



Faking It with the Ice Queen

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: A fake relationship, a frosty CEO, and a family weekend with way too much pressure...

Dive into The Ice Queen Series for all the thawing of icy hearts, all the super hot CEOs, all the steamy scenes, (Oh, and the Happily Ever Afters, of course!)

When Elara Silver—luxury resort CEO and queen of perfection—finds herself without a plus-one for her family's high-stakes anniversary weekend, she does the unthinkable: asks her messy, cheerful, and completely-out-of-her-element assistant, Grace Saunders, to pretend to be her girlfriend.

Elara plans to polish Grace up, fake a flawless backstory, and survive the weekend. But Grace's charm, optimism, and knack for finding trouble quickly derail the plan—and Elara's ice-cold walls. Forced to navigate nosy relatives, awkward dinners, and one very unexpected spark, Elara starts to wonder if the chaos Grace brings might be exactly what her life (and her heart) needs.

Can a fake relationship with her quirky assistant melt the ice queen's carefully constructed world?

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Mornings have always been Elara Silver's favorite time of day. She cherished those few moments before the chaos of the city and the stresses of work drowned out her peace. Softly padding across the room, Elara pulled open the blackout curtains, leaving the sheer white curtains closed. The early morning sun filtered through the sheer panels, casting a soft light across Elara's pristine bedroom. Everything in her world was orderly: crisp white linens, dark polished floors, and minimalist decor. The quiet hum of the city outside was barely audible through the double-paned windows, exactly how she liked it. Controlled. Predictable.

Near the closet, a soft dove-gray suit hung on a display rack with matching heels carefully placed below. Elara never left anything for the last minute, including picking out what to wear. It was one of her favorite nighttime routines to carefully choose the perfect attire for the next day's events and weather. Each of her suits was finely tailored, the fabric hugging her long, athletic frame. Every detail exuded confidence and power.

She stood in front of the mirror, carefully styling her hair to perfection, not a strand out of place. Her sharply angled bob wassleek, highlighting her sharp features and even sharper gaze. At forty-five, her once raven-black hair now had silver streaks throughout. Her mother constantly pressured her to have it dyed professionally, but Elara always refused. If men could be respected and powerful with salt-and-pepper hair, then so could she. Running her hands through her hair one last time, Elara stared at her reflection, her icy-blue eyes piercing back at her, cool and composed.

On the nightstand, her phone buzzed, disrupting the calm. Walking over, Elara

saw Father flash across the screen. With a resigned sigh, she pressed the speaker button and continued to get dressed for the day.

“Elara.” Her father’s voice boomed, but somehow still dripped with expectation. “We need to talk about this weekend.”

“Everything is set, Father. The driver will pick you up from the airport,” she replied smoothly. Adjusting her collar meticulously, she continued, “I’ve arranged for everyone else’s transportation as well.”

Sighing with exasperation, her father cut her off. “That is not what I called about, and you know it. This family has a reputation to uphold. As the heir to the Silver family fortune, you are expected to continue my legacy. You should be married by now with kids. Like your sister, Catherine. She is ten years younger than you, and yet she has two sons already. I know you don’t date men, but there are ways. Why haven’t you brought someone home yet? You know your brother and sister will both have their spouses at the resort this week. It would be nice if you?—”

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Elara interrupted, “I’ll be bringing someone.”

Her voice was steady, but her jaw was clenched tight in the silence. The pause on the other end of the line seemed to stretch to infinity..

“Really? You never mentioned?—”

“It was meant to be a surprise, Father.” The lie rolled off her tongue without hesitation.

“Well, who is she? What does she do?”

“Father, you will have plenty of time this week to learn all about her. I have to go. If I

don't leave now, I'll be late," she said quickly, cutting off his questions before he could dive too deep. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Elara—"

Before he could continue, she quickly hung up. She stared at the phone for a moment, a sinking feeling twisting in her gut. She wasn't ready for the family's scrutiny, and she certainly wasn't ready for their opinion on her love life—or lack thereof.

Slipping on her designer heels, she snatched her phone as she power walked to her Mercedes-Benz. Her neighbor casually waved from across the street as he unlocked his Audi. Elara plastered on a smile, waving back. Living in the fabulous forties involved being surrounded by Sacramento's elite, which suited Elara just fine. Her cool exterior never felt out of place amongst the upper echelon.

Backing out of her long driveway, guilt began to settle in. It's not like she lied. She was bringing someone; it just wasn't a girlfriend. They didn't have to know that the woman she was bringing was a high-end escort paid to be there.

After quickly navigating downtown traffic, Elara made her way past the skyscrapers lining the Capitol Mall area and pulled into her reserved parking spot in the private lot attached to her building. Glancing at her phone, she could see her mother had already texted, asking about who she was bringing. Feeling her insides twist into a knot, Elara's fingers hovered over the screen for a moment before tapping out a message.

Can you still make it tonight? Make sure you look the part.

She hit send and tucked the phone into her blazer pocket, taking one last glance at her reflection. The outside world would never know just how perfectly put-together her façade was.

Stepping out the elevator, Elara surveyed the Silver Resorts and Spas corporate office with an eye out for any late employees. If there was one thing Elara could not stand, it was her employees wasting time. The glass walls for each office ensured that no one could claim they were in their office without actually being present. Plus, Elara loved the way the floor-to-ceiling windows let in natural light throughout the space. While she preferred a more modern and minimalist style, Elara also hated to feel closed in. The sunlight and glass walls made the space feel open and bright.

Silver Resorts and Spas was the founding company that started her father's empire, and had since diversified into real estate and international resorts, forming the Silver International Group. As the eldest child, Elara was entrusted with the foundation company: the American branch of Silver Resorts and Spas. Determined to earn the legacy being handed to her, Elara spent all of her time ensuring they broke profit records each quarter. Every choice she made, every day of her life had been dedicated to proving she could handle becoming CEO of Silver International Group when her father stepped down.

Elara made her way to her corner office, but that tiny bit of pride disappeared when she looked with disdain at her secretary, Grace. The woman stood out like a sore thumb in the refined space Elara had created. Today, Grace was wearing electric-blue high-waisted pants cut off just above her ankles, giving plenty of room to see her bright-pink ballet flats. Tucked into her pants, Grace's blouse had a dark floral pattern with flowers in fuchsia, purple, and pink. She had highlighted her hazel eyes with blue graphic liner. In Elara's world of silvers and muted nudes, Grace was a neon sign declaring just how much she did not fit in. Elara did her best to swallow her distaste as Grace smiled brightly at her.

Grace tucked her messy light brown hair behind her ear. "Good morning, Ms. Silver!"

Looking down, Elara nodded. "Grace." Elara glanced over to the empty boardroom

across her office.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Elara turned back to Grace. “Has my nine o’clock shown up yet?”

Grace’s enormous round eyes widened as she nervously looked down at the calendar on her desk.

“Umm...” Grace paused, looking sheepishly up at Elara. She visibly gulped before she gained the confidence to reply. “What nine o’clock?”

Groaning, Elara closed her eyes and took a deep breath before she lost her composure.

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“The one I asked you to book yesterday. Which you obviously didn’t do.” Elara clenched her teeth in frustration. “Did you at least confirm with Patrick that the contracts were ready to sign?”

When Grace visibly started shaking, Elara stopped her before she could make excuses.

“I’ll take that as a no. Grace, for the love of god, please call Patrick and reschedule for when I get back from Lake Tahoe.”

“Yes, Ms. Silver. Right on it. I’m so sorry?—”

Before she could hear any more groveling, Elara walked into her office and slammed the door behind her. She stood still just behind the door, counting to ten as she took a few deep breaths to regain her composure.

Grace had only been here for a month, and already the woman had made Elara’s life a nightmare. That was the third meeting in two weeks she had failed to schedule. While she usually gave every employee the full ninety days to attempt to adjust to her high standards before she let anyone go, Elara began to think she could not hold out that long with Grace.

The phone in her pocket buzzed softly. She quickly fished out her phone, hoping for at least some good news today. But fate had other plans. Or at least Chelsea, the escort, did.

Sorry, hun. Plans changed. I won’t be back in town in time.

For a brief moment, Elara stared at her phone, blinking rapidly, jaw slack. Then her world started to spin. She was breathing way too fast, and she knew it.

“No, no, no, no, no, no.”

Panicked, Elara slumped down into her chair, attempting to become small enough to disappear. All Elara could think was why. Her fingers and toes began to tingle, the numbness of despair taking over. Elara flexed her fingers and realized that if she did not get her panic attack in check, she would pass out soon. As she began to slow her breathing down, Elara started running through all the ways she could fix this and came up short. As her world stopped spinning and feeling returned to her fingers, Elara sat up straighter. She looked up and only had one thought. Grace.

Grace. Maybe Grace could come. This could be fixed. It had to be fixed. There was no way she would admit to her family that she had lied about bringing someone. There was one thing her father valued above all else: the truth. His famous words echoed in Elara's head:

“Give it to me hard. Give it to me fast. Give it to me dirty. But at least have the balls to give it to me straight.”

Victor Silver was known for never giving second chances when it came to lying. Her father could forgive a mistake, though you would never hear the end of it. But a lie? Victor wouldn't just be disappointed; he'd be furious.

Oh god, her mother. Of course Father told her. Victor and Margaret never kept secrets, especially when it involved their children.

How would she break it to her mother? How could she possibly explain that she would rather lie than hear another lecture about how a woman as successful as Elara should have no trouble finding a partner? How successful families don't just have

marriages; they have arrangements? The thought of hearing about another mogul's daughter made Elara cringe. No. She would just have to ask Grace.

Elara pushed the intercom and did her best to use her calmest voice. "Grace, please come into my office."

Through the glass wall, Elara could see Grace slowly stand up and turn toward her. Grace smoothed her hands over her pants as she walked to the door. As she entered the office, she audibly gulped.

"Please put the screen down. I want this to be a private meeting."

At Elara's request, Grace walked over to the side of the room and pressed the small button on the wall. As the room slowly darkened, Grace's hands shook before she clasped them behind her back.

Motioning to the chair in front of her, Elara commanded, "Please sit, Grace."

The poor woman was on the verge of tears. She probably thought Elara was going to fire her, and it was probably what she should do. She should tell Grace how bad she was at her job and dismiss her. Instead, she was about to ask for an impossible favor.

Elara cleared her throat. "Grace, as you know, we have been planning my parents' anniversary celebration event for this upcoming week at our Lake Tahoe location."

Before she could continue, Grace interjected, "Yes! Of course I do. In fact, I just confirmed with the transportation company that they have the flight itineraries for everyone, and?—"

"Grace, stop. That's not why I called you in here."

Grace's mouth formed ano, confusion clearly written across her face. Elara briefly closed her eyes and took a deep breath to continue, but as she looked up at Grace, her confidence wavered. Grace was young, artsy, and entirely too innocent. Would she even understand such a request? Elara did her best to say something, but words failed her once more.

Smiling shyly, Grace inquired, "Well, what did you call me in here for? Am I in trouble? I know I forgot to confirm the meeting this morning. I swear it won't happen again."

Not wanting Grace or herself to suffer anymore, Elara finally blurted out, "I have a proposition for you. Well, not a proposition. That's not the right word. An opportunity. A...request."

At that, Grace sat up a little straighter, clearly relieved to not be in trouble. She smiled once more and chirped, "Sure, Ms. Silver. Anything at all. I'm happy to help you. What do you want me to do?"

Before she could completely lose her nerve, Elara continued, "I would like for you to attend the week-long event with me."

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Bouncing in her chair, Grace gleefully exclaimed, “Of course! I would love to come. I have the whole schedule for the week on my phone already, and I can certainly help keep all the activities on time and organized.”

Grimacing, Elara clarified, “While I appreciate you having the schedule on hand, I’m not asking you to attend as my secretary. I would like you to attend as my girlfriend.”

At this revelation, Grace’s jaw dropped wide open.

Before she could get the wrong idea, Elara quickly amended, “Not myrealgirlfriend. I need you topretendto be my girlfriend. I had a...guest who was supposed to attend as my partner. Unfortunately, she is no longer available.

“I need you to come with me this week and pretend to be my girlfriend. My entire family is expecting to meet my new partner, and, well, I just can’t bear to disappoint them.”

Filled with dread and a tingle of nerves, Elara looked into Grace’s eyes, pleading silently that she would agree. Grace continued to sit, her back straight against the chair, her mouth agape. The silence was palpable.

As a skilled negotiator, Elara could tell she was about to lose this deal. She stood up and made her way around the desk to stand directly in front of Grace. Leaning back against the desk, she looked into Grace’s eyes and could see that she was not about to run out of the office. She just had to hook her.

“You’ll be paid handsomely, of course. A thousand dollars a day. You will also be

provided clothes to wear, which you may keep.”

Seeing the wheels start to turn in Grace’s mind, Elara plastered on her best deal-closing smile. “The clothes will be designer, of course. And I will pay you for the first day upfront. A thousand dollars in your pocket right now. What do you say?”

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Grace knew taking this job was a risk. She had never worked in a corporate office this fancy before and knew her taste for bold colors and patterns and unique thrift store finds would never fit in with the sleek designer clothes and high heels everyone else seemed to prefer. Even her light brown hair stood out, always a little too wild with a mind of its own. Meanwhile, even the receptionist had smooth, long hair that looked like she regularly got a professional blowout.

Honestly, she wasn’t sure why they had hired her in the first place. It had only been a little over a month, and she knew she would be fired. Working for Elara Silver was more than what she expected. Her expectations weren’t just high; they were impossible. Or at least they were for Grace. Elara never seemed to get angry with anyone else.

Everyone seemed to be afraid of Elara, but Grace could tell they also admired her. And she couldn’t blame them. Who wouldn’t admire her? She was a freaking force of nature. Elara knew what she wanted—and seemed to always get it. Grace had long wished to be more like that. She wished she could have that drive; she wished she could be that successful.

That morning, the sound of Elara’s heels clicking echoed through the building and made Grace’s heart race. She knew she had forgotten something, but she just couldn’t, well, remember. When Elara walked up to her in that tailored suit, she looked like a statuette looking down her nose at Grace. A scary statuette, but one

lovingly carved by an artist. Every detail was perfect. Too perfect.

After realizing that the thing she forgot was the deal closing, Grace was sure that Elara's stony exterior would crack and she would rain wrath down on her. So when she was called into Elara's office, she fully expected to get the news that she was fired.

What she never expected was this.

Grace's neck burned, and she could feel her face turning red. Elara's intense gaze was fixed on her, and she was so freaking close. The proximity combined with the nature of Elara's request had her insides squirming.

Her girlfriend? Well, pretend girlfriend. But still, who would believe that Grace was Elara Silver's girlfriend? Elara was the sapphic community's most eligible bachelorette. She was rich, powerful, and really hot. Grace felt like a pleb in comparison.

Grace wasn't poor, but she wasn't rich enough to say no to a thousand dollars a day. That was the kind of money that could change lives—her life. It was for seven days too. Seven thousand dollars in one week was nothing to sneeze at. Grace had been scraping by for years now, putting all her extra money into savings so that one day she could open her own thrift shop. Owning a thrift shop wasn't the most glamorous of dreams, but it was hers. And seven thousand dollars would go a long way to making that dream a reality.

Plus the clothes. Elara had a taste for the finer things in life. Grace had no doubt that any clothes given wouldn't just be designer; they would be the best of the best. You couldn't want to own a thrift store and not love fashion. Silk ties and pressed suits might not be her style, but she knew a good deal when she saw one.

Grace looked down at her hands, if only to escape the intensity of Elara's gaze, and realized she had been nervously picking at the pilling on her vintage pants. Grace knew she was so out of her depth, but she couldn't help wanting Elara's approval too. Elara called this an opportunity, and she wasn't wrong. This could be her chance to prove herself, to prove she was good enough to be trusted with this. She may not want to stay in the high-stakes corporate world, but she wanted the chance to stay long enough to learn from the best in the business: Elara Silver. It was the reason she had applied for the job in the first place. Screw going back to school for a business degree; she wanted hands-on experience on how to run an actual business. And Elara definitely knew how to run a business. Without a doubt, she was the savviest businesswoman Grace had ever heard of.

Having made up her mind, Grace finally looked back up into Elara's worried face. "Sure. Why not?"

Relief washed over Elara's face before her stony exterior set back into place. Grace knew she would never get a thank you, but she hoped that Elara would show her gratitude in other ways.

Standing straighter, Elara smoothed the wrinkles in her slacks and replied, "Wonderful. You may take your leave to make any arrangements for your absence. I will need you to meet me in the lobby by 1 p.m. That will be all, Grace."

Rolling her eyes at Elara's formality, Grace stood up from the chair and made her way to the door. Before she closed it, she turned back. "See you at one, Elara."

Grace quickly grabbed her bag and made her way out of the building. As soon as she made it to the parking lot, she whipped out her cell and called Aunt Lucy, her only family who also lived in Sacramento.

Her parents had recently moved to the East Coast to be closer to her grandparents, so

Aunt Lucy had become somewhat of a mother figure, except she definitely did not act like a mom. Aunt Lucy was more of a free spirit. She never had children of her own, and she had had many “love affairs” as she called them. While Aunt Lucy was too loosey-goosey to be a true mother figure, Grace still relied on her for support.

Grace considered what to tell her about her upcoming week, as she was uncertain what exactly she was doing in the first place. But her cat Mr. Fluffy Pants needed someone to watch after him while she was gone. He was an elderly cat, and the name was obviously from a more childish time of Grace’s life. She knew cats were generally independent and didn’t need too much from a caretaker, but this was Mr. Fluffy Pants. He deserved to be spoiled with love, which Aunt Lucy certainly would do.

Aunt Lucy picked up on the third ring. Her voice trilled with surprise. “Grace! What do I owe the pleasure of a midday call from my favorite niece?”

Smiling, Grace replied, “I’m your only niece.”

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“And that’s why you’re my favorite!”

Grace laughed. “So, you know how I started a new job a few weeks ago? I have to go out of town for work starting tomorrow, and I’ll be gone for a week.”

“That’s fantastic, Grace. I knew you would be great at your job. I told you you just needed a few weeks to adjust. What did your boss ask you to do on this trip?”

Making a last-minute decision, Grace decided to tell her the whole story. After explaining the bizarre interaction with Elara, Grace curiously waited for Aunt Lucy’s response.

“Well, well, well. Isn’t this a curious turn of events? The week ahead seems to be very interesting. Very interesting, indeed. It’ll certainly be one to remember, that’s for sure. I know I told you that you should start dating again, but this isn’t exactly what I meant.”

“Very funny, Aunt Lucy. This doesn’t count as dating. I’m being paid. I prefer to think of it as a week-long performance piece. Sort of like what you did in college. What did you call it?”

“We Are All Sad Clowns. It was my attempt at subverting the ‘putting on a brave face’ idea.”

”That’s right! Didn’t you have your face painted for like a month?”

“I painted it every day for a week. It’s not my fault it stained my face. It was the

universe's way of telling me that I was doing a good job with this piece and I had more work to do.”

The two laughed until Grace had tears in her eyes.

Finally getting her giggle fit under control, Aunt Lucy asked, “Enough about me. What about you? How are you feeling about this?”

Grace sighed before she confessed, “Honestly? Feeling a bit out of my league. This is the Silver family. The lifestyle of the rich and powerful was never something I thought I would have to know about. What if I’m not smart enough? What if I’m not elegant?”

“The Silver family may have more money than God, but money can’t buy happiness, dear. It’s cliché but true. Don’t worry about what some rich dandy thinks of you. Just be yourself. Be the Grace that I know and love. If they are anywhere near being good people, they will love you.”

“I know. I know that’s what I’m supposed to think, but I can’t help but want to fit in just a little bit. Not that I want their approval; I just don’t want their judgment.”

“I know what it’s like to not fit in. But I also know that sacrificing who you are for who they want you to be will never work. Don’t dim your sparkle.”

“You’re right. I can’t let them get in my head. Jesus, I haven’t even gotten there yet. I need to take a chill pill. This will be fun. Plus, I’m getting paid to go on vacation at Lake Tahoe. Even if they are all frigid and judgmental, at least I get to go to the spa.”

“That’s my girl! You deserve a break. Don’t you worry one bit about Mr. Fluffy Pants either. I’ll check in on him every day. You just try to enjoy yourself.”

“Thanks, Aunt Lucy. I owe you one. Maybe I’ll steal a spa robe for you!”

“Ha! You do that.”

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Elara paced the lobby, waiting for Grace to show up. It was 12:58 p.m. She knew she had told Grace to meet at one, but the wait was killing her. Thoughts raced through her mind as she kept glancing toward the lobby door.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

Just as Elara considered backing out of this insane charade, Grace stepped through the doors with that same smile plastered across her face. Normally, Elara found Grace’s bubbly and indomitable attitude a bit grating, but right this moment, it soothed her fears. Grace was here. She wasn’t backing out.

Elara straightened her posture. “Right on time, Ms. Saunders.”

Grace stopped short, arching her eyebrow as if considering something. Her face broke into a grin. “Ms. Saunders? Come on. I’m supposed to be your girlfriend this week, right? Now is not the time for formalities. Please, let’s stick with Grace.”

Elara raised her eyebrow at Grace’s overt familiarity and turned toward the exit, her heels clicking. She refused to look back as she said, “The car is outside.”

Elara greeted the driver and slipped into the back of the waiting black car. With a sigh, she leaned her head back. Grace made her way around to the other side of the car, fumbling through thanking the driver for opening the door.

As soon as Grace was seated, Elara said, “You’ll need to start acting comfortable

with people doing things for you. You will never convince anyone you are a heiress if a driver opening a door for you makes you flustered.”

Grace looked directly at Elara, her displeasure clear. They held eye contact for a moment, neither wanting to be the first to back down.

Without looking at the driver, Elara confirmed, “To the Ainsley House, please.”

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Before she could continue her lecture, Grace blurted out, “TheAinsley House? Don’t you need to set up an appointment weeks in advance to go there?”

“Not for the rich and elite. Which you need to start acting like you are part of.”

“Do I? Why do I need to be a heiress? Wouldn’t your family be happy to see you happy with someone regardless of their...station?”

Elara looked away from Grace before she quietly replied, “No.”

Grace’s soft “oh” was almost too much for Elara. She couldn’t stand pity, especially not from someone who could never understand her life.

“I’ve done some research. It seems there is a wealthy family on the East Coast with a few Saunders in their line. This is who we will tell them is your family. They are obscure enough that I’m sure no one at this event will know who they are. It’ll be much easier to keep up this ruse if we can anticipate questions.”

“Um...okay? That works, actually. My parents moved back to the East Coast recently, so it wouldn’t even be a lie. And who knows? Maybe Iamrelated to those people.”

Seeing that her attempt at small talk wasn’t going well, Grace sat back in defeat. “Is there anything else I should know?”

Elara sighed. There were many things Grace probably needed to know, but how could she possibly change this woman into something she wasn’t in one day?

“Just...be on your best behavior. Polite. Quiet. The less you say, the fewer opportunities they’ll have to poke holes in the story.”

Grace scoffed. This finally brought Elara’s gaze back to Grace, who was clearly upset.

“So, I’m to be seen and not heard?”

The guilt crept back up, closing Elara’s throat. She coughed, attempting to clear it away.

