.

Just as she was trying to shake the thought, the elevator doors swung open. All Ari saw at first was red, a familiar red. She stood straighter, prompting Sydney to take a look.

“I guess the emergency was handled?” Sydney asked.

Ari’s mouth had fallen open. Trying to recover her shock, a smile crept onto her face.

“I guess so,” Ari said, confusion lacing her words.

She made her way through the crowd. Since Cass was here now, Ari would have to play along, whether she was ready to or not.

As she got closer, Ari was taken aback by her beauty. The dress, and more importantly Cass in it, was every bit as beautiful as it was when she tried it on. Ari’s heart fluttered at the sight and her body tingled in anticipation.

Cass’s face lit up when she spotted Ari, two weeks without each other had felt like a lifetime.

Ari hugged her and planted a kiss on her cheek, whispering, “I’m glad you could make it.”

As they embraced, Cass’s scent filled Ari’s nostrils. She felt like she was under a warm blanket in Cass’s bed.

“Well, I couldn’t let this beauty collect dust,” Cass said with a smile.

Ari didn’t know what Cass coming to the event meant, but she knew it meant something. As they walked through the party, grabbing Cass a glass of champagne to match Ari’s, they made their way to the terrace.

The event, hosted at the top of The Whitney Museum, featured unlimited access to the terrace that overlooked lower Manhattan.

“Tommy told me about your pitch,” Cass admitted.

Ari laughed and turned to scan for Tommy, who winked at her when they made eye contact, “Is that so?”

Cass nodded, “It’s a great idea. Inspired and smart.”

“Thank you,” Ari said, grateful that her light makeup would help cover up her blushing.

They stopped at the railing near the edge of the terrace, both taking in the view. Ari looked back to Cass, taking another look at her dress.

“This,” Ari said while putting her hand on Cass’s waist, “looks amazing on you.”

Cass smiled, “You have good taste.”

Ari nodded, “I think so.”

Cass looked away, trying to stop herself from completely turning pink.

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“Look, just to say, I know my coming here is strange, but it doesn’t mean we have to continue anything if...”

Ari nodded, “I get it.”

“I didn’t want to leave you high and dry,” Cass said, “But, I also wanted to say something to you.”

Cass let her hand fall to Ari’s, lacing their fingers together.

“You don’t get to decide for me what I want in a relationship,” Cass started.

Ari, confused, scrunched her face and listened.

“I know how much time and devotion I need from a partner. And you never asked,” Cass explained.

Ari laughed, it all becoming so clear to her now.

“You’re right, I should’ve just asked. I think I didn’t want you to think that I expected anything more from you than what we had agreed: help each other out and maybe be friends.”

Cass smiled, leaning into Ari and adding, “That was before Ginger’s, before Hedone’s... before your message.”

Ari tilted her head.

“I listened to the end...” Cass said, hoping Ari would pick up the string.

“Right,” Ari said, her slip up.

They looked into each other’s eyes, their fingers locked together, the warm breeze blowing in their clothes.

“Did you mean it?” Cass asked, giving Ari the “heat of the moment” excuse.

She took a deep breath, was she really going to admit she was in love with a complete stranger after just a few weeks?

“I think I was starting to mean it,” Ari said, not wanting to confess entirely.

Cass brought her hands up to Ari’s neck, draping them on her shoulders, “Maybe I’m starting to feel it too.”

Ari pulled back, “But what about Elle?”

Cass shrugged, “I started to feel like being alone was me hiding from it. And what I really need is to be with someone who I really trust.”

“But I didn’t do as you asked,” Ari said.

“Nobody’s perfect, but when I asked, you answered honestly,” Cass smiled.

Ari rested her head on Cass’s forehead. Just a few hours ago she dreaded being in her apartment, but now, all she wanted to do was take this gorgeous woman home, take off their clothes, and down a pint of ice cream.

Ari looked into Cass’s eyes, “But, what do you want from this?”

Cass took a deep breath, “I hadn’t figured that out yet. But I know I want you to be honest with me, to tell me when you need to cancel plans, to be present with me when you’re with me. And the rest we can figure out.”

Ari inhaled, letting the air rest in her chest before releasing it, “You’re okay with me not being able to go out all the time or be home by six?”

Cass laughed, “I work late all the time. I sleep until noon. I really couldn’t care less.”

Ari laughed, “Fair enough.”

Ari brought her hands to Cassie’s face, holding her head.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” Ari said.

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She brought her lips to Cass's, letting them push together. Cass put her hand on Ari's hips and brought her closer, their tongues lightly teasing each other's mouths.

"You look fucking hot in that tux," Cass said between kisses.

Tommy cheered as she walked out onto the balcony, "Fucking finally!"

Ari and Cass laughed, their hands meeting again.

Bringing them in for a hug, Tommy exclaimed, "It was about goddamn time you admitted you loved each other."

Before Ari or Cass could question, Tommy rolled her eyes and said, "The whole fucking world knew."

They laughed and raised their glasses.

"To faking it until you make it," Cass offered as they clinked their glasses and downed their drinks, Ari sure to look in Cass's eyes.

EPILOGUE

A thunderous applause broke out in the theater as the lights came up and the curtain closed.