“No, I’m sorry. That’s not what I meant. I...I just don’t want you to have to lie too much. Things are much easier if we stick to the truth as much as possible. I don’t want you to be silent.”

Grace sat quietly, watching Elara as she stumbled through her apology. After a moment of silence, she nodded and turned to look out the window.

The car pulled over to the curb. “The Ainsley House, Ms. Silver.”

“Thank you, John. We should be ready in an hour.”

“I’ll be right here, Ms. Silver.”

Elara stood outside The Ainsley House and took a deep breath. Things were finally feeling normal. This was her favorite boutique. She knew exactly what to expect—no surprises behind those gilded doors. The tall, arching windows gleamed under the afternoon sun, casting a warm glow on the marble floors that reflected soft shades of cream and gold. Inside, plush velvet seating in rich jewel tones—emerald and burgundy—dotted the floor, next to mahogany tables displaying the finest fabrics draped like artwork. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling, casting a warm, flattering

light that made everything feel as exclusive as it was.

Opening the door, she turned around to find Grace motionless. Elara held the door open and gestured inside. “After you, Grace.”

As if startled, Grace hurried through the open door, and Elara followed behind her.

“Ms. Silver! We’ve been expecting you. Follow me. We’ve set up tea as you like,” the sales associate said.

At this, a tiny giggle slipped out of Grace, which she failed at covering up with a cough. Elara didn’t want to find it funny, but Grace’s discomfort was entertaining. At least she wasn’t alone in the strange and new.

Unable to resist poking fun, Elara quietly asked, “Something wrong, Grace?”

A crooked smile pulled at Grace’s lips as she mouthed, “Tea?”

Charmed, Elara snorted before she turned away to follow the sales associate to the private backroom. Elara had always valued privacy, so of course, she requested a private room every time she visited. God knows she spent enough money at the Ainsley to get a private room and hot tea.

The sales associate set out a beautiful porcelain tea set and poured two cups of Earl Grey. Having assured that Elara was seated and served, the associate finally turned to Grace.

“Would you like milk or sugar, ma’am?”

Grace nervously looked between Elara and the associate before replying, “If that wouldn’t be too much trouble, I would love some milk and two cubes of sugar.”

“Of course. Right away.”

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As the woman left, the store manager appeared with a saccharine smile that stretched just a little too wide, gleaming like the Cheshire cat. Patty was everything one would expect from a woman running a high-end boutique. She was dressed in a designer dress with bold prints that clung to her slim frame, and her smooth blonde hair was pulled into a tight pony, which almost completely hid the grays beginning to streak throughout. Her eyes sparkled with sharp calculation, always hunting for the next sale, though her warm, almost theatrical manner masked it. The faint scent of expensive perfume lingered as she drew closer, her voice dripping with pleasure at the thought of the purchases to come.

Patty drew out with a dramatic flourish, “Eeeelaaara! What a pleasant surprise.”

She pulled up short when she noticed Grace but composed herself quickly. “I hear you’re in a bit of a rush and need ready-to-wear pieces. This must be your guest. Hello, dear. I’m Patty.”

At the sudden attention, Grace’s eyes widened. Biting her lip, she nodded in reply.

“Patty, this is Grace. We will need a week’s wardrobe. At least three formal dresses, three semi-formal suits, three semi-formal dresses, five casual outdoor outfits, a fur coat, and a ski jacket.”

Her fingers, polished with a pale pink manicure, quickly jotted down notes, all while her ever-present smile grew wider with each item Elara listed. She was clearly already mentally cataloging the commissions. The Cheshire-like grin made Elara roll her eyes.

Patty looked delirious, dollar signs practically popping out of her eyes. Nearly hopping with glee, she turned toward Grace, grabbing her hand and dragging her toward the raised alcove.

“Of course! Come, dear, let me get your measurements.”

Patty’s hands moved with the confidence of someone who’d done this a thousand times before. Her eyes flicked over Grace’s form, calculating every inch even before the measuring tape touched her skin. As she hemmed and hawed over Grace’s curvy frame, her sharp eyes sparkled with excitement—this was the thrill of her work. At one point, she commented that Grace’s build would limit their options.

Grace bit her lip. “Will that be a problem?”

Before Patty could answer, Elara crossed her arms and glared at the manager. This certainly did not go unnoticed by either woman standing in the alcove.

“Of course not! We’ll have you right as rain in no time.” Patty looked between Elara and Grace quickly before continuing, “In the standard palette, Elara?”

Elara stared at Grace for a moment, assessing her light brown hair, bright hazel eyes, and light olive skin. Elara’s standard grays, whites, and tans would dull Grace’s complexion.

“I think a few in the standard will be fine. I’d also like to see greens, golds, and burgundy.”

As Elara spoke, she watched disappointment wash across Grace’s face and amended, “Add in warm pink.”

Grace turned toward Elara, her face lit up with surprise and joy. Though Elara would

never admit it, seeing Grace smile made something warm creep up in her chest. Before she could think too deeply about that, she approached the manager and finished her list.

“I would also like shoes to match for each outfit.”

“Absolutely! I will be right back with your options.”

As soon as the manager left the room, Grace let another giggle escape as she turned to Elara. “That’s a lot of clothes for one week.”

“I was actually just wondering if it wasn’t enough. You don’t know my family yet, but everyone is expected to dress formally for each dinner. Image is important to them, and I need you to blend in. If you wore the same outfit twice or didn’t have designer clothes, you would stick out.”

Grace crossed the alcove and slumped back into the chair, drinking from her tea cup as Elara spoke. She looked at Elara with sympathy, which made Elara squirm.

“I’m sorry. That sounds...difficult.”

Elara bristled and snapped, “Don’t. I’m not sorry. They’re right. Image is everything.”

Grace gasped at Elara’s terse response. Elara could not let someone, anyone, criticize her family. Family was everything. Her family’s legacy was everything. Her father had taken his small inherited boarding house and built an empire. Elara was proud of his accomplishments and all that he had done to get there. The good, the bad, the ugly—it was all worth it. Whether she liked it or not, part of upholding that family legacy was the image.

Grace lifted her eyebrows and turned back to her tea. The two sat in silence until the

manager returned, this time with an entire entourage.

Nearly all the sales associates in the shop carried armfuls of clothes. As the associates displayed the choices on the racks around the room, Patty clapped her hands before crooning her pleasure to Elara.

“My, this was certainly a fun one today. We’ve picked the best of the best. Each item should be up to your impeccable standards.”

At this, she gestured to the selection. “Now, we only need to check the fit of each item.”

Grace let out a nervous giggle. “Well...tallyho?”

Elara snorted at Grace’s attempt at a joke before she could stop herself. She coughed and cleared her throat in a pathetic attempt to pretend that she did not laugh.

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With all eyes on her, Elara looked toward Patty. “Yes, please proceed. We do not want any ill-fitting items, especially since we won’t have time for alterations.”

Grace walked toward the only pink item in the room, an elegant shift dress, and reached to pick it up. Patty stepped in front of her, interrupting Grace before she could grab the dress.

“Please undress behind the privacy screen. One of the associates will help you.”

Grace hesitated, her hand still hovering over the dress as if weighing whether to ignore Patty’s instructions. With a sharp exhale, she finally turned on her heel toward the privacy screen, her gaze flicking to Elara as if to say I’m doing this for you.

After finishing at the boutique, Elara ushered Grace back into the car, bags piled in the trunk. The sleek black vehicle wound its way out of Sacramento, the city’s bustle fading behind them as they headed east toward Tahoe’s mountains. For the next two hours, the car was filled with the hum of the engine and the occasional rustle of shopping bags. Grace quietly scrolled through her phone, glancing every so often at Elara, who remained focused on her tablet, answering emails with a sharp tap of her manicured fingers.

Nestled against the pristine backdrop of Lake Tahoe, the resort never failed to impress, even after her countless visits. The driveway wound through meticulously manicured gardens, where in spring, vibrant bursts of wildflowers would mingle with carefully shaped shrubs, creating an enchanting welcome. But this was winter, Elara’s favorite time of year. The driveway wound through a winter wonderland, where thick layers of snow blanketed the ground and frosted the branches of towering pines. Each

flake glistened in the sunlight, creating a dazzling display that sparkled like diamonds.

As they glided past the glimmering fountains, now frozen in place, she marveled at how the sunlight caught the icy surfaces, casting shimmering reflections that danced across the ground. The main lodge loomed ahead, built from local stone and timber, harmoniously blending with the snow-covered mountains that surrounded it. Elara could almost feel the weight of her family's legacy resting on her shoulders, the responsibility both thrilling and daunting.

Pulling up to the valet, she caught a glimpse of guests bundled in elegant winter attire, sipping steaming mugs of cocoa and enjoying the crisp, cool air. She appreciated how the resort's layout encouraged interaction while still maintaining the privacy that high-profile clientele expected. The staff moved gracefully among them, their uniforms reflecting the standard of excellence that Elara insisted upon.

By the time the car pulled up to the valet, Grace was nervously fidgeting with the hem of her coat while Elara stayed composed, her cool expression unshaken.

Once out of the car, she motioned for Grace to follow her, and they walked toward the entrance together. The lobby doors opened, revealing the warm glow inside. Elara breathed in deeply, the familiar scent of cedar and mountain herbs enveloping her like a comforting embrace. The lobby was just as she remembered—richly decorated yet welcoming, a space designed to make even the most discerning guests feel at home.

The towering stone fireplace dominated the room, flames flickering behind an artfully crafted iron screen, casting a soft golden light that danced across the walls. Wide terraces stretched out toward the lake, framed by towering windows that showcased a breathtaking view of snow-draped trees and the serene surface of the water. Plush seating arrangements invited relaxation, their deep burgundy and forest green fabrics blending with the dark wood floors, creating a welcoming atmosphere.

As she walked through the lobby, she exchanged discreet nods with the staff, each familiar face a reminder of the commitment she had to this place. Grace, trailing a few steps behind her, was wide-eyed, taking in every detail as though it was a magical new world. Elara could sense her wonderment, the contrast between them palpable—the one who had built this world and the one only visiting it.

To the right, a hallway led to the suites on the top floor, each designed for unparalleled privacy and indulgence. The dining room, visible through a side arch, was draped in velvet curtains and illuminated by crystal chandeliers that sparkled like icicles, reflecting the wintry landscape outside. The tables were set with fine china and silver, ready to host the evening's distinguished guests.

Elara felt the familiar weight of responsibility settle over her shoulders. This wasn't just a place to admire; it was her family's empire, and every part of it reflected her choices and oversight. Even here, surrounded by grandeur, her mind was already moving to the next detail, the next challenge. She glanced over at Grace, who was still absorbing the surroundings, and a small smile tugged at the corners of her lips. For all the pressure, there was something satisfying about showing someone new the world she managed so deftly.

“Welcome back, Ms. Silver,” a staff member greeted her with a respectful smile as they approached the front desk. Elara nodded in return, the acknowledgment of her presence a comfortable reminder of her authority here.

The receptionist politely smiled. “Welcome to Silver Resorts at Lake Tahoe. It looks like you two are checking in. Last name on the reservation?”

She was clearly a new hire and a young one at that. The girl looked barely twenty-one. Elara smiled, pleased that the staff were following protocol, even when they didn't know she was around.

“Silver. Elara Silver. There will be several other Silvers arriving tomorrow.”

The receptionist’s eyes grew wide as she hurriedly typed Elara’s name into the computer, her fingers flying over the keyboard. “Oh, of course, Ms. Silver! I hope you enjoy your stay with us. Your suite is ready, and I’ve added a complimentary bottle of champagne for you and your guests.”

“Thank you. That’s very kind,” Elara replied, keeping her tone formal. The agent beamed, clearly thrilled to be helping a Silver.

After a moment, the girl handed Elara the key card, her hands trembling slightly. “Your suite is on the top floor, room 1201. Just take the elevator to your right.”

“Great, thank you,” Elara said. She turned to Grace. “Let’s go.”

Once inside the elevator, Elara kept her gaze forward. “From this moment on, it is crucial that we maintain the appearance of being a couple. Unless we are in the privacy of our suite, you must assume that eyes are on you.”

Grace nodded stiffly, her expression unreadable. “Understood.”

As the elevator doors opened on their floor, Elara stepped out first, heels clicking against the polished marble floor. She strode down the corridor with purpose, glancing back occasionally to ensure Grace was following.

When they reached their suite, Elara opened the door to reveal the elegant interior. A sitting room greeted them, adorned with plush furnishings and soft, ambient lighting, while large windows framed a breathtaking view of the snow-capped mountains beyond. Off to the side, a doorway led to the bedroom and bathroom.

Grace hesitated before crossing the threshold, glancing around with an expression

that suggested she was still assessing the situation. “This is...nice,” she said, her tone neutral and face revealing nothing.

Before Elara could respond, the sound of a discreet bell chimed as the staff elevator opened down the hall. A bellman appeared, wheeling a cart laden with their luggage.

“Welcome, ladies,” he said with a friendly smile, effortlessly maneuvering the cart toward them. “I hope your journey here was pleasant.”

Elara returned the smile, appreciating the bellman’s warmth. “It was, thank you.” After he unloaded the bags and placed them in the sitting room, she stepped forward and handed him a crisp hundred-dollar bill, the tip generous enough to elicit a look of surprise. “Thank you for taking care of our things.”

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“Wow, thank you, Ms. Silver!” His eyes lit up. “Enjoy your stay!”

Watching the bellman leave, Elara turned to Grace. “Let’s settle in. We’ll need to review the event schedule before the others arrive.”

Elara was met with silence as she looked up to see Grace standing far too still at the bedroom door. Elara stepped forward, her gaze shifting over Grace’s shoulder to see what was wrong. To her horror, Elara realized there was only one bed. Her stomach dropped and her palms began to sweat as she remembered making the reservation. She had requested a king-sized bed when she thought the escort would be accompanying her. That little detail slipped her mind when she was panicking and begging Grace to step in. Elara cleared her throat, startling Grace, who turned toward her with a shocked expression.

“There’s only one bed?”

Elara paused and took a deep breath. “I can see that. There must have been a mix-up with the reservation. An unfortunate mistake.”

Walking past Grace, Elara finally saw the rose petals on the duvet cover. Feeling heat rise up her neck, her face began to burn. “A very unfortunate mistake.”

Elara knew her discomfort was written across her face and in the way her posture slumped, as if she believed she could shrink out of existence.

Grace walked over and picked up a rose petal. Without looking up, she asked, “What do we do? Can we change it still?”

Elara palmed her face, wondering if she rubbed her eyes hard enough this would disappear. “We can’t. Remember what I said? Eyes everywhere. We wouldn’t be a very convincing couple if we demanded separate beds, now would we? No. I know this is...”

“Weird. This is weird.”

Sighing, Elara agreed. “It’s not normal. But we will have to make do. I cannot risk having this fall apart, especially not from the jump.”

4

There was no way this was happening. This day had started out normal, or at least normal for Grace. Now? She was standing in the most beautiful resort she had ever seen, facing the fact that she had to pretend to be in a relationship with Elara—and now had to share a bed with her too. After agreeing to not request a change, Grace needed some much-needed space.

She slowly stepped back toward the door, attempting to make her escape as she told Elara, “I think I’ll go check out that hot chocolate downstairs.”

Before Elara could respond, Grace grabbed her purse and slipped out of the room. She nearly ran down the hall to the elevator, her ballet flats slapping loudly on the smooth floor. Her finger jammed the elevator button several times, as if pressing it more would somehow make the doors open faster. When the bright ding finally announced the elevator’s arrival, Grace peeked down the hall before she stepped in. Part of her was expecting to see Elara, and she wasn’t sure if she was relieved or disappointed to find it empty.

Grace stepped in and quickly pressed the button for the lobby. As the doors closed, Grace peeked at her reflection in the mirrored walls. Her cheeks were still red from

embarrassment. She felt childish for being so flustered at the idea of sharing a bed with Elara. It shouldn't be such a big deal, and Elara certainly didn't seem worried about the prospect of sharing a bed with Grace. But just thinking about laying in bed next to her for a week had the rest of her face turning bright red.

Shaking off the rising panic, Grace rushed across the grand lobby toward the hot chocolate setup. As soon as the thick, steaming liquid warmed her hands, Grace slumped down into one of the burgundy chairs by the window. It was unbelievably soft and comfortable— definitely nicer than any of the furniture she had at home. Grace had seen pictures of the Silver Resorts, but being here in person was unlike anything she had expected. The view of the snow-blanketed grounds and glistening lake took her breath away. The lobby felt as if it was designed to complement the backdrop, while somehow still dripping in elegance. Every single detail was thought of with love and care, no expense spared. She had expected a cold, modern interior, one that would match Elara's sense of personal style and the corporate office, but instead, the resort exuded comfort. The room wasn't all white and neutral. There was so much color, and yet it never felt busy.

Grace rifled through her bag and pulled out her cell to call her mom, but she noticed that it was already 8 p.m. here, which meant her parents were already asleep on the East Coast. She thought about calling her best friend Carly, but then thought better of it. Carly was the queen of queer Twitter. Grace couldn't risk leaking her fake relationship with Elara. There was only one other person she could trust with this: Aunt Lucy. Grace stood up and headed out to explore the resort grounds. As she stepped outside, goosebumps bloomed on every inch of her exposed skin. She hadn't thought to grab her coat in her rush out of the room. Thankfully, next to the door, a basket had been prepared with thick wool blankets for guests to cuddle up in.

Grace shivered as she wrapped herself in the cozy blanket and decided to call Aunt Lucy. After the third ring, she answered.

“Grace? Two calls in one day? To what do I owe the pleasure? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m sorry to call so late.”

Aunt Lucy paused before she quietly responded, “You sure about that?”

Grace sighed. She shouldn’t be surprised. Aunt Lucy always knew when something was up. She had a knack for picking up on even the slightest change in tone.

“Honestly? I’m just really confused.”

“Tell me. I’m always here to listen to you, sweetie.”

Relieved, Grace let the words tumble out. “God, this whole thing is crazy. I mean, I knew it was going to be strange pretending to be my boss’s girlfriend. And Elara has always been aloof at the best of times and cold most days. But...I don’t know. I guess I expected her to at least try to talk to me more. I mean the two-hour drive here was awkward. She barely spoke a word to me.”

Aunt Lucy laughed. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t laugh. It’s just a funny image. Two hours is a long time to sit in silence.”

“Right? And it gets worse.”

Giggling, Aunt Lucy inquired, “How so?”

“Well, we arrived at the most ridiculously fancy resort I’ve ever been to and headed up to the suite, which was stunning and huge. As expected. But surprise surprise, there is only one bed!”

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Aunt Lucy snorted, clearly failing at holding back the laughter.

“It’s not funny, Aunt Lucy! The king bed was freaking decorated with rose petals! I mean, it’s ridiculous. And when I asked Elara if we could request a different room, she refused. She says it would be weird for a couple to request a room change for one with two beds. And I mean, she’s not wrong, but this is so awkward.”

Grace sighed, the adrenaline and anxiety finally starting to subside after voicing her thoughts.

With a barely veiled giggle, Aunt Lucy replied, “This trip just gets more and more amusing. I feel like I should get a bag of popcorn for all these updates.”

“Aunt Lucy, it’s not funny!”

At this, Aunt Lucy lost control and busted out in a hearty laugh. Unable to resist the warmth of her laugh, Grace found herself laughing too.

“Okay, fine. It’s a little funny. But what am I supposed to do?”

Taking a deep breath to calm down, Aunt Lucy paused. “I’m not sure you do anything, Grace. It’s not as if you haven’t shared a bed with your friends throughout your life. This is no different from that, right?”

Grace interrupted, “It’s very different, and you know it. She’s not my friend; she’s my boss and she barely talks to me.”

Lucy rebutted, “No, she isn’t your friend. But the two of you have to at least pretend to like each other for a week. Maybe sharing a bed will help break that icy exterior. I mean, you can’t not talk to someone after sharing a bed with them. This could be a good thing. Try not to overthink it, dear. You are impossible not to love. I’m sure she will start to warm up to you soon enough.”

Grace felt the impact of Aunt Lucy’s advice and began to acknowledge she was right. Maybe this was a good thing after all.

“You’re right. Thank you. I think I just needed to talk it out. I’m sorry for calling this late and dropping all of that on you.”

“It’s never too late to call me, Grace. You’ve got this. Now, go enjoy your paid vacation. I’m here anytime you need to talk again.”

Grace entered the suite cautiously, the soft click of the door closing behind her louder than she intended. Elara was already settled on the bed, propped up against a mountain of perfectly arranged pillows, wearing fine silk pajamas that shimmered in the dim light. Her iPad rested on her lap, and the soft tapping of her fingers on the screen suggested she was in the middle of something important. Grace hesitated by the door, her breath catching. Gathering her wits, she reminded herself that this was for the job. She was going to prove she belonged here.

“Do you need help arranging anything for tomorrow?” Grace asked, trying to sound professional, though her voice wavered slightly.

Without looking up, Elara murmured, “I just need you to play your part.”

The words stung, even though Grace told herself not to take them personally. She gave a terse nod, though Elara never glanced her way. Grace rummaged through her suitcase, finding her pajamas—a bright pink pair of pants and a cropped, fuzzy

sweater. She stared at them for a second, realizing they were comically inappropriate for this kind of setting.

There was no way she was changing in front of Elara.

Clutching the clothes, Grace ducked into the bathroom, closing the door behind her with a sigh of relief. As she pulled on the soft pajamas, she tried to convince herself they weren't that bad. Who cared if they screamed "slumber party" when she was trying to survive a week at a luxury resort masquerading as someone's girlfriend? She gave herself one last look in the mirror, shrugged, and headed back out into the bedroom.

Elara didn't react at first. But as Grace shuffled toward the bed, Elara's gaze flickered up from her iPad. There was no comment, no raised brow—just the slightest pause that made Grace feel underdressed in the most spectacular way.

Gathering what little courage she had left, Grace sat down on the edge of the king-size bed, her back rigid. Elara reached over, calmly switched off the lamp on her side, and lay down with her back to Grace without a word.

For a moment, Grace stared at Elara's silhouette. She seemed so distant, her back a wall that Grace couldn't breach, even if she tried—not that she really wanted to. Eventually, Grace sighed, slid under the covers, and curled up on the farthest edge of the mattress.

Despite the size of the bed, she still felt too close, like her presence alone might disturb Elara. Determined to keep her distance, Grace pressed herself toward the edge, her toes hanging off the side. She squeezed her arms around her chest, as if holding herself small enough would make this whole situation less surreal.

She closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

Hours later, she awoke with a jolt, falling headfirst off the bed. Her limbs tangled in the sheets as she landed with a thud and knocked over the bedside lamp.

“Shit!” Grace hissed, scrambling to free herself from the suffocating mess of fabric.

Elara shot upright, her hair tousled, blinking in the darkness. “Grace?”

“I’m sorry!” Grace gasped, finally untangling her foot from the blanket. The shattered remains of the lamp glimmered ominously on the floor.

Elara sighed, rubbing a hand over her face. “It’s fine. Just...don’t worry about it.”

Grace froze, mortified. “Are you sure? I’ll pay for the lamp?—”

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“Grace.” Elara’s tone was soft but firm. “It’s fine. Get back in bed.”

Cheeks burning, Grace climbed back onto the mattress, careful not to disturb Elara’s side. This time, she stayed away from the edge, though she still kept a safe distance, doing her best not to touch her.

As she lay there, she folded her arms around herself again, breathing slowly to calm her racing thoughts. She stared up at the ceiling, listening to Elara’s soft breathing beside her.

The bed felt too big, too small, too intimate, and too cold all at once. And though she tried to shrink into herself, she couldn’t help but be hyperaware of every tiny movement on the other side of the bed.

After a while, Elara shifted but didn’t say anything. Grace’s heart thudded in the silence, the distance between them somehow heavier than words.

5

Elara woke up slowly to the soft warmth of the sunrise peeking through the open curtains. She had never been one to sleep in, having risen with the sun for most of her life. She slowly blinked into consciousness, feeling warm and cozy. In fact, she wastoowarm and cozy. That’s when the events of last night came rushing back.Grace.

That warm, cozy feeling? That was Grace’s body heat seeping through the blankets and the pressure of her hand draped across Elara’s arm. She could hear Grace’s soft breathing, slow and steady as if in the deepest of sleep. Elara knew she should try to

get out of bed before Grace woke up, but she hesitated for just a moment. She couldn't explain it, but she just did not want to disturb Grace's sleep.

Sighing, Elara decided to first slowly roll onto her back, providing her first glance at Grace asleep. Her usually wild light brown hair was now twisted around Grace's face, with pieces sticking in her gaping mouth, drool dripping onto the pillow. At some point in the night, Grace turned onto her stomach and splayed her limbs out wide, explaining how Elara was now beneath her left hand.

That ridiculous, fuzzy sweater had ridden up high, displaying nearly all of Grace's spine. Everything about Grace screamed chaos, and yet she couldn't help the tiny laugh that escaped her lips at Grace's display. She should find the drooling mess appalling, but something about it was endearing. Realizing she was staring, Elara quickly tried to sneak out of bed before Grace could wake up.

Unfortunately, at Elara's sudden movement, Grace's eyes flew open. Elara felt frozen beneath Grace's confused stare, locked beneath her hazel gaze. Grace snatched her hand back and scrambled to sit up.

"I'm so sorry, Elara. I didn't mean to... I wasn't aware... I..."

Seeing Grace stammer through an attempted apology broke something in Elara. She suddenly didn't like the idea of Grace being so uncomfortable around her.

"Grace, stop. It's fine. People move in their sleep."

As Grace nodded, Elara caught sight of the mess behind her—the lamp. The poor thing was shattered beyond repair.

Noticing Elara's gaze shift, Grace turned to the broken lamp. Remembering the destruction from last night, Grace's face fell. Groaning she pulled her knees to her

chest, drawing her head down to become as small as possible. That little something that broke in Elara began to ache.

Before Grace could continue to agonize, Elara stood. “It’s just a lamp. I own the entire resort. One lamp is not the end of the world.”

Grace looked up with watery eyes, clearly on the verge of tears. “Really?”

Attempting to break the tension, Elara scoffed and replied, “Yes, really. I probably own thousands of identical lamps. I will call housekeeping right now to have them come sweep up this mess. Just...for the love of god, do not step on the glass. That’s the last thing we need today.”

The tears no longer welled up in Grace’s eyes as she crawled across the bed to stand on Elara’s side.

Taking a deep breath, Grace replied, “Right. It’s time to get this party started. What’s the plan?”

Relieved to no longer be on the edge of some disaster, Elara detailed what came next.

“Guests will begin to arrive by 10 a.m. We will be greeting everyone at the welcome luncheon, which is at 11:30. It’s still early, so you have plenty of time to get ready.

“Remember our discussion yesterday. Optics, image—these are everything to my family. If you want to leave a good first impression with any of the Silvers, you will need to look the part.

“I advise that for today you wear one of the neutral suits to the luncheon. Your hair should be neat and makeup minimal.”

As Elara laid out instructions for the day, the light in Grace's eyes dimmed. Although she did not argue with Elara, Grace's body language screamed discomfort and irritation. Elara almost began to feel bad for the intense instructions. Almost. Mostly, she was panicking about whether or not they would be able to pull this off. Stifling her guilt, Elara straightened and continued, "My family members are not the only guests expected this week. My father has invited some key investors and executives along as a chance to foster possible new deals. If you hear any business discussed, you cannot repeat that information."

"When speaking with any of these guests, I advise you to avoid the topics of politics or the economy. Enough of these guests are...passionate about debating the state of the economy and political climate. Your personal views on these matters need to appear vague and neutral if they do insist on bringing it up."

"My family also expects a certain level of respect to be shown toward them, especially my parents."

At the mention of her parents, Grace perked up.

"Your parents, what are their names? What are they like? Are you close with them?"

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Elara walked over to the coffee pot and poured herself a cup. With her hands busy and back to Grace, Elara tried to explain their dynamic.

“My father, Victor, is a brilliant man who is proud of his success and wants the same for his family. While my father was building an empire, my mother, Margaret, was ruling over hers—the family and the house. Mom is... She’s my mother. While I love my parents, I wouldn’t exactly describe our relationship as close.”

The mattress springs squeaked softly as Grace sat and sighed. “I’m sorry.”

Confused, Elara turned to Grace. “For what?”

“That you aren’t close with your parents.”

Elara bristled at Grace’s sympathy, uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. “It’s perfectly normal to not be close. They are important people with busy lives. I also have a busy life. There isn’t much time for calls home when you have a business to run.”

Grace slowly lifted a brow at Elara’s attempt at dismissing the conversation. The pause in the conversation was tense, and Grace crossed her arms.

Breaking the silence, Grace sighed. “What about your siblings? Anything I should know?”

Relieved that she wasn’t going to be pressed further on the dynamics, Elara dove into describing her siblings. “I have two younger siblings, James and Catherine, but she

goes by Cate. They will be here with their significant others. James is much like my father, though far less...intense. Cate... Well, you and Cate would probably get along. She's an artist. But don't underestimate her. They need to be just as convinced we are dating as my parents."

Elara nervously sipped her coffee, going through every way this week could go wrong in her mind. As Grace stood and crossed the room, Elara's eyes followed her, waiting for the next shoe to drop.

Grace opened the bathroom door, glanced over her shoulder, and said, "I guess I have a lot of work to do. Gotta look neat and clean and perfect for the oh-so-important Silvers."

Elara winced as Grace closed the door behind her with a soft click.

The clean lines of Elara's cream suit were emphasized by her sharp angles and long frame. Her fingers pressed down the lapel as she adjusted her coat for the third time. Elara couldn't get her hands to still as she waited for Grace in the suite's foyer. Glancing back into the mirror, she inspected her hair, making sure that not a strand was out of place.

Elara searched her own eyes, her dilated pupils making the nervousness blatant. Family get-togethers were not usually this anxiety inducing, and Elara desperately wished that this week was the same as all their past events. If she hadn't lied about being in a relationship, hadn't been forced into coming up with a partner just to please her parents, this week would be almost enjoyable. While nearly all of the Silver family functions ended with a few bruised egos, at least it was interesting.

Elara was a hair's breadth away from spiraling into an anxiety attack, and she knew it. Shaking her hands, Elara took a deep breath. In, out. In, out. She was on her fourth set of deep breaths when Grace opened the door. Elara sighed in relief, but stopped as

soon as she took in all that was Grace. The muted gold midi skirt and soft, silk cream blouse hugged all of Grace's curves, revealing a hint of her shape. Her usually messy hair was pulled back into a sleek bun, with only a few unruly pieces escaping, framing her face. Elara coughed as she stood a little straighter in her heels.

Grace waved her hand, motioning to her outfit. "How do I look? Do I pass the white-glove standard of the Silver family?"

Although she sounded irritated, Elara noticed the self-conscious way Grace shifted her weight and crossed her arms, as if shielding herself.

"You look..." Elara nearly said beautiful, but caught herself. "You look nice."

Before she could think too deeply about the thrumming behind her ribs, Elara turned on her foot and headed out of the suite.

Elara stared at the curtains, closed for privacy, and turned to Grace. "Ready?"

Grace smiled nervously and nodded. "Ready."

Elara held out her hand, smiling reassuringly in return. Grace blinked up at her as realization dawned on her.

Grace mumbled, "Oh, right. Holding hands." She stumbled forward and grasped Elara's hand. "Let's go meet your parents."

Elara reached over and held open the curtain for Grace to pass through. The two walked into the room, several curious eyes staring at them from across the table. Her parents stood near the head of the table, their intense gazes appraising Grace as they approached.

Elara strode over to her parents and greeted them each with a light peck on the cheek. “Mom, Dad, I’m so happy to see you arrived without a fuss.”

She took a step back and motioned to Grace. “I would like you to meet my partner, Grace.”

To everyone’s surprise, Grace surged forward and hugged Margaret. “It’s so lovely to meet you.” She then turned to Victor, drawing him into a hug and continued, “I’ve heard so much about both of you.”

Elara’s jaw dropped as she watched her parents awkwardly hug Grace back. Victor made eye contact with Elara, raising a brow in question. On the other side of the table, Cate snorted and James coughed to cover their laughs, but their eyes stayed wide with shock.

As Grace stepped back, Victor spoke to her but looked at Elara as he said, “A hug? That’s...unexpected.”

Margaret cut in, “My, how affectionate! We aren’t quite used to that, but it’s...charming. In its own way.”

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Elara closed her eyes for a moment, internally cringing at her parents' barely veiled displeasure. A warm hand landed on Elara's shoulder, prompting her to turn and look into Grandma Elle's curious eyes. Eleanor leaned forward and placed a small kiss on Elara's cheek.

Grandmother Eleanor's face lit up, clearly entertained as she said loudly, "My, my. Elara finally brought someone around to meet us. You must be very special."

Grace blushed as she took in everyone's odd reaction to her greeting.

Eleanor closed both her hands around Grace's, clasping hers gently. "You must be Grace. Such a warm greeting! I like you already. I'm Eleanor, but my grandkids call me Grandma Elle. You may call me that as well."

Relief washed over Grace's face as she smiled warmly. "Thank you, Grandma Elle. I'm so pleased to meet the matriarch of such a wonderful family."

Elara's palms were slick as she nervously reached out to snag Grace's elbow. Luckily, the catering staff entered, breaking the tension as the savory aromas drew everyone's attention away from Elara and Grace.

Cate clapped her hands. "Lunch! Looks delicious."

The catering staff set cups of warm squash soup at each place setting and filled the center of the table with baskets of warm bread and fresh-churned butter. The bright pop of a cork being released filled the room as champagne flutes softly clinked with each serving poured.

Elara steered the conversation to the events of the day, hoping to keep her family too busy and well fed to inquire too deeply about her “relationship.” Everyone grew quiet as they dove into the main course of sous vide chicken and asparagus with a truffle beurre blanc. Elara had chosen her mother’s favorites for this lunch, hoping to set the tone for the week. She also had chosen to start their week off with a couple’s massage for everyone, further attempting to put everyone in a good mood and hopefully steer the week in a calm and productive direction. It also served to keep everyone separate, minimizing the chance for too many questions to be asked.

As the conversation eased to a close, Elara smiled with confidence. Maybe this ruse wouldn’t be so difficult to keep up with after all.

After lunch, Elara and Grace headed to the spa for their scheduled couple’s massage. The atmosphere was designed to relax—lowlights, soothing music, and lavender oil in the air—but Elara struggled to unwind. Even as the masseuse kneaded the tension from her back and shoulders, she mentally reviewed the evening’s agenda, determined to stay one step ahead. When she glanced over at Grace, sprawled face down on the massage table, she heard soft snores. Elara smirked despite herself, a flicker of amusement breaking through her usual reserved veneer. At least one of them was enjoying this.

Back in the suite, they began getting ready for the wine tasting and formal dinner. Elara dressed in a sleek, tailored black suit, forgoing a tie but leaving the top buttons of her white shirt undone, providing a peek at the platinum bar of her necklace laying flat beneath her collarbone. The outfit felt like armor—clean, precise, and unmistakably her. She checked her reflection, smoothing a hand over her silver-streaked hair, slicked back away from her eyes.

When Grace stepped out in an emerald green dress that clung to all the right places, Elara froze for half a second. She was caught off guard by how well Grace cleaned up—soft curls framing her face, the dress accentuating her curves. Elara’s gaze

lingered a moment too long on the dip of Grace's neckline, and she had to remind herself to blink.

"Do I look okay?" Grace asked, tugging at the hem nervously.

Elara cleared her throat, her voice steady, even as something stirred low in her stomach. "You look...fine." She turned away, hiding the fact that her cool expression betrayed just the faintest flicker of heat in her eyes.

They left the suite together, Elara's posture stiff and collected, as if bracing against the unknown. Yet the memory of Grace's silhouette lingered, unwelcome and distracting, as they stepped into the evening together.

The wall separating the formal dining room from the larger event space had been removed, making room for all of the evening's guests. The open space glittered with light bouncing from the crystal chandelier and candles on the tables. Outside the floor-to-ceiling window, snow slowly fell, covering every surface in a new dusting of white. The room hummed with the sounds of quiet conversations.

Elara took note of the guests who had arrived already. While this was her parents' celebration of their fiftieth wedding anniversary, her father never passed up a chance to turn an event into a networking opportunity. The room was filled with real estate investors, private wealth clients, fund managers, and even a few of the local tourism board officials. James and his wife Julia stood with the president of the Lake Tahoe Tourism Board, clearly deep in conversation. As James caught sight of Elara and Grace's entrance, he excused himself and headed over to greet them.

James nodded in Elara's direction and then turned his gaze upon Grace. "You've got your hands full with Elara, don't you? Did she even go to your couple's massage?" With a chuckle, he grasped Elara's shoulder. "This one needs to loosen up a bit more."

Elara bristled, prepared to make a jab back at James, but paused when Grace's face broke into a genuine smile as she laughed at his good-natured teasing.

"She certainly did go to the massage with me. Although she could've slipped out without me noticing. I'm pretty sure I fell asleep five minutes in."

James's face broke into a beaming smile, laughing as he turned his gaze back to Elara. "Come join Julia and I for the wine tasting. I know my wife is excited to meet you, Grace."

Before James could corral Grace into the family corner, Elara grabbed her hand, stopping her from following.

"We'll join you in a bit. There are a few people I must say hello to first."

James took note of the brisk tone in Elara's voice and the way she grasped Grace's hand. His smile began to slip before a knowing look passed over his face.

"You can't avoid the family all night, Elara." James turned back to Grace, continuing, "Grace, I'm sure Elara's told you about the family dinner tradition. It's always...quite the spectacle. I look forward to seeing more of you two tonight."

Before James could rile her up any further, Elara turned on her heel, dragging Grace along toward the nearest business associate. Every few minutes, Elara would feel the pressure of her family's scrutiny, noticing their curious eyes watch her every move. Grace's every move.

The dinner was served on elegant tables, each course paired with a wine that the sommelier described the tasting notes and how it paired with their meal. After the third course, many of the guests were tipsy, the conversation ebbing and flowing with ease. Not usually one to drink, Elara drained her glass, grateful for the warmth that

eased the tension of the evening. She was feeling rather confident, having tactfully avoided questions about her relationship and kept her family entertained and distracted. After dessert was served, Elara began to make excuses for her and Grace to head to bed.

As she held her hand out to Grace in an attempt to help her up, Grandma Elle piped up. “I see the happy new couple is eager to snuggle and warm up on this snowy evening.”

Although her words teased a blush out of Grace, Elara could see the mischievous glint in her eyes and her cunning grin. Elara stiffened, fearing Grandma Elle was suspicious, but not knowing how to convince her. Unable to find words that would suffice, Elara simply began to usher Grace out of the room.

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The sound of a chair scraping and the quick clacking of heels signaled Cate's quick attempt to follow Elara out of the room. Before she could make it to the hallway, Cate reached out and grabbed Elara's elbow. But instead of stopping, she pulled them farther out of the dining area.

Cate whispered in Elara's ear, "Don't worry about Granny. You need to relax. She's just teasing. We all just want to make sure you're happy." Turning to Grace, Cate raised her voice enough to be heard only by the two. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Grace. Don't let the family scare you too much."

With that, Cate retreated back to the dining room. Elara and Grace stood still as they watched her disappear behind the luxurious curtains. The two stood frozen for a moment before Grace cleared her throat. "Well, that was interesting."

Elara closed off her panic, returning to her cool composure, as she quietly walked away. Grace's footsteps unevenly clipped as she rushed to catch up. Elara turned to watch Grace stumble forward. Realization dawned on her—Grace was drunk.

Raising her eyebrow, Elara pressed the elevator button. "Not much of a wine drinker?"

Grace swayed as she looked up into Elara's eyes and giggled. "That obvious, huh? Do you think anyone else noticed?"

Elara shot out her hand to steady Grace and guided her into the elevator. As the elevator doors closed, she coolly responded, "Hopefully not. Everyone in there was tipsy anyway."

Grace leaned back against the mirrored elevator wall and nodded.

Elara watched as Grace stumbled through the suite toward her suitcase and began rifling through for pajamas. After ensuring Grace wouldn't fall, Elara escaped to the bathroom to get ready for bed.

In another pair of her favorite silk pajamas, Elara stared at her reflection, assessing her freshly scrubbed face. A sharp series of knocks on the door interrupted her introspection. Elara opened the door to see Grace leaning in the doorway, wearing nothing but a band t-shirt that barely covered her ass. Saying nothing, Elara moved aside to let Grace pass and closed the door behind her.

Elara shook her head as if she could shake the racing thoughts out of her mind. Unable to bear the thought of seeing Grace's bare legs again, Elara turned all but one lamp off and then strode over to the foyer and opened the bar cabinet in search of a drink. Thankfully, the bar was stocked with her favorite whiskey. In the dark, Elara poured herself two knuckles' worth into the crystal glass and dropped a large square ice cube in with it. Irritation filled her veins with a fiery sensation, warming the back of her neck. At the sound of Grace scrambling into bed, Elara slumped into a chair. She silently sipped on her whiskey for an hour in the dark, grasping at her cool, calm composure, looking for it at the bottom of her glass.

Eventually, Elara turned off the sole lamp and felt her way toward the bed. Finding her side of the bed without too much of a struggle, Elara slipped under the covers as quietly as she could, not wanting to wake Grace. Unable to get comfortable, Elara tossed and turned in her sleep. In one of her more clumsy attempts at tossing, Elara turned toward Grace, her arm flopping over.

She expected her hand to land on the space between them, but to her surprise, Grace had turned toward her and, in her sleep, inched closer to Elara. Elara found her hand on Grace's hip, which woke Grace in turn. The two said nothing in the dark silence,

but Elara felt like she was burning from the inside out. She was inches away from the hem of the old t-shirt. It would be so easy to run her hands down Grace's thighs. So easy to pull that hem up above her belly button.

Elara stared at the way her hand seemed to mold to Grace's curves. In the dark, she could hear Grace's sharp inhale. Realizing what she was doing, Elara snatched her hand back with a mumbled apology. She quickly turned away before Grace could say anything.

Elara stared out the window as she wished for sleep to take her away from this embarrassing moment. All she could think was What am I doing? She scolded herself for getting caught up in the moment. This was all just an act. Grace was here because she was being paid to be there. She couldn't risk everything falling apart.

Sleep slowly overtook Elara as she silently chanted it's not real, as if she were counting sheep.

6

Grace woke up to the warm feeling of the sun on her face. As she opened her eyes, she realized that she was alone in the king-sized bed. Stretching with a big yawn, Grace sat up and surveyed the room. Her suitcase sat open on the chair, the contents strewn around, clear evidence of her drunken night. Grace groaned and crawled out of bed. Out of curiosity, she opened the hall closet to search for a robe. Inside, two plush white robes hung on hangers.

"Bingo."

Grace grabbed one, feeling the soft material rub against her arms as she slipped into it. Behind her, the door beeped, signaling someone was entering. Grace hurriedly tied the robe closed as the door opened.

Elara strode through the doorway, holding a brown bag and a paper coffee cup. Seeing Grace standing in the hall, Elara stopped in her tracks.

“Oh good, you’re awake.” Elara held out the coffee cup and the bag. “Here.”

Grace tentatively reached for the items. “What’s this?”

“I noticed you didn’t drink the brewed coffee yesterday. It’s a cappuccino.”

Smiling appreciatively, Grace sipped the cappuccino and let out a soft mmmm. It was a caramel cappuccino. Her favorite.

Confused, she looked up at Elara. “How’d you know my order?”

“You charged yesterday’s cappuccino to the room. I just asked for whatever you ordered yesterday.”

Grace opened the bag and spotted a chocolate chip muffin and a small paper box containing a single dose of Tylenol.

“I figured you would need carbs and meds after that much wine last night,” Elara explained.

Grace set her cappuccino down as she sat on the bed. Smiling up at Elara, she said, “That was very thoughtful. Thank you.”

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“Well, you wouldn’t be the first victim to the Silver family hangover. Not many escape that.”

Grace blushed, remembering how she stumbled around the room and chuckled. She certainly hadn’t expected to be wine drunk in front of so many people. As she munched on the muffin, her eyes finally landed on the clock.

Jolting up, she cried, “It’s noon! Oh my god I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to sleep so late. Did I miss anything?”

Elara coolly watched Grace, her calm demeanor exuding ease. “You haven’t missed anything. Today is meant to be for everyone to explore the resort. The events will be later this afternoon. I’ve reserved us a spot for the cooking demonstration and class later this afternoon. You have plenty of time to get ready.”

Grace sighed in relief as she sat back down. “Oh. Good.”

Elara simply watched Grace as she continued to down her cappuccino, saying nothing. Between sips, Grace would flick her eyes up at Elara and admire the way she looked in her gray slacks and silver sweater. Something about her was softer, although it certainly didn’t soften the hard planes of her tall frame.

Grace finished off her breakfast in silence, the only sound being Elara’s fingers softly tapping on her iPad. As soon as she stood, she realized that nearly all of her legs were on display, and Grace hurriedly closed the robe, announcing that she was going to get ready. As soon as she closed the door, putting up a physical barrier between the two, Grace covered her face as she turned bright red.

When Elara's eyes had trailed up her legs, the memory of last night came flooding back. Grace felt so embarrassed at how much she had wanted Elara to grip her hip.

Turning the shower on, Grace chanted, "It's not real. It's not real. It's not real."

The smell of garlic and aromatics wafted through the room as the chef explained the first steps of making a pan-roasted duck breast. Grace felt her mouth watering at all the delicious smells around her. Next to her, Elara was discussing some upcoming business deal with the executives at their table, but the sound of their conversation was nearly drowned out by the clatter of pans echoing throughout the fully chrome kitchen. There were only a handful of people who chose to attend this cooking class, hosted by the executive chef of the resort. Elara had carefully chosen seats next to some of her business associates, leaving no room for her brother or his wife to sit near them.

Grace considered trying to pretend to be part of whatever important conversation was happening beside her but just couldn't pull her attention away from the chef giving instructions. She had always loved watching her mother cook, although her childhood kitchen was nowhere near as pristinely scrubbed as this professional space.

Pulling her out of her reverie, James leaned over and surprised Grace by commenting, "She's always like that. All business, no fun, eh? Does she ever have time for you, Grace?"

Grace blushed, looking down at the meal she was preparing to avoid eye contact. "Elara is driven. It's part of what makes her special."