Tommy was the first to stand up, Ari not long behind.

Cass collected her bag and smiled at Ari.

Ari, waiting for a response, raised an eyebrow to Cass.

“Do your thing,” Cass said with a smirk.

Ari kissed her and said, “Thank you, baby. I’ll be right back.”

Cass watched her as she moved toward the stage entrance to congratulate Brian Wilkes, an actor who had made his mark on Hollywood during the 80s but had slowly been offered less and less roles.

Tommy and Gabby launched into their thoughts on the play.

“I would’ve liked to see more of *The Witch* to be honest,” Gabby confessed.

They headed out of the theater as they discussed.

Cass looked over her shoulder for her woman.

“Give me one second, I’m going to speak with the director,” Tommy said as she threaded her way through the crowd.

Gabby laughed, “You’ve really met some odd people.”

Cass shrugged, “Yeah, but good ones.”

Gabby nodded as they reached the lobby and followed the crowd to the sidewalk. Cass had become well-versed in the etiquette for theater... and concerts... and musicals... and pretty much any type of art you could imagine.

As they stood on the curb, Cass rested her head on Gabby.

“How long do they think they’ll be?” Gabby asked with a yawn.

Cass laughed, “No idea. But, we could go grab a drink while we wait?”

Gabby nodded and the pair headed off to the nearest bar.

* * *

It took Ari and Tommy about forty five minutes to find them, already a drink deep.

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When they arrived, Cass immediately squealed, “Ariel and Tommy!”

They laughed as they joined the rest of their group, Ari sliding in next to Cass.

“Did you eat before the show?” Ari asked, eyeing Cass who seemed a little too tipsy from one-drink.

Instead of answering, Cass took another sip of her drink. She set it down on the bar and wrapped her arms around Ari’s waist like a boa constrictor.

She looked up into Ari’s eyes and smiled, “I love you.”

Ari smiled back and repeated, “I love you too, Cassie.”

Tommy and Ari grabbed a drink too, adding it to Cass’s tab, something that happened more often since she got her own promotion a few months after the Gala. Ari’s ambition and drive for work had been a huge influence on Cass recentering her focus on her career goals.

Once they had caught up, the group was laughing and making the whole bar roll their eyes.

As Tommy and Gabby laughed, two good friends now, Cass leaned over to Ari, using her own hand to bring Ari’s ear to her mouth.

She whispered, “Can you take me home?”

Ari smiled and nodded.

She turned to Gabs and Tom, and interrupted, “We’re actually going to head out guys.”

“Booo, boring couple,” Tommy cried, Gabby joining in.

Ari rolled her eyes and said, “This is what you both wanted, so now you have to deal with it.”

They hugged and said their goodbyes, Cass rushing her way through it all.

“I love you both,” she said as she brought the two in for a hug.

Cass and Ari made their way out of the bar and headed downtown toward Ari’s place.

Suddenly walking straighter and with purpose, Cass was basically running down the street.

Ari tilted her head, “That drink wore off face.”

“Maybe you should sign me because I’m such a great actress,” Cass said, turning to look back at Ari who had fallen a few feet behind her.

Taking a look at her girlfriend, Ari examined the tight emerald skirt that Cass was wearing, every time she wore it, Ari knew she was feeling a little excited.

Cass laughed and continued, “You didn’t really think one drink would make methattipsy did you?”

“Hey, I’m a trusting person,” Ari smiled.

Cass slowed down and looped her arm with Ari's as she whispered, "I just wanted some time with Ms. Graves tonight. If that's something you're interested in."

Ari nodded, like a kid in a candy shop.

The rest of the way home was fast, both of them too excited to waste any time.

When Ari's apartment door finally swung open, they could barely keep their hands off of each other. Cass's hand slapped Ari's ass as the door slammed shut.

They made their way through Ari's more decorated apartment, finally looking lived in, to the bedroom.

The walls were no longer blank.

Though Cass hadn't moved in just yet, her presence was all over the place. Even Ari's room was fitted with a gorgeous, vintage rug.

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It had been Cass's suggestion originally, to protect her knees when Ms. Graves put her on her hands and knees. But, it warmed the place up more than Ari could've anticipated.

As their feet met the carpet, Cass turned around and began to kiss Ari, sliding her tongue into Ari's mouth.

The feeling sending a wave of excitement to Ari's clit, it hadn't stopped throbbing since Cass confessed her plans for the rest of the night.

Ari pulled away and looked at Cass. Fuck she's beautiful was the only thought Ari could manage.

"Cassandra," Ari said, her voice lowering, "I'd like you to take off your clothes and get on the bed."

Cassie nodded, not uttering a word. But, Ari could see her excitement as her chest rose and fell with her breathing.

Ari turned to her closet, letting her hair out of its bun and leaving a long ponytail in its place. She slid open the doors, revealing her much cleaner closet and an entire side that had shelves, displaying some of their newly acquired toys. It had become quite a pain to journey to Hedone's anytime they wanted to play with each other.

So, instead, they purchased some of their favorites and created a space for them.

Ari selected four, black leather cuffs lined with fleece and brought them to Cass who

was laying down on the bed.