James's smile grew sharp, a knowing look in his eyes. "Driven at work, but never at home. I'm surprised she even brought you here."

Grace blinked at the thinly veiled implication and moved her gaze over to James's

wife, Julia. “I’m sure you know how it goes, being married to a Silver and all.”

Julia thankfully caught on to Grace’s attempt to change the subject and smiled kindly. “I certainly do. Sometimes I have to drag him out of the office just to go to dinner.”

At this, Julia playfully pinched her husband as she continued, “But as passionate as he is about work, he is doubly so in the bedroom.”

James coughed as he looked at his wife in surprise. Grace couldn’t hold back the nervous laugh, sounding slightly hysterical. Elara turned at the sound and coolly stared down her brother.

“James, I hope you are being nice. I know Mother would be disappointed to find out you are not being a gracious host.”

Not wanting to cause a rift in the family, Grace grabbed Elara’s elbow with a reassuring squeeze and explained, “Julia and I were just discussing the Silver siblings’ capacity for passion.”

Elara’s eyes widened, prompting Grace to let loose another nervous giggle.

Elara lowered her voice, saying, “I hope you aren’t revealing too much of our bedroom secrets now.”

Seeing Elara’s discomfort, James dug his claws in. “She hasn’t revealed anything, Elara. Although I’m not sure there is much to reveal, now is there?”

Elara narrowed her eyes at her brother, retorting, “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

James turned to Grace. “Where did you meet my lovely sister again? She almost

never leaves the office these days.”

Feeling trapped, Grace looked back and forth between Elara and James before replying, “Through mutual friends.”

Before the inquiry could continue, waiters came around serving the pan-roasted duck with plates full of samples of the local produce the staff used in the kitchen. Grace felt her stomach flip with anxiety as she ate in silence.

Grace stood in front of the mirror, fussing over her curls that refused to stay in place. She had chosen to wear it down tonight, trying to tame her usually messy mane into an elegant shape. As she tucked one side behind her ear, the unruly curls began to pop out in a halo. Grace sighed as she shoved in yet more pins, finally forcing her hair to behave.

Grace felt as if she were teetering on the edge of a cliff, with no idea how to get things back in balance. Nothing seemed to go as she had expected today. Elara had seemed kind—thoughtful, even, with the cappuccino and breakfast—but then she had been distant, barely looking at her most of the day. Then there was Elara’s brother, James. What was with that guy? Up until that point, Grace thought that the family was curious, not outright suspicious. James had basically called them on their bullshit, and Grace was left floundering on how to fix this situation.

She tried to remind herself that this wasn’t her problem. Elara was the one who needed to convince her family. Though no matter how hard she tried, the guilt ate at her. She had made a promise, and Grace did not take that lightly. The problem now was how would she fix this?

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Deciding that her hair wasn't going to get any better, Grace smoothed her hands over the thigh slit in her muted gold dress, making sure that everything was in place. Looking at herself in the mirror, Grace felt pleased with how she looked. The off-the-shoulder neckline showcased her collarbones and the barest hint of the swell of her breasts, but the long sleeves and floor-length hem kept the details demure. Everything was picture-perfect, just like the Silver family.

As she opened the door to the bathroom, her breath caught in her throat at the sight of Elara in cream slacks and a gold sweater that perfectly matched Grace's dress. Elara's sharp lines looked sculpted by an artist. At the sound of Grace entering, Elara turned around and stopped short. Grace could feel Elara's cool gaze travel up her body, assessing her inch by inch. She should feel cold and insecure, but her skin burned every place that Elara's gaze lingered. The two stood in silence for a moment, intense gazes not quite meeting the eyes.

Eventually, Elara simply held out her hand. "Ready?"

Plate after plate of the most divine seafood dishes passed in front of Grace. Her eyes couldn't help but grow wide with each course served. Ceviche, seared scallops, smoked salmon blini, paella, and more. Each course was served with a white wine pairing, keeping the conversation flowing with a growing volume. Grace ate in silence, watching closely as the Silver family conversed as if they were holding court. Not wanting to be the victim of too much alcohol once again, Grace continued to sneakily pour her wine into the plant beside the table. It felt like a crime to waste such delicious—and probably ridiculously expensive—wine, but if she was going to keep up with the Silver family, she needed to be clear-headed.

As the assortment of dessert tarts were served, everyone's attention suddenly turned to her. Swirling his wine slowly as he looked between Elara and Grace with a sharp gaze, Victor asked, "So, Grace, how exactly did the two of you meet again? Through mutual friends, was it?"

The pit of her stomach dropped. Grace knew this was somehow a trap, but she had no choice but to answer him.

"Yes. Friends of ours thought we would hit it off." Grace turned to Elara, silently begging for help. "And they were right."

Smiling tightly, Elara's fingers brushed the stem of her wine glass as if to anchor herself. Yet she said nothing, her lips frozen in place.

Margaret tilted her head, offering a polite but clearly skeptical smile. "Which friends, dear? I don't think I've heard of any new names."

Grace again looked to Elara, hoping for her to cut in, but Elara's eyes were wide, her smile still frozen in place.

Looking back to Elara's mother, she replied, "Oh, um...Diane and, uh, Steven? You probably wouldn't know them. They're not exactly in your circle."

Victor cut in, his smile still in place but never reaching his eyes, "Ah, Steven and Diane. And what do they do?"

Panic began to take root, making Grace's head swim. Searching for any excuse to think, Grace slowly sipped her wine as she tried desperately to make eye contact with Elara, who was stoically still staring at nothing.

Dread filled her veins. "Steven is in tech. And Diane's a, uh, florist."

Margaret chuckled softly, exchanging a glance with Victor. “Interesting pair. I’d love to meet them sometime.”

Unable to take Elara’s silence, Grace swiftly kicked her under the table in a last-ditch effort to salvage the situation. Finally coming out of her stupor, Elara coughed before she interjected, “Well, they travel a lot—Europe, mostly. They’re not around much.”

Eleanor set her wine glass down with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Well, isn’t that convenient?”

Forcing a smile in a pathetic attempt to lighten the mood, Grace replied, “It really was, though! The timing worked out perfectly.”

Eleanor’s eyes twinkled as she leaned forward slightly. “Yes, I can imagine. Timing is everything, especially with...these kinds of arrangements.”

A loaded silence hung over the table as Elara shot her grandmother a warning look. The sound of a champagne bottle being popped made Grace jerk, the tension in the room having wound her tight. Glasses clinked as the bubbly liquid was poured. The guests began to file over to the window where the waiters were handing out flutes near the warm fire. Grace jumped out of her seat, thanking the heavens for the excuse to flee this situation, although her relief was short-lived.

Following close behind her, Victor picked up a flute and handed one over to Grace. Elara stiffly walked up to Grace as Victor joined Margaret on the couch. Leaning back, Victor continued his inquisition. “So, Grace, what is it you do? Elara hasn’t told us much about you.”

Grace’s smile faltered as she gulped down the entire glass of champagne. Her voice wavered as she replied, “Oh, well, I dabble in a few things.”

Finally coming to the rescue, Elara swiftly interjected, “Grace is very creative. She’s between projects right now, but she’s always got something exciting going on.”

Margaret arched a brow, giving a sweet but pointed look. “Between projects? How...interesting.”

Grace snatched another flute of champagne from a passing waiter and drank deeply, desperately hoping to find a solution to this mess at the bottom of her glass.

Eleanor smirked as she leaned back in her chair, clearly enjoying the tension.

“Well, at least Elara finally found someone who keeps her on her toes. And you two must be very close already to vacation together.”

Trying too hard to sound casual, Grace replied, “Oh, absolutely! We’re practically inseparable.”

Grace downed the last of her champagne, warmth spreading through her chest as realization hit. There was only one way to salvage this. Straightening her spine, she stepped into Elara’s personal space, close enough to feel the heat radiating off her. Without missing a beat, she turned to the family with a deliberate smile.

“Well, this has certainly been an interesting night.”

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Before anyone could respond, Grace looped her arms around Elara's neck, pulling her in close. She leaned in, her voice low but loud enough to be heard by those nearest. "Let's go to bed."

Elara's sharp blue-gray eyes locked with Grace's, flickering with surprise. Grace held her gaze, silently pleading. Please, just go with it. A second stretched into forever before Elara's expression shifted, realization settling over her. And then, finally, she closed the remaining space between them, her lips meeting Grace's in a kiss.

What began as a chaste touch quickly unraveled. Grace's heart pounded, her breath catching in her throat as Elara's soft lips pressed more firmly against hers. The kiss deepened—slow, deliberate, but far more intense than she had planned. Heat shot through her veins, setting every inch of her skin on fire.

Elara's hand slid up Grace's back, her fingers digging into the delicate fabric of the dress, pulling her closer. The scent of sandalwood, amber, and a hint of spice flooded Grace's senses, leaving her dizzy and gasping for more. Every thought, every worry, every carefully rehearsed lie evaporated, until all that existed was the feeling of Elara's lips, warm and insistent against hers. Grace's knees felt weak, her body pressed against Elara's like it was the most natural thing in the world.

For one reckless moment, Grace imagined herself undoing every button on Elara's suit and dragging her to bed right then and there.

The sound of someone clearing their throat cut through the haze, snapping Grace back to reality. She broke the kiss, gasping softly as she pulled back. Her pulse roared in her ears, and the absence of Elara's touch left her feeling cold and unsteady.

Elara stared at her, eyes dark and unreadable, as if waiting for Grace to bolt or say something. Instead, Grace let her hands drift down from Elara's neck, her fingers trailing slowly down the soft sweater, feeling the strength in her arms before intertwining her fingers with Elara's. The warmth of their joined hands felt like an anchor, keeping her grounded in the storm of emotions swirling between them.

Grace spared a look at the Silver family behind her. Some looked shocked, jaws slack and eyes wide. But Grandma Elle looked like she was on the verge of laughing. Her eyes twinkled with mischief and her smile brightened her face, making her look ten years younger.

Eleanore chuckled and broke the silence. "Well, it seems the happy couple is done for the evening."

After her proclamation, Grandma Elle stood from her chair and motioned for her grandson to help her over to the fire. Soon, the rest of the family followed suit.

Squeezing Elara's hand, Grace whispered, "Let's get the hell out of here while we still have the chance."

The walk back to their suite was shrouded in silence, broken only by the soft echo of their footsteps along the marble hallway. Grace's heart pounded, still reeling from the kiss. Every nerve in her body felt like it was on high alert, her skin buzzing with the memory of Elara's lips. She snuck a glance at Elara, but her face was unreadable—cool and composed, as if nothing out of the ordinary just happened.

Grace felt a knot tighten in her stomach. What just happened? Did that kiss mean anything? Or was it just another piece of the performance, something to placate the family and keep up appearances?

The weight of unspoken questions pressed between them, thickening the air.

They walked side by side, close enough for their arms to brush, but neither made a move to close the gap. Grace's hand twitched at her side; she wasn't even sure what she wanted to do, only that the space between them felt unbearable.

When they reached the suite door, Elara opened it without a word. Grace stepped inside, her heartbeat loud in her ears. The sound of the door clicking shut behind them was deafening, sealing them in together, alone with the unacknowledged tension crackling between them.

Elara exhaled sharply, as if she had held her breath the entire way back, and Grace felt the air shift. But still—nothing. No explanation for the inquisition, no apology for freezing up on her, no admission that the kiss was more than a show.

Grace shivered, the heat in her veins cooling rapidly. Elara really wasn't going to acknowledge what happened? Fine. Two could play that game. Grace strode over to her suitcase, grabbed her pajamas, and rushed into the bathroom, letting the door slam behind her.

Grace took her time getting ready for bed, making sure to occupy the bathroom for as long as possible. Did she need a second shower for the day? Probably not. But was she going to take the longest shower in history? Yes. Yes she would.

She took as long as possible, meticulously scrubbing every inch of her skin with the lavender-scented soap provided by the resort. The scalding water slowly melted away the stress of the evening, loosening her muscles. Despite her best efforts to maintain her irrational anger, by the time Grace stepped out of the bathroom in her softest leggings and neon purple fuzzy sweater, she felt too tired to maintain anything but exasperation.

Grace rubbed her wet hair with the towel as she watched Elara tap away on her iPad. Standing at the end of the bed, Grace continued to stare at Elara, waiting for her to

acknowledge her presence, but no matter how long she stood there, Elara refused to look up. Huffing in frustration, Grace threw the towel into a corner of the room, hoping to provoke Elara into making a comment about the mess. Still, Elara said nothing.

Sighing in defeat, Grace finally turned off the lamp on her side and crawled into bed. As soon as Grace was under the covers, Elara put her iPad down and murmured, “Good night.”

Grace glanced over at Elara, watching her carefully in silence, waiting for something, anything to happen. Instead, Elara simply turned off her lamp and got under the covers. Disappointment flooded through Grace as she murmured a quick good night in return.

Praying for the sweet release of sleep, Grace forced her eyes closed and turned her back to Elara. But no matter how hard she tried, she just could not fall asleep. The feel of Elara’s lips burned into her brain as she replayed the kiss over and over in her head. All of the tension, confusion, and frustration swirled around in her mind, making it impossible to fall asleep, much less lay still. Hoping to find a comfortable position, Grace tossed over to her other side.

Grace sucked in her breath in surprise to find Elara was facing her, eyes open in the dark. Shafts of silver moonlight lit the shape of Elara’s body beneath the covers, providing the barest of light for Grace to notice the way her eyes glimmered with unspoken thoughts. Once their eyes met, Grace felt her heart flip. In the deep of the night, she felt lost in Elara’s piercing blue gaze. She searched Elara’s face for any hint of what she was thinking, but her expression was unreadable.

Grace felt frozen, unsure if she should say something. Every inch of her wanted to reach out and cup Elara’s face, feel the way her hands would mold to her sharp edges. But fear gripped her, stopping her from acting on her desires. Elara had been the one

to kiss Grace, and since that moment, they had barely spoken a word. While Grace might be burning alive in attraction, she wasn't sure if Elara felt the same.

Grace sighed, silently chanting, "It's all a game. It's not real. It's all a game. It's not real."

Unable to bear the tension anymore, Grace flopped over onto her back. As she lay there in the dark, slowly fading into sleep, she could feel Elara's eyes roam her face and body, never looking away.

7

The sun had not yet risen when Elara woke up. She had barely slept all night, unable to stop thinking about kissing Grace. It had been madness, pure madness, the way she had nearly lost control. It took every ounce of restraint not to drag Grace into the nearest closet and rip off anything blocking her way to kissing, consuming every inch of her. Walking back to their room was torture. Every step closer to that damn bed, every step closer to being alone with Grace.

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She both wanted and feared that moment when the door would close behind her. The soft click of the door was like a bell ringing through her body, and she almost gave into temptation. She knew without a doubt that if she looked at Grace in that dress for one more moment, she would do just that. It would be all too easy to slide her hand up that slit and hike Grace's dress up around her hips. The only thing that stopped her was one thought:

It's not real. This is just a game. The kiss was just part of the game. It's not real.

Before Elara could look up, before she could lose hold of that one thread of control, Grace had stormed away. Grace's anger was palpable, her spine rigid as she walked away. Elara could only watch as Grace grabbed her belongings and went to the bathroom.

Elara fumed over her idiocy. Grace was probably angry with her for taking things too far. She should never have lost control in the first place. What had she expected? Still, as they lay in bed, Elara could not rip her gaze from Grace, wishing she could reach out and hold her once more.

Now, she waited for the sun to rise as she stared at Grace next to her. Like her, it was clear Grace had not been able to sleep much last night. She had tossed and turned, twisting in the blankets until she couldn't take it anymore and threw them off of her. Now, they faced each other.. Grace's normally messy curls were in a veritable disarray, and her fuzzy purple sweater had ridden up throughout the night, now resting just beneath her breasts. She should be appalled by the mess, but all Elara could think about was laying her hand on the soft curve of Grace's stomach. Everything about Grace was soft, full, and utterly alluring. She couldn't help but

remember the way those soft curves felt against her as they kissed last night. Or the way she inhaled sharply before the kiss was deepened.

Elara quietly groaned in frustration, straining to close off her growing attraction. She felt like a teenager again. This was insanity. It's not like she hadn't slept with other women. In fact, she had bedded her fair share of them. It had simply been too long; that's all that this was. Grace didn't want this, not really. Elara had to remember that nothing between them was real. Was Grace even gay?

Eventually, Elara got out of bed and went for a run at the resort gym. She needed to do something, anything, to get all of this...energy out. On her way back to the room, Elara stopped at the concierge desk and requested entirely too much food be sent upstairs, along with Grace's favorite cappuccino.

When Grace woke up, their breakfast spread had been set up on the counter in the foyer—the smell of eggs, bacon, and something buttery hanging in the air. Elara watched as she sleepily looked over in confusion. Grace sat up, her hair sticking straight up in places, and Elara smiled.

“I ordered breakfast. I needed lots of carbs and protein after my run this morning. Plus, we will be outside a lot today. You'll need your energy as well.”

Grace padded over while rubbing her eyes and then looked up at Elara. She momentarily paused, jaw slack as she took in Elara in her tight running clothes. She sported leggings and a thick jacket unzipped, exposing her matching sports bra. Elara watched as Grace audibly gulped and averted her gaze, which landed on the breakfast buffet.

“Umm...are we expecting guests? There's enough food for five, maybe six, people!”

Elara held out the paper cup with Grace's cappuccino. “Well, I wasn't sure what you

liked, so I got one of everything. I also may have been a little hungry when I ordered.”

Grace shook her head and snatched the cup from Elara’s hand. “If I eat all of this, you will have to cart me out of this room”—she pointed at Elara—“and it will be all your fault.”

Elara chuckled as she grabbed a plate with an omelet and snatched a croissant from the pile of assorted breads. “That’s only if I don’t eat it all first.”

The chime of Grace’s laugh filled the room, making Elara’s smile grow wider. Grace grabbed a plate with waffles and hefted some eggs and bacon on top. “So outside, huh? What’s the plan today?”

Elara’s smile grew mischievous. “Snowmobiles.”

Grace turned, eyes wide and jaw slack. “Snowmobiles?”

“Snowmobiles.”

Grace pointed at herself and then Elara. “We? We are going on snowmobiles?”

Elara got just a little too much pleasure in watching Grace squirm as she taunted, “What’s the matter? Never ridden a snowmobile?”

Grace plopped down on the chair next to Elara, dropping her plate unceremoniously on the table. “Ride a snowmobile?! I can barely drive a car. I’m going to get myself killed.”

At this, Elara lost her control and outright cackled. Grace sat back, shocked having never heard Elara laugh like that before.

Wiping a tear from her eye, Elara continued, “It’s not so bad. You’ll get used to it.”

Grace held up her fork and waved it at Elara. “I swear to god Elara, if I’m dying on a snowmobile today, I’m taking you with me.”

Elara laughed again, the feeling of it filling her chest. “You’ll be fine.”

Grace was, in fact, not fine.

Elara shook her head as she surveyed the damage. They hadn’t even made it past the instructor’s first few steps before Grace somehow miraculously set the snowmobile careening into the resort wall.

Grace had tears in her eyes as she professed her guilt. “Oh my god, I am so sorry. I cannot believe I did this. I can pay for any repairs. I don’t know how it got away from me so quickly.”

The instructor looked appalled as he looked back and forth between Grace and Elara, as if he could read in their expressions to know how he should react.

Elara stood, dusting off her hands on her pants. “It’s fine. Minor damage only. Nothing that can’t be repaired.”

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Grace wrung her hands as she continued apologizing, “I’m so sorry. I’ll pay for repairs.”

Elara shook her head and waved off Grace’s apology. “It’s fine. Please don’t worry about paying for anything. I own the place, remember?”

Grace looked utterly petrified at the disaster before her as she turned to the instructor. “I probably should stay behind, huh?”

He scoffed. “Well, I’m certainly not letting you drive one of these off into the woods. You’ll have to ride along with someone.”

Grace stumbled through excuses as to why she should stay behind, but Elara cut her off. “No chance. You’re riding with me. Let’s go.”

Grace huffed as she unsteadily walked with Elara back to the group. The instructor continued his quick safety lesson as the group donned their gear. Elara turned to Grace, watching her hand tremble as she put her helmet on. Unable to stop herself, she reached out and helped Grace.

“Hey now, it’s okay. Take a deep breath. What’s done is done. Please don’t worry about that snowmobile. I can’t tell you how many tourists damage those things every season. It’s not a big deal,” Elara reassured.

Grace looked up at Elara, relief washing over her face.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Now, stop worrying and try to have fun. Snowmobiling is thrilling. I’ll be driving, so you have nothing to worry about. Just hold on tight.”

Grace closed her eyes, gathering her courage as she repeated, “Hold on tight.”

Elara smiled. “You got it. When I turn, lean into the turn with me. Just follow my lead.”

The snowmobiles roared to life, sending clouds of white powder spraying into the crisp morning air. The cold bit at Elara’s face, but it was invigorating. With Grace seated behind her, arms hesitantly wrapped around her waist, Elara gripped the handlebars and eased them forward. The engine hummed beneath them, vibrating through her gloves, and the snow crunched under the tracks as they glided out into the open terrain.

They followed the group along a narrow trail, flanked by towering, snow-covered pines. The wind sliced across her cheeks, sharp and refreshing, but Elara barely felt the chill. All she was aware of was Grace, pressed against her back, clinging a little tighter than necessary.

When they hit a gentle slope, Elara felt Grace shift, leaning with her as instructed, her warm breath brushing against Elara’s neck despite the cold. The sensation sent a spark down Elara’s spine—unexpected and almost unsettling.

“You okay back there?” Elara called over the hum of the engine.

Grace’s helmet tapped against hers as she leaned forward to respond. “Still alive!”

Elara couldn’t help but smile, something warm unfurling in her chest. She revved the engine a little, just to see if Grace would squeal—and she did, a startled laugh spilling from her lips. The sound was bright and unguarded, and it made Elara’s heart twist.

As they picked up speed, the world around them transformed into a blur of glistening snowdrifts and pine branches weighed down with frost. Every turn made Grace shift closer, her arms tightening instinctively, her body moving in sync with Elara's. The pressure of Grace's hands on her waist and the way her thighs pressed into hers sent Elara's thoughts scattering, making it hard to focus. The touch was innocent, yet it felt intimate—too intimate for something that was supposed to be fake.

They caught up with the rest of the group in a wide-open meadow, the sun reflecting off the untouched snow in a blinding shimmer. Elara slowed the snowmobile to a stop, feeling Grace's arms relax but not let go. Cate and her husband glided past them, laughing effortlessly, followed by James and his wife, picture-perfect in their matching winter gear.

Watching her siblings, Elara felt a familiar pang—jealousy, resentment, and that old ache of never quite being what her family wanted. Cate with her happy, chaotic family, and James with his glamorous wife—both fitting neatly into the Silver family mold. And here she was, still trying to convince herself and everyone else that she belonged.

A glance toward her mother caught Margaret's gaze, and Elara's stomach tightened. Her mother's polite smile never wavered, but her eyes flicked to Grace with quiet judgment. Elara's jaw clenched. No matter how well Grace played her part, it would never be enough. Elara would never be enough.

Grace leaned closer, sensing the shift in Elara's mood. "You good?" she asked softly, her breath warming the edge of Elara's ear through the helmet.

Elara exhaled slowly, forcing her tension to melt with the cold. "Yeah," she replied, softer than she intended. "Let's keep going."

They started the snowmobile again, weaving through snowy hills and shadowed

forests. Elara's mind drifted as they rode, but Grace's presence was constant—a steady warmth against the winter cold. For once, Elara didn't feel entirely alone.

By the time they returned to the lodge, the sun was dipping low, casting the snow in shades of gold and lavender. Grace dismounted with a breathless grin, snowflakes caught in her hair. Elara watched, her heart doing a strange, unsettling dance in her chest.

Elara silently helped Grace out of the safety gear, savoring the way her fingers could lightly touch Grace's throat as she unclipped her helmet. Elara quietly took the helmet, assessing every inch of Grace's face, hoping for some sign that she wasn't alone in this feeling. Grace silently looked up at her, an unspoken question in her eyes Elara couldn't quite decipher.

Victor chose that moment to walk up, breaking their reverie. “Well, Elara, I have to give it to you. This was an outstanding choice today. A near-perfect outing”—he looked pointedly at Grace—“if it weren't for the mishap at the beginning.”

Grace's face fell, and Elara felt the shared moment between them dissolve into nothingness.

Later that evening, Elara found herself standing in the suite's foyer waiting on Grace again. Standing in front of the floor-length mirror, she inspected her reflection. Smoothing down the lapels of the charcoal-gray velvet blazer, Elara felt more than a little pleased at the way the black slacks and matching black shirt complimented the blazer, making her look as if she had stepped out of the ashes of a fire extinguisher. Her normally straight chin-length hair was slicked back, accenting the diamond earrings that shone bright in comparison. Every piece was expertly chosen, dripping in exquisitely intricate detail, down to the silver embroidery on the cuffs of her black sleeves.

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Unable to keep still, Elara drifted over to the bar and procured the most expensive bottle of whiskey. She poured herself a dram and took a small sip, savoring the way the warmth flooded her chest and calmed her nerves. It was unsettling how nervous each dinner made her. Every moment she was alone with her family was a risk to their charade. She couldn't decide what would be worse, their disappointment in her lies or the shame of her willingness to stoop so low. There was no pleasant outcome for being caught.

That was why she couldn't fail. They couldn't fail. Her family may be suspicious of Grace's background, but she was relatively confident that they no longer questioned the validity of their relationship. Elara took a larger sip from her crystal glass and sighed as the warmth spread further.

Elara heard Grace before she saw her. The soft click of heels drew her attention toward the bedroom, where Grace stood in the doorway. Every thought emptied out of her head as her gaze darkened in desire. The deep v of the velvet dress plunged daringly to the base of Grace's rib cage, offering a devastating view of her ample cleavage. The burgundy fabric, so dark it looked like red wine spilled across the night sky, hugged her waist before fluttering open with every step, teasing glimpses of her legs. Long sleeves clung to Grace's arms, lending the gown an elegant restraint that made the tantalizing flashes beneath it all the more intoxicating.

Elara stood stock-still, summoning a miraculous effort to regain control. Unable to tear her gaze away, she brought the glass to her lips and drained every drop of whiskey. Turning sharply from Grace, she placed the empty glass on the bar and strode toward the door. The rapid click of Grace's steps behind her was like a key twisting in a toy soldier, winding her tighter and tighter into a ball of nerves.

Reaching out, Elara rested her hand on the door handle, the long fingers gripping it tight. She paused, taking a moment to breathe, hoping to cool down the fire in her veins, but all she could smell was Grace. The faint lavender scent of her soap and her nutty perfume filled her nose, making her head spin. She needed space, fresh air, anything that would cleanse her of the insane impulse to turn around and pull Grace into her. Elara shook her head and opened the door, standing back to allow Grace to pass. She coldly looked back at Grace and motioned to the hallway as if to say after you.

Grace's cheery demeanor was gone, replaced by something Elara could not decipher. She could feel Grace's eyes assess her own expression in turn, and Elara hoped she could not see the desire hidden beneath her icy mask. Grace stepped near enough for her heat to radiate into Elara's bones, though still not stepping through the threshold, and locked eyes with her.

Unable to take the tension any longer, Elara gave up on her attempt at manners and turned on her heel, rushing into the hallway and nearly jogging to the elevator.

Unlike the past few nights, Elara could not wait to step into the dining room and greet her family, her earlier anxiety about their ruse being discovered replaced by the burning desire to touch, kiss, and hold Grace. She was like a moth drawn to the assured destruction of the delicious flames of a well-stoked fire. No matter how she schooled her expression, no matter how cold she willed her exterior to be, her insides burned exquisitely.

She attempted to freeze out her insanity with business discussions or family arguments, but her gaze could never stray far from Grace. Her light, her warmth, her smile. She knew she wasn't the only one drawn to her that evening. In her usual indomitably cheerful way, Grace had managed to charm everyone at the table. Even her mother had a genuine smile on her face as Grace regaled them with another story—this one about her Aunt Lucy.

“You know, my father wishes he could claim my creativity came from him, but we all know it was my kooky Aunt Lucy who made art seem like a living, breathing being to be worshipped. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her without some mark of her art, be it paint on her clothes or charcoal staining her fingers.

“But the funniest example of her art marking her was when she decided to do a performance piece commenting on society’s demands to put on a brave face. She painted her face like a sad clown and walked around her campus. She intended for her project to last a week, but after slathering on the paint every day for seven days, she had stained her face! She ended up stuck with a shadow of her sad clown makeup for a month!”

The table roared with laughter, but the only laugh Elara could hear was the bright peal of Grace’s. Elara caught herself staring and quickly looked away. She scolded herself and silently reminded herself that Grace was here because she was being paid to be here, not because they were actually in a relationship.

The dinner continued in relative peace, her parents lavishing in the attention for their anniversary celebration. Victor’s eyes were glassy, and Margaret’s face was flushed with the effects of too much champagne. In fact, nearly everyone glowed, as if the bubbles of the champagne had contained sunshine itself. Elara felt her cheeks warm with a flush similar to her mother’s and realized that maybe she was actually enjoying herself.

Trying to avoid being alone with Grace for too long, Elara chatted with the guests until the crowd had dwindled down to just the immediate family. Cate yawned as she stood, her husband excusing them for the evening. Elara turned to Grace, and their gazes met, making her heart flip as she admired how beautiful Grace looked in that devastatingly tempting gown. Gone was the unsure fumbling and questioning eyes. For the first time this week, Grace looked comfortable, happy even. A warm smile spread across her face, and Elara answered with a small one in return.

Winding through the halls, the two walked in companionable silence toward the suite. Even though they hadn't spoken a word since they left the dining room, Grace's smile continued to exude light and happiness, lifting Elara's spirits in turn. Every few steps, Elara would peek out of the corner of her eyes to catch a glimpse of Grace's radiance. When they finally reached their suite, the soft click of the door closing behind them seemed to break the spell of silence.

Grace turned toward her, her smile turning sheepish. "That went well, I think. I never thought I would see your parents laugh."

Elara chuckled, "Honestly? Neither did I."

Grace giggled, but her eyes swelled with vulnerability. "I'm still not sure they like me, but I think they may be convinced we are together, don't you think?"

Hearing Grace voice her insecurities, Elara stepped closer to reassure her. "They liked you. Everyone did."

Grace's brows pulled together, her smile slipping and chin dipping as she confessed, "I'm just not sure I'm... I don't know...posh enough for them. I feel like no matter how many fancy dresses I wear, they will somehow still see through that and realize I don't belong."

Elara's heart cracked watching the light drain from her eyes as she delved deeper into her insecurities. Unable to stop herself, Elara stepped closer and tipped Grace's face up as she looked deeply into her widened eyes.

Elara's hand lingered underneath Grace's chin as she looked into Grace's eyes. In the glassy sheen over Grace's hazel eyes, she could see every insecurity she had ever felt around her family reflected back at her. Sorrow clutched at her throat, making her voice raspy as she spoke.

“Don’t worry about them. I thought you were perfect,” she whispered.
“Youareperfect.”

The heat of Grace’s body washed over Elara, drawing her even closer. She could feel the way Grace’s pulse fluttered gentlybeneath her fingers. Their air was thick with tension as their breath mingled. In a half-hearted attempt to stop herself, Elara whispered, “Grace?”

Grace’s lips parted as she quietly gasped, and Elara found herself surging forward, closing the distance between them. Their lips crashed together, the kiss immediately spiraling in a heated frenzy into insanity. Before she could think better of it, Elara found herself pushing Grace back against a wall, her left hand clutching the fabric at the base of her spine. Her right hand shifted down from Grace’s chin, spreading across her neck and grasping possessively as Grace sharply inhaled. Elara took that opening to deepen the kiss, wanting to devour her, to taste every inch of her.

Grace’s hands shifted beneath Elara’s blazer, pushing it off her shoulders. Shifting to let the charcoal fabric fall from her arms, Grace began deftly working at the buttons on her shirt. As soon as Elara’s hands were freed from the blazer, she wrapped her arms around Grace’s back, cupping her ass as she lifted her up. Grace’s legs hooked around her hips as Elara shifted them closer to the counter. Placing her down gently, Elara’s hands drifted down Grace’s legs, finding the gap in the wrap dress and pushing it aside to feel soft, creamy thighs still wrapped around her. Elara trailed her kisses down the side of Grace’s neck as she continued to inch her fingers along her inner thighs. She gently rubbed the lace panties, finding Grace soaked and ready for her.

Grace moaned and wrapped her arms around Elara tighter, her fingernails biting into her back. The pain mixed with pleasure, making Elara moan in turn as she pushed Grace’s lace underwear to the side revealing her pussy- wet and wanting. Grace moaned lightly and opened her legs wider. Elara took that as the consent she needed

and she took the fingers of her right hand and began to push them inside Grace curling them upwards as she did so. Elara watched as Grace's head tipped back as she cried out, soaking in every moment of her pleasure. Elara added a third finger that slid in so easily and began to thrust in and out of Grace. Fucking her was the sweetest pleasure. Elara's eyes stayed locked on Grace as she writhed on her fingers.

“God, you are so beautiful, Grace.”

As Grace writhed faster and moaned louder, Elara closed her mouth over her's, swallowing the moans as if she could swallow the sound itself and keep that pleasure to herself. She could feel Grace begin to tighten around her fingers, and Grace began to cry out.

Gasping, Grace moaned and begged, “Elara, I...I'm close.”

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Elara continued her sweet torture increasing the pace with which she was fucking Grace and moving her thumb to put pressure on Grace's swollen clit.

She wanted to feel Grace's orgasm so desperately. She wanted to give Grace the ultimate release.

Grace's moans grew louder than ever, her lips mere centimetres from Elara's. Her breathing quickened and Elara's fingers squelched inside of her just one more time before Grace's orgasm crashed through them both like a tidal wave. Grace cried out loudly and Elara could feel the reverberations of her climax through her fingers, up her arm, between her own legs.

Fuck. It has never been like this before.

It was the most incredible feeling she had ever felt.

Before a word could be spoken, Elara wrapped her arms around Grace, picking her up once more and carried her over toward the bed.

Grace's hungry hands began to work at the remaining clothes, stripping Elara naked as they stumbled forward. Elara kissed her collarbone as she unzipped Grace's dress, pushing it aside, and watched it pool to the ground. Her eyes hungrily took in Grace's curves, naked except for those lace panties. Elara gently lowered Grace onto the bed and slipped the last remaining fabric down her legs. Elara stood at the edge of the bed, hungrily drinking in the visage of Grace's curves, the way her nipples peaked.

Grace leaned up on one elbow and huskily asked, "Are you going to stare all night or

are you going to join me?”

Elara knelt on the bed, opening Grace’s legs with her hands as she did so and moving between them. All she could see was Grace’s wet and tempting pussy opening before her like a flower.

Elara’s mouth was watering at the sight and she knew exactly what she wanted next. She dipped her head between Grace’s legs and took Grace in her mouth, licking long stokes from bottom to top to taste her entirely, sucking Grace’s excited labia into her mouth, circling Grace’s full clitoris with her tongue before pulling it into her mouth and suckling.

She dipped her tongue lower, pushing it deep inside of Grace, parting Grace’s labia with her hands to give her tongue as much access as possible.

The taste of Grace was earthy and sexy and Elara couldn’t get enough. She made out with Grace’s pussy as though it was her mouth. Kissing, licking, sucking, taking from her.

Grace’s moans were going crazy, but as much as Elara was doing this to please Grace, she was mostly devouring Grace to please herself. Because she wanted this pleasure more than anything. To be lost in the taste and smell of Grace.

And she did lose herself in it.

Elara felt Grace’s body begin to tense and her breathing become shorter and she knew she was close. Elara felt close as anything to her own orgasm without even being touched.

Eating Grace’s pussy with all her pent up enthusiasm was turning her on more than anything else ever had.

As Grace's orgasm exploded into her mouth, a sweet gush of fluid flooded her mouth. She swallowed and lapped some more, pulling her face into Grace as tight as it would go. And just as she did that, her own orgasm crashed through her, wave after wave of release that she had needed so desperately.

Eventually she stopped licking when it was clear Grace was done and she just lay there, her face still buried between Grace's legs, her mouth and cheek still resting against Grace's pussy.

Grace didn't move her away and neither of them spoke. She felt Grace's hand reach to stroke her hair, as though giving her permission to stay there. So she did stay there. Breathing in the sweet scent of Grace's pleasure. She felt tears beading in the corners of her eyes and blinked them away.

She would just lay still here some more.

8

From somewhere beyond the balcony windows, the muffled sounds of winter stirred—a distant gust of wind, the soft rustling of tree branches, and the faint crunch of footsteps as early risers began their day. Grace had felt the stirrings of early morning coming to life, but she had refused to open her eyes as she took in this precious moment. The feeling of warm arms holding her was strange but comforting, and the warm scents of sandalwood, amber, and spices filled her lungs as she breathed in the crisp morning air.

Peeking her eyes open, she saw how the soft glow of early dawn seeped into the room, casting pale blue shadows along the edges of the bed. Frost clung to the windows in delicate patterns, catching the first hints of the blush-pink light of sunrise. This was the first time this week that she had woken up to the sunrise, and, more importantly, before Elara. She had gotten used to the cold bed being empty when she

first opened her eyes. But now? Elara's hand was softly holding her, resting just below her navel. Elara's other arm was beneath her neck, holding Grace's head close to her shoulder. Their legs were intertwined, as if in their sleep they couldn't get close enough. She was surrounded, held close by Elara as if she were caged beneath her limbs.

Grace felt confusion bubbling up from her stomach. A week ago, she was terrified of Elara's disapproval, worrying she was on the edge of losing her job. And now? That terrifying intensity that Elara always exuded had been turned on her. And she had liked it. A lot. She had relished the way Elara's gaze had bored into her, pinning her in place and taking her breath away. She remembered the way that all coherent thought had eddied out of her brain the moment Elara's hand had gripped her throat. Just thinking about last night had Grace's skin prickling with the memory.

She couldn't help but think What the hell am I doing? She could feel herself getting caught up in the enigma that was Elara, as if she were a puzzle that Grace was determined to piece together. But this wasn't supposed to be real, was it? As much as she loved to brag about being a hopeless romantic, Grace had been burned in the past by falling too hard too fast. Up until last week, she thought Elara barely tolerated her presence. How could Elara possibly go from that to having genuine feelings?

The only answer Grace could think of made her heart squeeze and tears prick at her eyes. Elara couldn't possibly have feelings for her; she probably didn't even like her. This was just sex. That's all it was. No matter how mind-blowing and intense the sex was, that's all it could ever be. She needed to stop herself or she would end up planning their imagined future together by the end of the week. What she should do was figure out how to act as cold and calm as Elara always seemed to be.

Grace stewed in her emotions, oscillating back and forth between attraction and disappointment as she watched the first beams of sunlight begin to creep across the room. Eventually, Elara stirred, drawing Grace out of her spiral. Unable to stop

herself, Grace turned to look at Elara and watched as Elara slowly blinked her stunning blue eyes, her features softer than Grace had ever seen. Elara slowly ran her hand up Grace's back as she smiled, sharing a rare glimpse of the person beneath the mask. Grace felt herself smile in return as emotions swirled inside. How could she not feel happy in this quiet, vulnerable moment?

Giving in, Grace ran a hand up Elara's arm. "Good morning."

Elara's piercing blue eyes roamed over her face and drifted down her body, pausing at the swell of her breasts peeking out from under the duvet. Tension crackled in the air as Elara's eyes darkened, yet she still said nothing in return. Grace waited, unsure if she wanted Elara to speak or put her mouth to better use, but the longer she waited for words, the more disappointment began to cool her veins and harden her heart.

Grace couldn't help but worry. What if she's going to tell me this can't happen again or some other bullshit excuse? Not wanting to hear the words that would break her heart, Grace twisted out of Elara's grasp and got out of bed. She could feel Elara's confusion in the way her hands had lingered until she could no longer reach. She wondered if she turned back she would see her own disappointment echoed in Elara's eyes, but she couldn't bring herself to find out. Instead, she strode across the room, naked as the day she was born, and disappeared into the bathroom.

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Once there was a physical divider between them, the tension broke and turned Grace's stomach sour. She was no stranger to hook-ups. Her college days had been a string of bad sex with men nearly every weekend until she had met Taylor. One look at her had made Grace's heart flip, and she never looked back. Since she had begun dating women, she had instead found herself in relationship after relationship, and each time hurt more than the last. With men, she never worried about falling in love, but with women she couldn't help but fall fast. That's why she had sworn off dating for the last two years. She had wanted to figure out who she was on her own and fall in love with herself before she fell for someone else.

Grace turned on the hot water, wanting nothing more than to scrub her skin raw and feel the sting of the searing heat warm her inside out. She always did her best thinking in the shower, and she certainly had a lot to think about this morning. As she let the shower pelt her back, Grace slowly scrubbed as she thought about last night. Her soapy loofa followed the path that Elara's mouth had trailed across her body, igniting the fire in her veins as she attempted to scrub away the feel of her lips on nipples. Her pussy began to pulse with heat as she recalled the feel of Elara's tongue on her clit, sucking her labia, pushing deep inside of her. Elara had eaten her out like she was a starving woman and Grace was an all you can eat buffet. Grace had never experienced hunger like it. She had happily let Elara feast on her.

Grace slipped a finger inside herself, groaning and writhing in pleasure as she imagined it was Elara's fingers back inside of her. She still was so wet. She still felt so utterly turned on from what Elara had done to her body last night.

Before she knew it, she was using two fingers to fuck herself and she felt herself heating right up. The moment came right back into her mind of the way Elara's blue

eyes had darkened and looked at her with a hunger beyond words. Then Elara devouring her pussy with her mouth and the mere memory of it tipped her right over the edge.

She moaned as she came, the water dripping down her face and over her body as she cried out in pleasure.

Grace cursed as she realized she had failed spectacularly at scrubbing Elara from her mind. All she could think was, I'm so fucked.

When Grace made her way out of the bathroom, she was surprised to find the suite empty, Elara nowhere in sight. For reasons she did not want to think about, her stomach dropped and her throat closed in disappointment. Not wanting to cry, Grace shook her head and quietly chanted. It's not real. It's all a sham. It's all pretend.

She was nearly done getting ready for the day when Elara burst through the front door, a brown bag in one hand and a paper coffee cup in the other. But that's not what Grace's eyes saw first. No. She stared open-mouthed at Elara in another matching workout set, sweat dripping down her flat stomach. She watched intently as one bead of sweat trailed down from beneath her sports bra and made its way to the band of her low-cut leggings. She knew Elara was saying something to her, but all she could hear was the blood rushing to her head.

Finally, Elara coughed, and said, "Grace? Everything okay?"

Grace blushed, her ears burning as she said, "Hmm? What was that?"

Elara's smile turned wolfish as she stepped closer, the salty smell of her sweat mingling with that intoxicatingly spicy, woodsy scent, making Grace's head spin. Up close, Elara was a full head taller than her, forcing her to crane her neck to look up.

“I said, I hope I didn’t make you wait too long.”

Grace swallowed, trying to force her thoughts into a less sweaty and heated direction, as she replied huskily, “Not at all.”

Unable to take the intensity of the eye contact any longer, she looked back down and finally noticed the cappuccino in Elara’s hand. She reached out to grab it, their fingers touching. “I hope that’s for me.”

Grace took the cup and drank deeply, wanting to do anything that would stop her from dragging Elara back into the bedroom. Elara’s eyes darkened as she watched Grace, yet she did not reach out to touch her. Nor did she say anything. Grace carefully kept eye contact as she continued to drink from the paper cup, waiting for Elara to speak. When she realized that no words would be spoken, she grabbed the bag from Elara’s other hand and walked away.

Still, Elara said nothing as she watched Grace move over to the chair next to the counter. That counter, Grace realized. She felt her heart race as she opened the bag and pulled out the contents: a bagel sandwich and a muffin. She knew the muffin was probably meant for her, but she was feeling spiteful. Wanting to egg Elara on to speak, to say something...anything, Grace leaned against the counter and watched Elara as she bit into the sandwich. Elara stood, rooted to the spot, as she watched Grace chew slowly, her eyes locked onto Grace’s lips. She could feel the heat radiating off her from across the room. Her heart flipped as heat began to pool at her core. She wanted Elara to react, to say something, or to cross the room and kiss her again. Either way, she wanted to see that cold mask crack.

Instead, Elara took a long deep breath and simply said, “We’ll be outdoors again. You should probably change.” She turned away, slamming the bathroom door behind her.

Grace sighed in disappointment, not sure which she wanted more: the conversation or the passion.

Grace stared at the closed bathroom door, her pulse still pounding in her ears. “Outdoors, right,” she muttered, licking the last bit of bagel from her lips, both annoyed and exhilarated by Elara’s infuriating calm. As if changing clothes could somehow douse the heat simmering between them.

She pushed off the counter and shuffled back to the bedroom, still clutching the coffee cup. The thought of layering herself in fleece and thermal leggings felt like a punishment after Elara’s skin-on-display morning entrance.

Fifteen minutes later, Grace emerged, bundled in too many layers of fine wool and cashmere. As she shuffled toward the front door, Elara reappeared, now wrapped in sleek black winter gear, looking like a walking advertisement for designer adventurewear. Her hood was down, revealing her pin-straight, perfectly styled black hair streaked with silver glinting in the soft light.

“Ready?” Elara asked, as if nothing at all had transpired between them five minutes ago.

Grace gave a tight nod, unwilling to let the butterflies in her stomach show. “As I’ll ever be.”

When they stepped outside, the crisp air hit Grace’s face like a splash of ice water, dragging her back into reality. The crunch of snow underfoot echoed softly in the morning stillness, broken only by the sound of distant laughter and footsteps as the rest of Elara’s family gathered near the trailhead.

Victor stood at the front of the group, adjusting the strap on his trekking poles, while Margaret fussed with the scarf around her neck. James and Cate were already joking

with one another, their boots kicking up puffs of powder as they exchanged playful shoves. Elara's grandmother, Eleanor, leaned heavily on a silver cane, a knowing smile curling her lips as she spotted Grace approach.

"Well, look at you two," Eleanor said warmly, though her sharp gaze pinned Grace like a butterfly in a glass case. "Matching couples on an adventure—how delightful."