“I’m going to strap you down and use you,” Ari said with a devious smile.

Cass nodded, holding her hands out for Ari to cuff, “Yes, Ms. Graves.”

Ari wrapped the cuffs around her wrists, kissing them as she tightened the strap.

With a wince, Cass rolled her head back.

“Too tight?” Ari asked, her voice a little softer.

Cass shook her head, “No, ma’am.”

Ari smiled, taking her cuffs and clipping them to the under-bed restraints they had installed a few months ago. Once Cass’s body was entirely laid out, Ari stood and watched her squirm.

“You’re making me wet,” Cass complained.

Ari smiled and took off her pants, revealing a pair of crotchless, maroon panties.

Cass moaned, “Fuck, you’re hot.”

Walking around Cass’s tied up body, Ari asked, “You’re going to taste me until I finish.”

Cass, her heart pounding, nodded.

Ari climbed on top of Cass, placing her entrance just above Cass’s slit. If she had made Cass put on a strap, Ari could ride her all night like this.

Instead, she moved her hips up, closer and closer to Cass's mouth. As she got closer, Cass tried to lift her body to Ari, not wanting to wait any longer for her lover's taste.

Ari pushed her head back into the mattress, "Don't make me punish you, naughty girl."

Cass nodded, pleading with her eyes, "I'm sorry, Ms. Graves."

Finally, deciding Cass deserved it, Ari placed her folds on Cass's mouth, letting her body weight bring her slit to Cass's tongue. She loved sitting on Cass's face, all the pleasure and all the power. She could relinquish Cassie's treat whenever she pleased.

Once Cass's tongue found Ari's slit, she moaned.

Through the hair and skin, Cass said, "I love the way you taste."

Ari, spurred by Cass's enjoyment, began to rock her hips along Cass's mouth, feeling her tongue begin to tease her entrance.

"That's right, right there Cassandra," Ari encouraged.

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Cass's tongue grew sharper, applying more pressure to Ari's clit and center. She tasted sweet, a hint of sweat mixing with her wetness.

Ari, pleased with Cass's skills, brought her hand back to Cass's clit.

She moaned as she felt how slick Cassie was for her, clearly she had been considering this moment for a while.

Ari's moan spurred more excitement from Cass, her own grunts growing louder between licks.

Ari rubbed her fingers along Cassie's clit, feeling her hard clit under her hood. The pressure made Cass moan, pulling away from Ari's slit.

Placing her hand on Cass's head, Ari brought Cass's mouth back to where it belonged.

"If you get distracted, I'll take it away. Do you understand?"

Cass nodded, not wanting to speak and pull her tongue from where her mistress wanted it. Instead, she increased the pressure to Ari's center, flicking her tongue between Ari's bud and her entrance. Ari grinded her hips harder and slower as Cass got her closer and closer.

Bringing her hand to Cass's entrance, Ari teased her with her fingers, letting Cass's moisture slick her fingers. Just as she was about to enter her, Ari removed her silky fingers, shifted her pussy away from Cass's mouth and instead placed her fingers in

Cass's mouth.

"Oh baby," Cass moaned at her own taste.

Ari smirked.

"Do you like knowing what you do to me?" Cass asked.

Ari brought herself back to Cass's mouth, "I fucking love it."

Cass pushed her tongue deep inside Ari's center, thrusting as much as she could as Ari put her fingers inside of Cass. Their bodies moved in perfect sync, each of them growing in volume.

Ari looked at Cass, meeting her gaze and said "Look at me while I come."

Cass nodded, forcing her eyes to stay open as her own body shuttered and grew closer to orgasm.

"Cassandra," Ari said, softly.

Looking up at Ari's perfect hazel eyes, Cassie nodded.

"You're all mine," Ari said.

The words prompted Cass to reach her final peak, her body squeezing around Ari's hand and fingers. Ari persisted, continuing to push her fingers inside of Cass and gently massaging her perfect spot.

Listening to Cass come and feeling her mouth envelope her folds, Ari's body followed suit. Squeezing Cass's head between her thighs as she succumbed to the pleasure. Cass's hands pulled at the restraints, her arms tense from the pleasure.

Finally, they screamed together, “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,” until their bodies stopped seizing.

Ari took herself off of Cass, quick to release her hands and feet from the cuffs, letting the metal clank to the floor.

She wrapped herself around Cass and she rolled on to her side. Cass loved being the little spoon after an intense fuck. And Ari loved resting her head on Cass’s.

Ari gently places kisses on Cassie’s neck and ears, “Are you okay?”

Cass nodded, “Yeah, babe. Are you?”

Ari nodded too, “I love you, Cassie.”

A smile crept onto Cass’s face, just barely visible to Ari from behind.

“I love you too, Ari,” Cass said, she brought her tired hand to Ari’s hair, gentle scratching her scalp;

Cass turned onto her other side, facing Ari.

“Thank you for letting me into your life,” Cass said, planting a tender kiss on Ari’s lips.

Ari smiled, “It wasn’t in the plans but I’m so grateful to have you in my life.”

They rested their heads together, their breathing falling into sync as their eyes drifted closed.