Grace smiled and waved cheerfully as she greeted Grandma Elle. Right. Time to play pretend.

She stole a glance at Elara, hoping to find some hint at her feelings, but Elara's face was impassive, already settling back into her cold, controlled exterior.

"Let's head out," Elara said briskly, adjusting her gloves as if they were weapons, then gestured to the group to begin their trek.

Grace fell into step beside her, and whispered, "Promise you won't let me fall to my death or get buried in snow?"

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Elara's lips twitched as she looked at Grace from the corner of her eye, replying lowly, "I've got you."

Grace giggled and blushed, hoping that the redness looked like nothing more than flush from the cold. As they reached the snow-covered trailhead, Grace tugged her hood down further and blew into her gloves to warm her fingers. The sky was a brilliant, cloudless blue, and the morning light reflected off the snow, making everything seem too bright, too sharp. She squinted against the glare.

"Stick close," Elara murmured quietly as they fell in line behind Victor and Margaret.

Grace blinked up at her, surprised by the unexpected softness in her voice. "You mean emotionally or, like, physically?"

A flicker of a smile touched Elara's lips—a moment so brief, Grace almost missed it. "Both," Elara replied, her voice low and quiet enough that no one else could hear.

And just like that, the tension between them stretched thin again, taut and humming beneath the surface, waiting to snap.

The group shuffled forward, their snowshoes crunching against the frozen ground. Grace took a breath, filling her lungs with the cold air, hoping it would cool the heat that hadn't left her since Elara walked through the door that morning. But as Elara moved gracefully ahead, her dark hair catching the sunlight like a glimmering thread, Grace knew it was going to be a very long hike.

Grace huffed as she made her way up the hill, glaring at Eleanor's back in

amazement. How was it possible that an old woman with a cane was leaving her in the dust? Grace muttered under her breath, cursing as she tried to widen her stride and gain ground.

As they crested the hill, Grace sighed in amazement at the stunning view before her. An extravagant table had been set with picnic baskets and thermoses that were sure to be filled with some warm concoction that would put to shame her packets of hot cocoa back at home. The long wooden table seemed to have grown out of the earth, blending in with the snow-dusted trees. The deep blue waters of the lake were eerily calm, shimmering with sunlight and the reflection of the clouds above. The lake's shoreline was dappled with large granite boulders and empty piers, now coated in the soft white blanket of snow.

Grace had not yet approached the table, watching everyone sit as the waiters began to pour steaming cups of hot cocoa. She turned to look out at the vista and wondered if any of the Silver family still felt awe at such beautiful scenery.

She could feel Elara's presence behind her as Elara whispered in her ear, "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Grace felt chills run down her spine that had nothing to do with the cold mountain air. She couldn't help but recall the way Elara had looked when she called her beautiful. Looking just over her shoulder, she locked eyes with Elara, and could see the same heat reflected back at her. Unable to resist the pull between them, Grace turned so that they were toe to toe and looked up into Elara's eyes.

"It's stunning," she whispered and then slipped her arms around Elara's waist, pulling her into a hug. She felt the stiffness in Elara's spine slowly melt as she wrapped her arms around Grace in turn. She tucked her head against Elara's chest. "Thank you."

Elara stiffened briefly before resting her cheek on Grace's head, her hands lightly

bunching the fabric at the small of her back. The two held each other for a moment until Elara slowly pulled back. “Let’s go eat.”

9

Get it together. This is just the next part of the performance.

Elara stabbed at her salad, keeping her expression neutral as the conversation hummed around the table. Grace was laughing at something Cate had said, her hazel eyes glowing in the candlelight. Focus, Elara. She’d let things go too far, lost control of the situation—and herself—in the heat of that kiss and everything that followed. But it was just an act. That’s all it was. A necessary step to make the charade convincing. The sex doesn’t mean anything. I needed to make it believable. It’s fine. Everything is under control.

Except nothing felt under control. She could still feel the warmth of Grace’s skin beneath her hands, the way her breath had hitched in the dark. The sweet sweet taste of Grace’s pussy. And that maddening look on Grace’s face afterward—that was the part Elara couldn’t stop replaying. As if Grace had seen through her, peeled back every layer she used to keep herself distant and cool.

She shifted in her seat, feeling the weight of it all pressing against her: the family, the expectations, the charade. It’s working, she reminded herself, glancing down the table. They were buying it. They believed she was finally doing what they wanted—settling down, finding someone. The family pressure had eased, and the conversation had moved to safer ground. So why do I feel like I’m unraveling?

Her father’s voice broke through her thoughts. “You’ve made a good choice with this one, Elara,” Victor said, leaning back in his chair with the satisfied smile of a man who believed he was right about everything. “I’m proud of you for finally making the effort to settle down.”

Proud. That word twisted like a knife in her gut. For years, all she had wanted was to hear it—and now that it was here, it felt hollow, meaningless. He's not proud of me. He's proud of this image I've created. Of the lie I'm living right in front of him.

She forced a smile and nodded, lifting her wine glass to her lips to buy herself time. A hand slipped over hers, squeezing gently. Elara peeked at Grace, who caught her eye, a soft question lingering in her gaze. Elara looked away quickly. Don't, Grace. Don't look at me like that. This isn't real.

The sooner you accept that, the better.

Not noticing the turmoil raging inside of Elara, Victor smiled and began to ask about recent market trends. James quipped in bringing up expansion plans and real estate acquisitions. Elara sat straighter, glad to be back in safe territory.

She leaned forward. "We've been considering a new property on the East Coast," Elara said smoothly, seizing control of the conversation. "The market is showing promise, especially for boutique experiences."

The conversations whirled around her, excitement in the air as the family volleyed questions and remarks as if it were a sport. However, Elara couldn't help but find her gaze constantly shifting over to Grace seated beside her.

She looked beautiful as she smiled and laughed at something Grandma Elle said. She leaned forward, the corset top of her muted pink dress offering Elara a glimpse at her ample breasts. Elara's eyes fixed on Grace, remembering the way she moaned when Elara had sucked and teased her nipples. The blood began to rush to her head, the buzzing in her ears drowning out the conversation around her. She shook her head, attempting to shake off the heat crawling under her skin.

Dinner wound down with the slow crawl of conversation and the clinking of wine

glasses. Elara barely tasted the final course, too busy calculating how soon she could make her exit without arousing suspicion.

She folded her napkin and placed it neatly by her plate, glancing down the table at her parents, who were still deep in conversation. Victor had a satisfied look on his face, as if he'd just made a wise investment. Margaret gave her an approving nod, the subtle kind she reserved for moments when Elara did exactly what was expected of her.

Perfectly executed. Everyone is happy. Mission accomplished.

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So why did it feel like she couldn't breathe?

Grace caught her eye again, the corner of her mouth quirking up as if to say, We survived.

Elara stood abruptly, her chair scraping back against the wood floor. "We'll head back to the suite," she announced, her voice cool and steady. She barely registered the murmured goodnights from her family as she turned on her heel and made her way toward the exit.

Grace scrambled to her feet, hurrying after her. As soon as they made it to the elevator, nudged her shoulder with her own. "Well, that wasn't so bad, right?"

Elara gave a noncommittal hum. She didn't trust herself to say more—not when her thoughts kept circling back to the warmth of Grace's body beside hers, the way Grace had smiled at her, as if she saw right through everything.

When they stepped into the suite, the door clicked shut behind them, muffling the outside world. Elara exhaled slowly, shrugging off her coat and hanging it with deliberate care, each movement an attempt to steady herself.

Grace tossed her coat over the back of a chair and flopped onto the couch, kicking off her boots with a sigh. "We deserve a drink after that," she said, her voice light and playful. She leaned over the small minibar and pulled out two miniature bottles of tequila. "Celebratory shot?"

Elara arched a brow, though a reluctant smile tugged at her lips. "Why not?" She took

the offered bottle, her fingers brushing Grace's in a way that felt far too deliberate, far too intimate.

They toasted silently and knocked back the shot. The burn slid down Elara's throat, warming her in a way that had nothing to do with alcohol.

Grace coughed, laughing at her own inability to take a shot, and leaned back against the counter, grinning. "Personally, I think we're nailing this."

Elara chuckled softly, the sound rare enough to make Grace's grin widen. "I suppose we are."

They poured a second drink—whiskey this time at Elara's insistence—no longer just a celebration, but a way to linger in the quiet, away from the family's judgmental eyes. As they sipped, the conversation drifted into safer territory: complaints about Elara's brother, Cate's wild stories, and the sheer ridiculousness of Eleanor's fur coat.

But despite the ease of the conversation, Elara's thoughts kept straying to Grace—her laugh, the sparkle in her hazel eyes, the way she sprawled so casually, so comfortably, as if she belonged here.

Grace leaned a little closer, her voice dipping conspiratorially. "Admit it, you had fun tonight."

Elara smirked. "Fun isn't exactly how I'd describe it."

"Come on," Grace teased, nudging Elara's knee with her own. "You love this."

Elara's breath caught, though she didn't know why. The teasing, the laughter, the proximity—it all felt too easy, too natural. She hadn't realized how close they'd gotten until now, their knees brushing, their hands resting within reach.

She tilted her glass, watching the amber liquid swirl inside. “It’s going well,” she murmured, though she wasn’t sure if she meant the evening or something else entirely.

Grace leaned in further, her knee pressing against Elara’s now, the warmth bleeding through their clothes. Her voice dropped to a playful whisper. “You know, I think we make a good team.”

And just like that, Elara was done for. Too close. Too warm. Too much.

Her heart thudded against her ribs as she looked at Grace—really looked at her—and suddenly the space between them felt like a fragile thread, ready to snap. She didn’t know who moved first, only that suddenly they were toe to toe, close enough that she could see the flecks of gold in Grace’s hazel eyes.

Elara swallowed, her throat dry from the alcohol. “Grace?—”

Grace’s smile softened, a quiet dare lingering in her gaze. “What?”

Elara didn’t answer. She couldn’t. Instead, she took one step closer, closing the remaining distance between them. There was nothing soft in this kiss, not tonight. As soon as their lips touched, Grace exploded. All of her light, her spontaneity, sparkled like a firecracker as she pulled Elara’s hair, making her gasp and deepen the kiss.

Elara’s world narrowed down to this moment, this kiss. She inhaled Grace’s sweet honey scent, filling her lungs as if she were drowning and Grace was her lifesaving air. The two stumbled back further, finding themselves pushed against that counter. Elara chuckled darkly as she remembered watching Grace squirm and open her legs in this very same spot last night. She began to kiss her way down Grace’s neck, biting and sucking at the crook, making Grace release that sweet moan she could not stop thinking about all day. But before she could attempt to reenact last’s night show,

Grace leaned back, her eyes dark. “Bed. Now.”

Grace lightly pushed Elara backward, as she began to tear off Elara’s designer suit jacket. Her hands hurried as if she couldn’t undress her fast enough. Not one to hand over control, Elara leaned down and picked Grace up, turning toward the bedroom.

When she made it through the doorway, Elara kicked the bedroom door closed behind her as she gently placed Grace down. She ran her hands through Grace’s hair, and continued their exploration down until she found the laces at the back of the corset. Slowly, she turned Grace around and began to loosen the ties deftly. With each inch of skin exposed, she kissed and then gently bit her way down Grace’s spine, until at last the dress pooled down to the floor. Grace stood shaking, gasping, as Elara kneeled behind her and gently hooked her fingers under the lace thong’s waistband, and slowly tugged it down. She followed the trail of lace with yet more kisses and licks, paying close attention to every sensitive spot all the way down to Grace’s ankles.

Grace stepped out of her underwear, and turned back to face Elara, looking down with her lips parted and her eyes dark with desperation. She whispered, “Please.”

Elara smiled wolfishly as she gripped Grace’s thighs. “Please what? Use your words, Grace.”

Grace trembled as she stood bare, looking down at Elara fully clothed. “I...need... I...”

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Elara leaned forward and kissed the side of Grace's knee, making her moan. "Tell me what you need, Grace." She nipped just above the knee on her inner thigh.

Grace threw her head back, her eyes fluttering as she moaned out, "You."

Elara turned to kiss the other inner thigh, and demanded, eyes dark, "You need me to what?" Her wolfish smile turned wicked, as she nipped the same spot she had kissed.

Grace's face had turned red, her face flickering from embarrassment and desire as she looked down at Elara, until she finally uttered, "Eat me out. Now. God. Please."

Elara kissed her thigh once more, before pushing her back onto the bed and praising her, "Good girl, Grace."

Grace gasped. "Fuck. That's hot."

Still on her knees, fully clothed, Elara moved forward between Grace's legs and kissed her way to the apex of Grace's thighs. She paused and looked up at Grace's face as she slid two fingers inside her slick core, watching intently as Grace moaned and writhed beneath her. She felt her own pussy pool with desire as she leaned down, finally giving Grace what she asked for.

She pulled her fingers out for a minute or two while she went to work with her mouth. The same as last night, devouring Grace with a hunger that had overcome her in a way she had never expected.

Although she had always enjoyed giving oral sex, it had never been something that

had taken over her completely as her hunger to devour Grace did.

Grace tasted sweeter than last night on her tongue. She pulled Grace's thighs wider with her hands so she could get her face pressed in as close as possible as she worked with her mouth and tongue.

As Grace's moans increased in intensity, she added her fingers back in, pushing three fingers easily inside Grace eliciting a deep guttural moan as they entered her.

She licked and suckled as she pumped her fingers inside of Grace with such fervor as if she could devour every ounce of her pleasure. When Grace began to clench around her fingers, she glanced up, wanting to soak in the way Grace's face twisted in pleasure. She moaned against Grace and in between licks said, "I want to hear you scream when you come in my mouth."

She began to pick up the pace, hooking her fingers and pumping faster as she sucked Grace's clitoris deep into her mouth and massaged it with her tongue. She felt Grace's clitoris swelling in her mouth and that beautiful feeling lodged in her brain. Grace began to shake and finally screamed out in pleasure as she came with another sweet gush. Elara continued pumping and suckling, wanting to consume every moment of her orgasm. When Grace finished, she slipped her fingers out and popped them in her own mouth as she looked into Grace's eyes. She licked and sucked the taste of Grace from her own fingers and enjoyed every second of it. She didn't want to waste a drop of Grace's pleasure.

"Fuck, Elara," Grace moaned at the sight and leaned forward, pulling Elara up off her knees and onto the bed with her. Her painted nails stood out stark against Elara's dark shirt as she made swift work of the buttons, desperate to gain access to her skin. Elara shifted, pulling off her clothes quickly as she straddled Grace. Finally getting Elara naked, Grace tried to wriggle out from beneath her, but Elara just chuckled as she kept her pinned down.

Again, she huskily demanded, “Tell me what you want, Grace.”

Determined, Grace slid her hands up Elara’s thighs, as she said, “I want to taste you. Please.”

“And how do you want me, Grace?”

A wicked look crossed Grace’s face as she blushed. “I want you to ride my face until you come.”

Elara clutched Grace’s face, leaning down as she pulled her face closer and said, “good girl,” before kissing her. Grace flopped back onto the bed and pulled Elara forward. Elara, flooded with desire at the mere thought of riding Grace’s face, positioned herself over Grace’s beautiful mouth.

She lowered herself onto Grace’s eager tongue. She already felt so very close to orgasm, it was all she could do to hold off and watch as Grace with her eyes closed and her hands gripping Elara’s thighs, began to lick and suck Elara’s pussy attentively.

It had barely been a minute before Elara exploded into climax, coming in Grace’s sweet obedient mouth.

The pleasure of the release was more than Elara had imagined. She rode the wave of the orgasm for ages, gripping Grace’s hair as she did so. She watched Grace’s face intently, as Grace opened her eyes as she licked the remnants of Elara’s orgasm from her.

As Elara’s orgasm subsided, the one thought she was consumed by was wanting to take more of Grace. Elara moved to slide under the sheets with Grace, pulling her into a passionate kiss, tasting herself on Grace’s lips. Elara squeezed one of her big

enticing nipples, making Grace moan into her mouth as she deepened the kiss. Elara continued her sweet torture as she placed her right thigh between Grace's thighs, against her soaking pussy. Grace writhed against her, moaning and gasping with each pinch, each bite. Elara kept one hand busy teasing Grace's nipple as she lowered her other hand pushing it between her thigh and Grace's pussy and slipped her fingers easily inside Grace once more. She added a fourth finger this time and elicited a sweet sweet moan from Grace as she pushed four fingers inside of her. She could feel Grace opening up for her and it was the most incredible feeling in the world.

Elara began to fuck Grace with her fingers, whilst still pinning her down with her body. Elara lowered her mouth to Grace's other pert nipple, sucking and biting, keeping Grace on the edge of pleasure and pain. Grace's nipples were simply delightful. They felt incredibly similar to the way Grace's lovely clitoris felt in Elara's mouth. Both were experiences Elara would never forget.

Seconds later, Grace came once more, her orgasm ripping through her as she screamed out in ecstasy.

Elara watched, rapt as she rode the last waves of Grace's climax with her fingers still deep inside her. She felt Grace melt, her body limp from exhaustion and pleasure. Elara kissed her temple, as she slowly slid her fingers out of her and drew her into her arms. "You okay?"

Eyes still closed, Grace murmured, "Mmmmm. Great."

Elara's face broke into a smile. "Can I get you anything? Water maybe?"

Grace croaked out, "Water would be nice."

Elara slipped out of bed and quickly returned with two bottles of water. She slipped back under the covers as she tried to hand Grace the bottle. Grace reached out, eyes

still mostly closed and head flat against the mattress.

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Elara chuckled. “You have to sit up to drink water. I can’t have you choking and dying, after all.”

Grace’s face broke into a grin as she pushed herself up on one elbow, sipping from the open water bottle. After she nearly drained half the bottle in one go, Grace handed the bottle back, and laid her head down on the pillow.

She smiled sleepily as she watched Elara place the bottles on the nightstand. “At least I’d die happy.”

Elara laughed, genuinely and wholeheartedly, as she snuggled in closer. Grace’s eyes flew open, her face full of pleasure and joy. Elara moved in, pulling Grace toward her and cradling her. The room was quiet, wrapped in the dim glow of the bedside lamp. The sheets rustled as Grace shifted, turning onto her side to face Elara. For a moment, neither of them spoke. Their breathing was still uneven, tangled like the blankets around their legs.

Grace’s voice was soft when she finally broke the silence. “Your dad said he’s proud of you.”

Elara stiffened, the weight of those words pressing down on her. “Did he?” she murmured, trying to keep her voice light, as if it didn’t matter.

“Yeah.” Grace’s fingers traced lazy patterns on Elara’s arm, her touch gentle, hesitant. “I think it’s the first time I’ve ever heard someone say that to you.”

Elara let out a low, humorless laugh. “That makes two of us.” She closed her eyes for

a beat, trying to smother the ache that came with those words. “It only took forty-five years and a fake girlfriend to make it happen.”

Grace’s hand stilled, resting warm against Elara’s skin. “It doesn’t have to be fake, though.” She said it quietly, not an accusation—just a thought floating in the space between them.

Elara opened her eyes, turning her head on the pillow to look at Grace. “And what exactly am I supposed to be proud of?” she asked, a hint of bitterness creeping in despite herself. “That I’ve built a business my family only acknowledges when it suits them? That they’ll approve of me, but only as long as I play by their rules?”

Grace frowned, her fingers brushing along Elara’s arm again in quiet reassurance. “That’s not what I meant. You’ve built something incredible. You’ve done it on your own terms, even when they didn’t support you.” She paused, biting her bottom lip. “You’re amazing, Elara. I mean it.”

Elara stared at her, something unfamiliar blooming in her chest. Grace’s words—simple and unpolished—landed with more weight than anything her family had ever said.

But Elara wasn’t used to praise that felt...real. Not like this.

She shifted closer, her hand brushing Grace’s waist under the covers. “What about you?” Elara asked, her voice low and curious. “What’s your dream, Grace? Because I know it can’t be...this.” She gestured vaguely toward the suite, meaning the job, the ruse, the life of being her assistant.

Grace gave a small, breathy laugh. “Definitely not this,” she admitted. “No offense.”

“None taken.” Elara’s lips twitched in a rare, teasing smile. “So? What’s the plan?”

Grace hesitated for a moment, as if saying the words out loud would make them too real. “I want to open a thrift shop,” she said, her voice small but steady. “A really good one. Like, curated stuff. Vintage finds. Weird, interesting pieces—stuff people didn’t know they needed until they saw it.”

Elara raised a brow. “A thrift shop?”

Grace shrugged. “I know it sounds silly?—”

“It doesn’t,” Elara cut in, her tone surprisingly gentle. “It sounds...like you.”

Grace smiled, a little shy, but there was still an undercurrent of uncertainty in her expression. “The problem is, I have no clue how to run a business. I thought maybe working with you would teach me, you know? How to be organized, how to actually make something work.”

Elara let out a soft chuckle. “You do realize you picked the least patient person on earth to learn from, right?”

Grace grinned. “Yeah. But you’re not all bad.”

Elara shook her head, amused. “Not exactly a glowing review.”

They both fell silent for a moment, the humor fading into something quieter, more meaningful. Elara shifted again, propping herself on one elbow so she could see Grace more clearly. “Why didn’t you tell me that before? About the thrift shop?”

Grace shrugged, her gaze dropping to the sheet between them. “I don’t know. I guess...I didn’t think you’d care. Or maybe I was scared you’d think it was stupid.”

Elara reached out, tucking a strand of Grace’s hair behind her ear. “It’s not stupid,”

she murmured, her voice soft. “And I do care.”

For a moment, the weight of the conversation hung between them—Elara letting someone in, truly in, for the first time in a long time, and Grace realizing that maybe, just maybe, Elara wasn’t as unreachable as she seemed.

Elara traced her thumb along the curve of Grace’s jaw, a gesture so uncharacteristically gentle it made Grace’s breath hitch. “I think you could do it,” Elara said quietly. “The thrift shop. I think you’d be great at it.”

Grace’s smile was slow, tentative. “Yeah?”

Elara gave a small nod. “Yeah.”

Their gazes locked, and for once, there were no walls between them. Just two people, tangled up in sheets and dreams, finally starting to see each other clearly.

The two talked late into the night, asking tentative questions about each other’s lives, their likes and dislikes, until sleep tugged them gently down into the world of dreams.

10

Grace awoke gently to the feeling of Elara slowly tracing shapes on her back. She knew it was late morning before she even opened her eyes. The sun peeking through the window warmed her bare back, and the sounds of birds chirping filled her ears. She slowly opened her eyes, blinking up at Elara, who was gazing at her sleepily. Grace felt her heart flip as she noticed the peaceful happiness that radiated from Elara.

Grace reached out, cupping Elara’s cheek as she smiled in return. Slowly, she leaned in close, watching Elara for any change in body language. Elara’s hand splayed against her back, continuing her soft touches. Grace felt overwhelmed with happiness and closed the distance between them, brushing her lips against Elara’s. This time, their kiss was gentle, charged with an emotion.

Grace moved, straddling Elara as she ran her hands through her hair. Elara sat up, holding Grace in her lap, as she softly explored every inch of available skin. Grace peppered kisses down Elara’s chin and nipped at the lobe of her ear. Continuing her journey, she kissed and licked her way down to Elara’s breasts and closed her mouth

around the dark pink nipple. Elara gasped, leaning back to provide Grace better access opening herself to Grace in a way she hadn't yet. Grace moved to the other, worshiping Elara with sultry kisses as she shifted to ride Elara's thigh, and slowly began to move her hips back and forth.

Grace moved one hand down the flat planes of Elara's stomach until she reached the slick wetness of her pussy. Elara's legs opened as though to invite her in. Gently, she slipped in one finger, then two, inside of Elara. Elara moaned as her own hand shifted, sliding against Grace's clitoris, before pushing lower and Grace felt Elara's fingers entering her.

Grace rode Elara's fingers, creating pressure on her clitoris as she mashed it down against the heel of Elara's hand. At the very same time, her own fingers worked deep inside of Elara, thrusting in and out in the same rhythm as her hip pressed against Elara's clitoris.

It was the first time Elara had allowed Grace to fuck her and Grace could see how big of a step it was for her to make herself vulnerable like this. Her blue eyes were wide with a trust that Grace hadn't seen in her before as they both looked into each other's eyes. Grace closed the space between them and kissed her tenderly, as though to tell her that she would take care of her.

They continued to move in tandem, in the most intricate dance, and Grace continued to kiss Elara gently, pushing her tongue lightly into Elara's mouth, probing and exploring.

She felt Elara tightening beneath her and around her fingers and at the same time she felt her own orgasm building.

"Come with me," she gasped into Elara's mouth.

And as they looked into each other's eyes, it was enough to tip them both over the edge.

Grace's orgasm was intense and drawn out in the same way that Elara's was as she writhed beneath her.

She kissed Elara again as they rode out their orgasm, fingers still buried inside of each other.

It felt like the most beautiful moment Grace could imagine. Seeing Elara come undone like this for her was something truly special.

Afterward, Grace leaned forward, placing her head in the crook of Elara's neck as she leaned back to sit against the head of the bed. Their limbs still tangled, Grace softly kissed her, breathing in her woodsy, spicy scent.

Something about this sex felt different, felt real. Elara's gentle touches grazed across her back as she nudged her nose against Grace's shoulder. Grace had never felt more content and less motivated to move. And that scared her. She was getting wrapped up, falling for the woman beneath the icy mask. But she was still unsure if anything between them was real.

After a few minutes of silently holding each other, Grace leaned back and looked into Elara's eyes.

"Elara, is this real? I don't mean 'am I dreaming,' but I need to know. Is this"—she waved her hand between the two of them—"real?"

Grace felt Elara physically stiffen and watched as that piercing blue gaze grew distant. She realized that Elara was going to pull away and avoid this conversation, but she refused to let her.

She continued, “I mean, fake relationships don’t usually include mind-blowing sex.”

Elara looked away, breaking eye contact as she said, “I wouldn’t know what a fake relationship includes. This would be my first.”

Grace felt the words sting, as if they had slapped her across the face. Elara moved, untangling herself from Grace as she slipped out of bed and made her way to the bathroom. Grace sat back, hugging her knees close to her chest as she chastised herself. Stupid. Stupid. I’m so stupid. She wrapped the duvet around herself, feeling too vulnerable sitting naked on the bed.

Elara emerged from the bathroom in another matching workout set, her hair tucked neatly behind her ears with a black beanie over her head. Grace couldn’t face looking at her, so she shifted to look out the window. She could see Elara out of the corner of her eye, watching her closely.

After a tense moment of silence, Elara announced quietly, “I’m going to work out.”

Without turning around, refusing to acknowledge the pain Elara had caused, Grace softly replied, “Sure.”

Elara audibly sighed as she strode out the suite. Grace lowered her head to her knees and let out a long sigh, doing her best to not cry.

After a long, hot shower, Grace wrapped herself in a plush white robe and grabbed her cell. She needed to talk to someone, and she knew exactly who to call. Wanting more space from the bedroom, she snuck out onto the suite’s balcony, her breath misting in the cold night air as she dialed. After a few rings, Aunt Lucy picked up, her voice light and familiar.

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“Well, well, if it isn’t my favorite disaster. How’s the fake girlfriend gig going? You seduce the Ice Queen yet?”

Grace groaned. “Oh my god, Aunt Lucy, please. I kissed her. In front of her whole family.”

There was a pause, followed by the sound of Lucy laughing hard. Grace pulled the phone away from her ear, grimacing as the laughter turned into a little wheeze.

Finally, Aunt Lucy blurted out, “Atta girl! Look at you—living the dream. So? How’d it go? Sparks flying? Fireworks? Or did she run screaming into the snow?”

Grace sighed, quietly explaining, “It was...intense. Way more than I expected. And maybe a lot more happened later. Okay, definitely a lot more happened. And it didn’t feel like just sex; it felt different, more somehow. I think she felt it too, but...”

Lucy quietly implored, “But what?”

Grace shivered as a breeze tickled her bare legs. She leaned back against the glass door as she sighed.

“She’s avoiding me. I tried to ask her if what we had was real, and she just clammed up and left. It’s driving me insane, Aunt Lucy. I just...what if she never says anything?”

Lucy sighed, the playful tone in her voice softened into something more serious.

“Sweetheart, people like Elara don’t exactly come with a user manual. You gotta understand, someone like her, all buttoned up and in control? She’s spent years building walls to keep herself safe. It’s not about you. It’s about her learning to let someone in.”

Grace rubbed her temple. “So what am I supposed to do? Just wait around while she decides whether or not I’m worth it?”

Aunt Lucy scoffed. “No, no. Waiting’s not the right word. You step back. You give her space and let her come to you. If she cares—and it sounds like she does—she’ll find her way. But you can’t force her.”

Grace stood in silence for a moment, working up the courage to continue. “And if she doesn’t?”

The pause on the other line was long as Grace heard Lucy shifting on the other end of the line, as if she’s choosing her words carefully.

“Then you have to walk away. I know it’s hard, but you can’t build something real if you’re the only one showing up for it.”

Grace felt her heart break at the idea. “I don’t know if I can do that, Aunt Lucy. It’s already starting to hurt, and we’re not even real.”

“That’s the thing, Grace. Real relationship or not, it sounds like your feelings are. And that’s okay. Just.. don’t lose yourself trying to break down her walls. If she’s worth it, she’ll meet you halfway.”

Grace closed her eyes, letting Lucy’s words sink in. The air felt colder now, but the knot in her chest loosened just a little. “Thanks, Aunt Lucy. I really needed this.”

With a smile in her voice, Lucy said, “Anytime, kid. Now go on. And remember, no more crazy stunts unless you’re gonna call me right after.”

Grace laughed despite herself, feeling just a little lighter. She said goodbye and hung up, staring out over the snow-covered landscape. Elara’s walls might be high, but for the first time, Grace thought she just might be worth climbing them—if Elara let her.

Grace waited for Elara to return, determined to crack that icy exterior and get back the Elara she had seen last night and this morning. She jumped at the sharp knock at the door and padded over to look through the peephole.

Although she figured it wouldn’t be Elara knocking, her heart still dropped in disappointment when she saw a hotel worker with a tray in their hand. She stood there, looking out the peephole for a moment longer, dumbfounded and disappointed. The staff member knocked again and called out, “Room service.”

Grace sighed and pulled the door open. “I didn’t order room service.”

The hotel worker shifted his weight nervously. “Ms. Silver asked for this to be delivered to you.”

Grace rolled her eyes as she motioned for him to enter. As he lifted the cover, Grace noted that only one serving of breakfast was plated. She felt frustration heat her veins as she turned on the worker.

“And did Ms. Silver tell you when she would return?”

The poor man looked like he was going to be sick as he pulled out a white envelope and relayed his message. “She included this note and asked that I ensure you received it.”

Grace stiffened, but guilt at causing the worker such discomfort bubbled up in her

stomach. She sighed as she looked at the eggs Benedict and cappuccino. Putting on a smile, she turned back to the staff member and turned up the charm. “Thank you so much. I appreciate you doing all this.”

Spotting Elara’s wallet on the table, she strode over and grabbed all of the cash—a hefty three hundred dollars—and handed it over to the man.

“For your troubles.”

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The worker's eyes widened as he stammered, "I couldn't possibly... This is too much."

Grace smiled mischievously as she closed the man's hands around the cash. "I insist."

She ushered the man out of the suite, refusing to hear his protests.

"Have a good day! And if you see Ms. Silver, make sure to tell her it was me who tipped you."

Grace slammed the door with a little too much fervor. Well, if she is going to insist I act rich and play along, I'm going to at least do it in style.

Grace sat, grabbing the cappuccino and drinking deeply before she opened the envelope. Inside was a handwritten note.

Grace, I've been pulled into meetings until dinner. Please enjoy the spa day I've booked for you. - E.

Of course her handwriting was pristine. She threw the note down in frustration and leaned back in her chair. Climbing those walls was going to be a lot harder if she couldn't even find Elara.

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Elara paced outside the suite door, wondering if she should go inside or retreat to the dining room and wait for Grace there. Even though she had spent the day delving into

business meetings and hikes, Elara had felt like part of her very being was pulling her toward this door the whole time. When she had met the investors for a coffee break, she couldn't help but wonder if Grace had enjoyed her cappuccino this morning. While out on the hike, she watched her siblings and their spouses hold hands as they trekked through the snow, and she couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like to have Grace's hand warmed between hers.

Several times she had caught herself daydreaming about the way Grace had fit so perfectly in her arms. Instead of shop talk, she had wished she could hear Grace moan her name again. It was maddening. She felt consumed, swallowed whole by emotions and desires that she refused to name or give credence to. Less than a week ago, Grace was just a bad secretary who Elara was considering firing. Yet now, she somehow felt empty without her bubbly presence lighting up the room.

Elara straightened her spine as she paced past the door, deciding she would turn on her heel and leave. She couldn't let herself get so caught up in this delusion, because that was all it was. A very pleasant, persistent delusion. As she made her way to the end of the hall, she felt frozen, unable to call the elevator and run from Grace's orbit. She ran her hands through her hair, mussing her perfectly straight hair.

Dammit.

She walked back toward the suite door slowly, wondering if she was making a mistake yet again. Before she could change her mind once again, Grace opened the door. The two looked at each other silently, both shocked at the other's presence. Elara searched Grace's face, unsure what she would find in her expression, and afraid of why she was so desperate to know what Grace was thinking. Grace's eyes slowly softened as she took in Elara, her glance pausing at Elara's hair. Elara quickly smoothed her hair as she scrounged her brain for anything to say.

Grace beat her to the punch. "Elara, what on earth are you doing out here? I thought

you would be downstairs.”

Elara’s eyes swept Grace from head to toe, appreciating the long-sleeved black dress that sparkled darkly as it pooled down to the floor. She averted her gaze as she finally answered. “I came to escort you.”

She looked up at Grace, seeing her light up and felt her stomach twist as her heart flipped. No, she thought. I can’t get caught up again.

She continued, “I thought it may seem strange if we arrived separately. I wouldn’t want to give the family any reason to question the status of our relationship.”

Grace deflated, her light and joyful personality dimming almost visibly. She stepped into the hall and turned her back to Elara as she shut the door, muttering under her breath. “We wouldn’t want anyone to question the status of our relationship.”

Elara’s heart raced, and every thought disappeared as she took in how the low, backless cut of the dress scooped down to the base of Grace’s spine. She inhaled sharply, trying to clear her mind and find control. Instead, Grace’s sweet honey and cream scent filled her lungs. She felt as if she was being pulled into a black hole, her control slowly disintegrating as she orbited closer to the center.

Grace never turned back toward Elara and took no notice of the desire dripping through her veins. She simply turned toward the elevator and started walking with purpose, her heels clicking loudly. Elara stood frozen, watching and appreciating Grace’s retreat. She closed her eyes and rubbed her hands over her face as if she could wipe away the image of the fabric teasingly shifting over Grace’s curves. Unable to exit her orbit, Elara followed the pull of Grace as she strode down the hall and closed the distance between the two.

The bell chimed, and the doors slid open, revealing the mirrored wall of the elevator.

Grace looked up at her reflection and locked eyes with Elara as she stepped up behind her. Elara placed her hand on the small of Grace's back and guided her into the elevator. She felt as if her hand burned, singed by the heat of Grace's body. Not wanting to lose the thin sliver of control she could maintain, Elara snatched her hand back and leaned back against the elevator wall. Grace slowly turned to face the doors, doing her best not to look over at Elara, who had not looked away once.

The dining room buzzed with the low murmur of conversation and the soft clink of silverware against china. Elara sat perfectly upright, her posture impeccable, glancing now and then at her parents, who were deep in conversation with her siblings. She was alert to every small gesture from her family, each subtle shift in tone—a reminder that she had to keep her guard up.

Her father raised his glass for a toast, his voice booming. "To Elara, for yet another success under her belt. This celebration has been spectacular so far. May she continue to bring the family pride."

A wave of polite applause circled the table, and Elara gave a small, restrained smile. But her fingers, hidden beneath the table, tapped restlessly against her leg. She could feel Grace watching her from beside her, the warmth of her gaze like a faint current, hard to ignore.

The familiar question came, sharp and clear, from her mother. "Elara, darling, you've certainly made strides in the business lately. It's wonderful to see you finally accomplish something and how much more complete your life seems now that you have begun to consider the next steps and continuing the family legacy."

Elara's smile tightened, irritation curling at the edges of her composure. Her eyes dropped to her plate, a dozen cutting replies lined up in her mind. But before she could speak, Grace's hand covered hers, gentle and steady.

“Actually,” Grace began, her voice warm but firm, “I think Elara’s accomplished more than most could even dream of in her position. She’s already achieved so much—and she’s done it all while balancing expectations that most people wouldn’t understand.”

Elara’s chest tightened, her hand still beneath Grace’s touch. She glanced sideways, caught off guard by Grace’s sincerity, by the calm conviction in her voice. Grace was looking straight at her mother, undeterred by the sharp gaze fixed on her.

“Oh?” her mother’s brow arched delicately. “And what expectations would those be?”

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Grace didn't look away, her hand giving Elara's a slight, reassuring squeeze. "The expectation to be perfect all the time. To be tough, even when people assume she doesn't feel any pressure at all. But I know how much she puts into everything she does—how much she cares about her family." She looked directly at Elara, her gaze so open, so unguarded, it made Elara's heart clench. "She has a kind of strength and dedication that deserves a lot more appreciation."

A quiet fell over the table, her family's expressions shifting as they absorbed Grace's words. Elara felt the heat rise in her cheeks, the praise unexpectedly making her feel exposed, almost vulnerable. She straightened, looking away, feeling as though the intensity of Grace's gaze might burn through her.

Grace leaned closer, her voice a low murmur just for Elara. "You don't have to keep proving yourself to everyone, you know. You're allowed to just...be yourself."

Elara swallowed, a flurry of emotions she couldn't place stirring within her. For a fleeting moment, she wanted to say something real, to let Grace see a glimpse of what lay beneath. But that feeling scared her—scared her enough to make her pull back.

"Thank you, Grace," she said, her tone polite, controlled. She slipped her hand out from Grace's grip, turning her attention back to her plate, doing her best to ignore the pang of regret that came with her detachment.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Grace's expression falter, a flicker of disappointment that made Elara's heart ache. But this was how it had to be. She couldn't afford to be drawn in, not when every instinct screamed at her to keep her walls up.

Yet even as she distanced herself, she felt the fracture forming, the strange realization that Grace had seen her, really seen her. And as much as she tried to shut it out, Elara couldn't ignore the terrifying truth: part of her didn't want Grace to stop.

As the dinner continued, Grace tried to catch Elara's gaze, her hand reaching out to linger on Elara's arm, but Elara didn't look up. Instead, she fixed her eyes on her plate, her jaw tight, and gave only a curt nod in response. Grace's hand slipped away, her fingertips trailing over Elara's sleeve, but Elara stayed firmly in her own space, her posture straight and rigid.

Grace shifted slightly, her face falling for just a moment before she recovered, smiling warmly as she engaged Elara's brother in conversation. But every now and then, Elara noticed Grace glancing her way, confusion in her eyes.

Moments later, Grace tried again, this time making a lighthearted remark to Elara.

"You know, your family has a taste for these multi-course dinners. I don't know how you keep up!" she teased, her voice cheerful.

Elara merely glanced at her, gave a tight smile, and then turned her attention back to her father, as if she hadn't even heard Grace's comment. The warmth Grace had tried to bring to the table hung in the air, unanswered.

Grace's smile faltered. Elara felt a pang of guilt as she saw Grace withdraw, her expression briefly clouded with hurt. Yet she couldn't bring herself to soften, not now, not when every word of praise from Grace felt like a crack in her carefully constructed walls.

Later, Grace made one more attempt to close the distance, reaching for Elara's hand under the table. But as soon as Grace's fingers brushed against hers, Elara pulled her hand away, folding it carefully in her lap. She kept her gaze fixed on her wineglass,

determined not to let Grace see even the smallest hint of her own inner conflict.

Grace sat back, hands resting awkwardly in her lap as she looked around the table, clearly searching for some other way to bridge the gap Elara had opened between them. Elara didn't look up, instead turning to her sister-in-law with a question about her latest project, making a point to lean into the conversation as if Grace wasn't there.

Grace was quiet for the rest of the meal. Elara forced herself to keep her focus on her family's voices, her plate, anything other than the hurt glint she'd caught in Grace's eyes. But even as she kept her back turned, she felt the weight of that wounded silence pressing down on her, leaving her questioning whether her walls could really hold.

Elara and Grace stepped into the elevator together, the silence between them thick and heavy. The doors slid shut, enclosing them in a small space that amplified every breath, every heartbeat. Elara fixed her eyes on the numbers above the door, watching them climb, but she could feel Grace's presence beside her—an electric pull she couldn't ignore.

Neither of them spoke. The awkwardness from dinner lingered, mingling with the charged silence of the elevator. Grace stole a glance at Elara, her lips parting as if she were about to speak, then hesitated, catching herself. Elara felt the brief flicker of Grace's gaze, the warmth of her standing so close, and fought the urge to turn, to reach out, to explain herself—or maybe just to end this silent standoff.

The numbers ticked upward far too slowly. Elara's hands balled into fists at her sides, her pulse quickening despite herself. She could still feel the sting of Grace's confusion, her disappointment. But layered beneath it was something else, something harder to resist—a heat she knew she couldn't keep ignoring.

The doors opened on their floor. Elara stepped out first, her strides brisk, though she sensed Grace following a step behind her. When they reached the door to their suite, Elara stopped, feeling Grace's breath at her shoulder as they waited in tense silence. She fumbled briefly with the key card, and in the quiet, she could hear Grace shift behind her, a subtle, nervous movement.

The door clicked open, and Elara walked into the suite, Grace right behind her. She moved to turn, to break the ice with some cool, dismissive comment—but then, without thinking, she looked at Grace.

In the dim light of the room, Grace's face was open, her eyes filled with a mixture of confusion and something else—something that mirrored Elara's own tightly held feelings. Grace looked hurt, yes, but there was a longing there, raw and unmistakable, as if she were daring Elara to take a step forward.

And before she could talk herself out of it, Elara did.

In one swift movement, Elara closed the distance between them. Her hands found Grace's shoulders, and for a brief moment, she hesitated, her control wavering. She could see Grace's lips part, her breath catching. Then Elara leaned in, her mouth finding Grace's, and all the tension, the frustration, the confusion burned between them.

It wasn't a gentle kiss. Elara's lips were hard, almost punishing, driven by a mix of desire and resentment, a need to silence her own doubts. She felt Grace respond, her hands pressing into Elara's back, pulling her closer, as if she wanted to bridge the chasm Elara had created. But even in the heat of the kiss, Elara kept herself guarded, her hands gripping Grace's shoulders with a desperate intensity, as if trying to keep herself from giving in completely.

For one suspended moment, they were locked together, breathing each other in, a

tangled mess of fire and frustration. Then the kiss turned into something more, a fight for control and a fight for love, the tension ebbing and flowing between the two as if waging a war between two pressed lips. Elara felt herself being worn down by the ocean of emotions flowing from Grace, and refused to lose her last line of defense.

Turning into stone and flame, an impenetrable wall and a fire consuming, Elara shifted Grace to stumble towards the bed, moving her lips down her neck to nip and consume while she built her walls back up. She continued her trail of kisses as she deftly unzipped and undressed Grace, leaving her bare skin on display. Elara's hands dug deep into her soft skin, soaking up each drop of warmth as she left her mark. She lifted Grace and plopped her down on the bed, pushing her back against the mattress.

Grace gasped, her eyes wide as Elara crawled over her, caging her in between her arms. Elara continued her caresses down Grace's body, stopping to pay special attention to her breasts. Elara kissed and licked and nipped her way down to Grace's hips, savoring the way she squirmed beneath her. She placed her hands on both of Grace's hips, pinning her to the bed as she kissed her inner thighs and then finally that sweet heat of her soaking pussy. Elara lavished her, sucking her labia and her clitoris until she felt Grace tremor with pleasure. She kept her hands strong on Grace's hips, not letting her squirm and rock, pinning her with pleasure. When Grace finally screamed out her name, shaking with the orgasm that rocked through her, Elara moved off of the bed and stood at the end of the mattress.

She looked down at Grace, sweaty and breathless, still coming down from the intensity of her orgasm and felt an insatiable need to hold her, to make her scream over and over. But as Grace looked up and held out her hand in a silent request for Elara to come back to bed, she felt that stone wall close up, shackling her to her control. She could see Grace's brows furrowed in confusion and then contort in pain as she realized Elara would not be joining her. Elara's throat tightened up as she turned on her heel and walked to the bathroom, locking the door behind her.

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Grace lay alone in the bed, the sheets cooling beside her where Elara had been just moments before. She stared up at the ceiling, barely able to process the ache left in the room, in her chest. Her skin still tingled from Elara's touch, her lips slightly swollen from their fierce, breathless kisses. Yet instead of the warmth she'd hoped would linger, all she felt was an empty chill settling in around her.

She blinked against the dark, trying to push down the sting of tears gathering in her eyes. It felt like every part of her had been laid bare for Elara, a vulnerability she hadn't planned on but had surrendered to, drawn in by the fire in Elara's gaze, the urgency in her touch. And then, without a word, Elara had slipped away, leaving nothing but silence and the twisted sheets behind.

A knot formed in Grace's throat, tight and burning. She was confused, yes—unable to make sense of how someone could kiss her like that, touch her like that, only to pull away so completely, so easily. But under the confusion, anger simmered, raw and undeniable. How dare Elara act like this was something she could just take and leave as she pleased? How dare she walk away, leaving Grace here to put herself back together, alone?

Grace turned onto her side, her fingers gripping the edge of the pillow as she fought to steady her breath. She tried to remember every look Elara had given her, every whispered word that might explain this, but all that came to mind were the moments of coldness, the distance Elara kept forcing between them, as if Grace were something she needed to keep at arm's length.

But this wasn't something Grace could just let slide, not anymore. She wouldn't allow herself to be pulled close one moment then pushed away the next like some

convenience for Elara to indulge in and discard. Her heart ached with something deeper than anger, a hurt that ran all the way down to the bones. But beneath that hurt was a spark of something harder, something determined.

Sitting up, Grace ran a hand through her hair, her fingers clenching into her tangled curls. She wouldn't lie here waiting, hoping Elara might come back to give her an answer. No, she would confront Elara, demand the truth. She needed to know what this meant, to understand why Elara felt the need to keep building walls, even as they tore them down together.

Her heart pounded with a mix of hurt and resolve as she got out of bed, pulling on her robe and bracing herself for whatever might come. Elara had left her with a wound that needed healing—or, at the very least, an answer. And she wasn't going to rest until she got one.

Grace sat on the edge of the bed, her hand clenched in the fabric of her robe as she listened to the water running in the bathroom, the sound grating against her raw nerves. She'd pulled herself out of bed, determined to get answers, but now, each second of waiting only made the wound deepen. She ran her fingers through her tangled curls, the silence amplifying every flicker of doubt and hurt that gnawed at her.

Her mind replayed their moments together—every look, every whispered word—and with each one, the coldness that had crept into Elara's eyes became sharper, more damning. Grace could still feel the intensity of Elara's touch on her skin, the way it had shattered her walls and made her believe, however briefly, that something real existed between them. But now, all she felt was the emptiness left behind.

The water stopped, and Grace took a shaky breath, her heart thudding as she braced herself. Elara couldn't keep pulling her close one moment then pushing her away the next. Not anymore. This wasn't something Grace could just let slide, not after

everything they'd shared. Her heart ached with a hurt that cut to the bone, yet beneath that pain was a spark of something harder—a determination to finally get the truth, whatever it might cost.

When the bathroom door creaked open, Grace stood, the weight of her emotions coiled tightly in her chest. Elara stepped out, her hair damp, her face blank, every line of her posture guarded. The sight of her, so cold and distant, sent a fresh surge of anger and hurt rushing through Grace.

“Elara,” she began, her voice barely above a whisper but filled with all the pain and resolve she'd been holding back. “What the hell was that?”

Elara's gaze flicked to her, impassive, and for a brief moment, something almost like guilt flashed in her eyes—but it was gone just as quickly, replaced by that steely, unyielding expression Grace had come to know all too well.

“Grace, I thought we understood each other,” Elara replied, her tone as cold as her expression. “This—us—was always just an arrangement. Nothing more.”

Grace's chest tightened, her fingers clenching into fists at her sides as the words hit her, each one a blade. Her voice shook as she spoke, barely holding back the pain lacing her words. “You can't honestly believe that, Elara. You can't just...kiss me like that, have sex with me like that, and then act like none of it matters.”

Elara's face didn't soften; if anything, it hardened. “I never asked you to put meaning into this, Grace. If you decided to get attached, that's your problem, not mine.”

The words stung, but Grace didn't back down. She took a step closer, her voice rising as frustration mixed with heartbreak. “You're lying. I know you feel something; you wouldn't have let me in otherwise. But you're so damn scared of being vulnerable that you'd rather throw this away than admit you care.”

Elara's jaw tightened, her voice cold and clipped. "Maybe I don't care, Grace. Maybe this was just...convenient."

The words left Grace reeling, a fresh wave of hurt and betrayal crashing over her. She swallowed hard, refusing to let the tears that burned her eyes fall. "So, that's it? After everything we've shared, I'm just convenient?"

Elara's gaze turned icy, her tone dismissive. "Yes, Grace. That's exactly what this is. If you can't handle that, then maybe you should have kept your feelings to yourself."

Grace's heart shattered, each cold word a hammer blow to her resolve. She felt her pulse thudding in her ears, every fiber of her being screaming for her to stay and fight, to keep pushing. But she couldn't—couldn't bear to stand here and let Elara cut her down piece by piece.

Without another word, she turned toward the closet, her vision blurring as she gathered the few belongings that were truly hers, leaving the clothes Elara had given her untouched. Each small movement felt excruciating, her heart breaking as she pulled on her shirt in the charged silence, her every action a silent plea for Elara to say something, to stop her from leaving.

But Elara said nothing, watching her with a mask of indifference that cut deeper than any words could.

As Grace pulled her bag over her shoulder, she forced herself to meet Elara's gaze one last time. Her voice was barely a whisper, thick with hurt and resolve. "Goodbye, Elara."

She turned and walked out of the room, the door clicking softly shut behind her. With each step down the hall, she could feel the weight of her own heartache pressing down on her, but she didn't look back. She couldn't bear to, couldn't let herself hope

for something she knew Elara would never give.

The cold night air bit at Grace's skin as she stepped outside the resort, wrapping her arms around herself as she waited for the Uber. She shivered, her eyes stinging as she stared out at the dark expanse of Lake Tahoe. The water was still, the reflection of the stars scattered across its surface—an indifferent beauty that felt painfully at odds with the hollowness spreading through her chest.

Her phone buzzed, the app notifying her that the driver had arrived. She glanced up and saw a car pull up, headlights casting a pale glow over the driveway. She forced herself to walk forward, to keep moving, even as her heart begged her to turn around, to run back inside and confront Elara one last time. But she knew it wouldn't matter; Elara's cold, detached gaze would still be there, as unyielding as stone.

The driver rolled down his window as she approached. "Grace?" he asked, his voice kind and warm.

She nodded, mumbling a quiet "yes," as she climbed into the back, pulling the door shut behind her. She felt the ache sharpen as she settled into the seat, her hands clenching around the strap of her bag. The car began to move, pulling away from the resort, from Elara, from every painful reminder of what she'd thought they could be.

The silence stretched as they drove, broken only by the hum of the engine and the occasional crackle of the radio. Grace stared out the window, watching the dark trees blur past, her reflection faint and ghostly in the glass. She looked at herself—the hurt in her own eyes, the lines of exhaustion and sorrow etched into her face—and felt an overwhelming urge to cry, but she held it back, clinging to whatever was left of her composure.

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As they passed a small cabin, lights glowing warmly in the window, the driver spoke, his voice breaking the quiet. “Lake Tahoe’s beautiful, huh? So peaceful at night,” he said, his tone friendly, oblivious to the turmoil swirling within her. “Were you staying up here for a little getaway? Looks like the perfect place for a vacation.”

Grace’s lips tightened as she swallowed, forcing herself to answer. “No,” she replied, her voice soft, barely audible. “Just work.”

The words hung in the air, sounding hollow even to her own ears. She’d come here with Elara to play a role, to pretend, but it had felt like so much more than just work—at least to her. Now, saying it out loud felt like a final admission, a confirmation of how little it had meant to Elara, how foolish she’d been to hope for something real.

The driver nodded, a sympathetic look in the rearview mirror. “I hear ya,” he said, a friendly smile in his eyes. “They make it sound glamorous, but work trips can be brutal.”

She forced a smile, a small, tight expression that didn’t reach her eyes. “Yeah,” she murmured, looking away quickly before he could see the tears threatening to spill.

The minutes dragged on, the highway stretching endlessly in front of them. Grace let her head rest against the cool glass, closing her eyes, but every time she tried to push Elara’s face out of her mind, she only saw it more clearly—the warmth in Elara’s eyes during those brief moments when her guard had slipped, followed by the cold dismissal that had shattered her illusions. Each memory twisted the knife a little deeper, and her heart ached, raw and bruised.

She opened her eyes, staring blankly at the passing headlights, wondering how she'd allowed herself to fall so hard, to believe that Elara could ever truly let her in. It felt foolish now, like a mistake she should have seen coming. But the pain ran too deep to simply brush it off; she'd given Elara a part of herself she couldn't easily take back.

The city lights of Sacramento finally appeared in the distance, a faint glow on the horizon, but the sight brought no relief, only a sense of emptiness. She was going back to the life she'd had before Elara, yet it felt irreparably different now, like she'd left a part of herself behind at that resort, abandoned in the cold, silent room.

The driver cleared his throat as they neared her apartment, glancing back at her in the rearview mirror. "Hope it wasn't all bad up there," he said, offering a comforting smile. "Sometimes work surprises you."

She managed another tight smile, nodding, even as her chest tightened painfully. "Yeah," she replied, her voice barely steady. "Sometimes it does."

As they pulled up to her building, she thanked him softly, her voice barely more than a whisper. She climbed out, her legs feeling leaden as she walked toward her door, her bag heavy in her hand. She wanted to drop it, to let it all go, but instead, she forced herself to keep moving, to put one foot in front of the other, even as her heart felt shattered beyond repair.

And as she closed her apartment door behind her, she finally allowed herself to let go, the tears spilling over as she slid down against the wall, the ache filling the empty silence.

The once warm bed felt vast and cold as Elara tossed and turned, tangling her legs in the sheets and making a mess of the pillows. Every time she closed her eyes, all she

could see was the hurt in Grace's eyes. The silence in the room was deafening, as if all sounds disappeared after the door clicked shut behind Grace. She had once thought of Grace's emotions as an ocean berating her stone walls, eroding away her defenses. Now, she felt as if she were drowning on land, gasping for air and breathing in sand, making her throat raw and her heart heavy.

Breathing deep, trying to find her center of calm, Elara filled her lungs with Grace's honey-sweet scent. The anger bubbled up in her stomach, making her feel sick. Elara sat up in a fury, throwing the sheets and blankets off the bed as she punched a pillow. She strode over to the sitting room, desperate for a dram to calm her nerves. Elara methodically poured her drink as her hands shook. In search of any relief, she quickly downed the whiskey in one gulp and poured another.

Elara leaned against the wall, fuming as she played their argument over in her mind. Elara's hands tightened around the glass, her knuckles white as she downed the whiskey, feeling the familiar burn in her throat. She glared at the empty glass, then poured a third, her mind churning as fragments of their argument echoed in her ears.

"You can't honestly believe that, Elara. You can't just kiss me like that, have sex with me like that, and then act like none of it matters."

The words twisted in her mind, poking at her pride, fueling her anger. How could Grace think she had any right to demand so much? They'd had an arrangement—clear, simple, no strings attached. Grace had known that from the start. She had no business expecting more.

Elara clenched her teeth, staring into her drink as her chest tightened. She'd never asked for this, never asked Grace to care so much. I didn't ask her to make me feel anything, she thought bitterly, a familiar wave of frustration building inside her. Grace had pushed and pried, refusing to accept the boundaries Elara had worked so hard to keep intact.

Her gaze dropped to the floor, the memory of Grace's tear-filled eyes flashing in her mind. She'd been so...vulnerable, so open, begging for something Elara didn't know how to give. Why couldn't she just let it be?

But as the thought settled, a sliver of doubt crept in, nagging at the edges of her anger. She remembered the way Grace had looked at her—not with blame or resentment, but with a deep, aching hurt, as though Elara had reached into her chest and ripped out her heart. Elara's throat tightened, and she swallowed hard, pushing down the rising wave of guilt.

Maybe she didn't deserve that, a small voice whispered, but Elara shoved it down, clinging to her anger like a lifeline.

Yet, as she stared blankly at the wall, the anger began to ebb, replaced by a gnawing emptiness. She replayed every sharp word, every icy response she'd thrown at Grace, each one a defense she'd clung to out of fear. A fear that now felt hollow, pointless, leaving her with nothing but the memory of Grace's retreating back and the silence that had fallen in her wake.

Maybe I'm the one who's afraid, the thought whispered again, this time louder, undeniable. She had watched Grace leave without saying a word, knowing it was what she'd wanted—yet now, the emptiness that filled the room felt like a punishment. She'd pushed Grace away, but now, alone in the cold silence, she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd just lost something real, something precious.

Elara's hand shook as she lifted the glass to her lips again, the whiskey now offering no relief, no numbing comfort. All she felt was the ache, a hollow, suffocating ache that seemed to spread through her chest, filling every corner of her heart. She squeezed her eyes shut, but all she could see was Grace's face, the hope in her eyes when they'd first kissed, the warmth that had lingered in every touch, every word, even as Elara had tried to deny it.

And then she saw the moment that warmth had broken, replaced by the look of betrayal, of pain, as Elara's words had struck deep. She'd torn down Grace's hope without a second thought, like it meant nothing to her. But it didn't mean nothing, she realized, her chest tightening painfully. It never did.

A shaky breath escaped her lips, and before she could stop herself, a tear slipped down her cheek, hot and bitter. She swiped at it angrily, but another followed, and another, until the walls she'd built around herself began to crumble. She sank to the floor, the glass slipping from her fingers as the weight of her own actions crashed over her.

The reality hit her like a wave, stealing her breath, leaving her raw and exposed. She hadn't just hurt Grace; she'd hurt herself, wounding the part of her that had dared to hope, that had longed for something real, something she'd never thought she could have.

Her shoulders shook as the tears came faster, her heart aching with a regret so deep it felt like it might swallow her whole. She pressed a hand to her mouth, stifling a sob, her chest heaving as the pain she'd tried so hard to deny finally broke free, flooding her with the truth she'd been too afraid to face.

She'd pushed Grace away, again and again, trying to keep her heart safe. But now, with Grace gone, the emptiness felt unbearable—a hollow ache that no amount of anger, no amount of pride, could ever fill.

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Curling into herself, Elara let the tears fall, each one a release, a reminder of everything she'd lost. And for the first time, she let herself feel it all—every ounce of pain, every sliver of regret—knowing there was no one to blame but herself.

Later, Elara felt the tears begin to dry as if she had hollowed out all the parts of herself she had tried to bury deep, and she felt empty and cold. She sat up on the floor and looked around at the mess around her. Her glass had shattered when she dropped it; the dress Grace had worn earlier was still on the floor, her heels kicked off in separate directions across the room. Elara felt her heart squeeze, wanting to wring out any last tears. Every inch of this room had some piece of Grace, and she felt as if she would break if she had to look at any of it any longer. She knew she should go after Grace; she should call her and beg her to come back, but Elara still felt like a hollowed-out shell and was too afraid of what Grace would say to her.

Elara sighed as she stood up and made her way over to the room phone. With a press of one button, she had called housekeeping, requesting the sheets be changed and the mess cleaned up ASAP. There would be no sleep for Elara this evening. She knew that. It was pointless to wait for the sunrise surrounded by the evidence of her mistakes. Instead, Elara decided to do the only thing she knew would clear her mind, however briefly. She donned her workout clothes and a warm jacket and rushed from the room, desperate to get away from the suite.

When she made it to the gym, she got on the treadmill and began her routine. Running had always been her escape. She loved the way her muscles burned, her lungs ached, and her mind emptied. When she ran, the world narrowed down to the next step, the next mile. There was nothing but what was directly ahead. Her daily five miles wasn't going to cut it today. She ran until the sun began to rise and she felt

like she was going to collapse, and then she ran a mile more after that. She savored that last mile, the pain and the elation mixing to wash away anything else.

Over the past week, Elara had avoided the family for breakfast and lunch in the hopes of reducing their interactions with Grace. However, when Elara faced the thought of spending time alone, she found herself wandering to her parent's suite for their private family breakfast gathering.

The family's chatter hummed in the background, and the clink of silverware punctuated the quiet. Elara sat at the head of the table, her usual calm façade in place, but her stomach twisted. Grace should have been here. She'd been present for nearly every family event so far, and yet, this morning—after all the meals, the celebrations, the conversations—she was conspicuously absent.

Victor, as always, was the first to notice. He set his coffee cup down with a precise motion, his gaze sweeping the table before landing on the empty seat beside Elara.

"Where's Grace?" he asked, his tone neutral but laced with curiosity. The silence that followed felt suffocating.

Elara's breath caught. It was the question she had been dreading, the one she knew would come.

"She's not here," Elara replied, keeping her voice steady despite the knot in her chest. She forced herself to look around the table, avoiding her father's steady gaze. But her mother had already noticed.

Her mother raised an eyebrow, her face an unreadable mask as she set her napkin down carefully. "Not here? But she's been with us at every event. Why wouldn't she join us today?" Her tone was polite but expectant, like it was the natural course of things.

Elara's eyes darted to her sister, Cate, who gave her a curious glance before returning her attention to her mother. James sat back in his chair, his expression thoughtful but waiting for Elara to respond. Eleanor observed everything in silence, her sharp eyes missing nothing.

Elara felt the weight of their gazes. She had never been the one to share personal details with her family, and this was no exception. But today, everything felt raw, too fragile to conceal any longer.

"She left," Elara said quietly, her voice barely rising above a whisper. She didn't dare meet their eyes. "It was my fault."

There was a collective pause. Margaret looked at her, her expression unreadable, and Victor leaned forward slightly, his gaze narrowing.

"What do you mean it's your fault?" he asked, the concern clear in his voice now.

Elara swallowed hard. She could feel the walls closing in around her, but she couldn't stop now. She had to explain, even if it scared her more than anything she had ever done.

"I...I pushed her away," Elara said, the words tumbling out with a heaviness she couldn't disguise. "I didn't want to admit it, but I was falling in love with her. And it scared me. I couldn't let myself be vulnerable, not with her...not with anyone."

The words hung in the air, and the silence that followed felt like a thick fog. Cate shifted in her chair, her lips slightly parted in surprise. James glanced at their father, then back at Elara. Margaret's face softened, but there was still a quiet intensity behind her eyes.

"Elara," Victor said, his voice gentler than usual. "You can't just.. run away from

something like this. You've spent so long building this life, but you can't keep pretending it's enough. Not if it's costing you everything else."

Elara's eyes stung. She hadn't wanted to hear it, not like this, but his words cut through her defenses.

"I wasn't ready," she whispered, her throat tightening. "I thought I could control everything—my business, my life, my relationships. But with Grace, I couldn't. And it terrified me."

Margaret's gaze softened, but there was an edge of concern beneath her composure. "You've been so focused on perfection, on control, Elara," she said quietly. "But this...this isn't about control. It's about being real. It's about letting yourself be loved, not just admired from a distance."

Cate leaned forward, her voice light but laced with something deeper. "You really pushed her away because you were scared of falling in love?" she asked, almost teasing. "You? The Elara Silver I know would never let fear dictate anything. But love...that's different, isn't it?"

Elara looked at her sister, the bitterness in her chest rising. She had never let herself feel things like this, had buried it all beneath a well-maintained façade. And now, faced with her family's questions, she couldn't stop the rush of emotion.

"I didn't want to be vulnerable," Elara admitted, her voice cracking slightly. "I didn't want to fall in love with someone who could leave, who could hurt me. I've spent my whole life keeping everything together, controlling it. But Grace...she made me feel something I couldn't control."

James leaned back in his chair, his expression thoughtful. "Maybe that's the problem," he said quietly. "You can't control everything, Elara. And maybe you're

supposed to feel those things, even if they scare you. That's what makes us human."

Eleanor, who had been sitting quietly, watching the exchange, finally spoke up in her steady, wise tone. "You can't run from love, Elara. It doesn't wait. You can only hold it back for so long. Don't let fear make your decisions for you. You'll regret it."

Elara felt the weight of her grandmother's words settle on her like a quiet truth. She didn't want to regret this. But she didn't know how to fix it. She had pushed Grace away, and now she wasn't sure if she could make it right.

"I'll talk to her," Elara said softly, the resolve creeping back into her voice. "I have to. I need to tell her the truth, even if I don't know what happens next."

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Victor's gaze softened slightly, though there was still a hint of expectation in his eyes. "You'll figure it out, Elara. You always do. But don't let your pride get in the way of something that could make you happy."

The table fell into a quiet lull after that, the weight of Elara's confession hanging in the air. But as the conversation turned to other topics, she felt a small sense of relief. The truth was out there, for better or worse, and maybe—just maybe—this was the first step toward letting herself be vulnerable enough to make things right with Grace.

14

Grace woke up in her own bed for the first time that week, the familiar smell of her laundry sharply reminding her she was no longer sleeping next to Elara. She rolled over onto her back and splayed her arms out wide, attempting to take up as much space as she could, hoping she could rid herself of the emptiness threatening to consume her. As she stared up at her ceiling, she felt a soft plop next to her and smiled as she turned to watch her cat trot over to lay on her chest.

Grace gently folded her arms to hold him closer. "Good Morning Mr. Fluffy Pants." As she stroked his back, his soft purrs rumbled into her chest. Her eyes were sore and swollen from crying all night, but everything felt a little better with a cat purring on her. She giggled at Mr. Fluffy Pants as he curled his back to encourage better butt skritches. Having received the attention he wanted and desiring no more, the cat jumped off the bed and meowed loudly in a clear demand to be fed.

Grace scoffed as she sat up. "That's all I'm good for, huh? A quick cuddle and a can of wet food, eh?"

Grace felt her heart squeeze and her eyes tear up as she realized how close that proclamation came to what she said lastnight. Her hands brushed through the mess of waves and curls that had tangled through the night, trying to release the knots as much as she wanted to release the tension building back up in her chest.

Grace softly padded barefoot across the apartment toward the pantry and pulled out a can of cat food. Mr. Fluffy Pants had happily chirped at the sound of the metal screeching as she pulled off the top. She dumped the can into his fish-shaped bowl and watched as he happily chowed down. Grace pulled out her cell and shot a quick text to her Aunt Lucy.

Got back last night. No need to stop by. Thanks for cat sitting.

It was early in the morning, so she doubted Aunt Lucy would see her text any time soon. It would be a miracle if she read the text before 10 a.m. Leaning against the counter, Grace looked around her apartment, noticing the stark differences in comparison to the suite she shared with Elara. Her walls were covered in art prints, a collection she had started in her teens after she had thrifted an original sketch by David Hockney—a find that had inspired her dream to open her own thrift store.

Her furniture was covered in cat hair and throw pillows, with a wine stain on the armchair that never fully came out regardless of how hard she scrubbed. She had shoes in a pile near the mirror in the hall, proof of a wardrobe dilemma that she had yet to clean up. Every inch was full of life and color, yet she still felt empty. Refusing to give into the urge to cry again, Grace turned to her cabinets in search of any food she could scrounge together to make a decent breakfast. She sighed as she realized she had not gone grocery shopping in weeks and only had condiments and some saltines left.

Just as she was considering how satisfying saltines and yellow mustard would be, she heard her phone ding, indicating a text had come through. Her stomach flipped in a

way that had nothing to do with her impending breakfast disaster. Grace held her breath as she turned over the phone to look at the screen, and gasped in surprise as she saw Aunt Lucy's nameflash on the screen. What in the world is she doing awake this early?

Grace opened her texts.

Why so early? You weren't supposed to be back for days.

Grace sighed as she tapped her fingers on the screen quickly, responding in as few words as possible.

Things didn't work out.

Grace stared at her phone, waiting for the inevitable reply. When none came, she shrugged and made her way to the couch. Grabbing the remote, she flipped through the channels until she found something safe. The Cooking Channel wouldn't do. She had that class with Elara. Neither did any of her favorite home renovation shows. She wouldn't be able to think of anything but the details Elara put into her resort. Hallmark movies were out of the question. She felt like throwing up just thinking about watching some sappy romance. Eventually, Grace put on the History Channel, which was playing a rerun of Ancient Aliens. Definitely no connection to Elara there.

Just as the reenactments were starting, she heard a knock on her door. Grace sat still, staring at the door unsure what to do. No one ever came to her door. But Grace sighed in exasperation when she heard her Aunt Lucy yell out, "Grace! I'm coming in! I've got a key."

Aunt Lucy opened the door without waiting for Grace to get up off the couch. She barreled across the living room, her hands full with coffee cups and a brown paper bag. The smell of baked goods wafted out, making Grace's mouth water.

Sitting up, Grace reached out for the bag, which Lucy handed over immediately. She opened up the bag and laughed as she saw it was filled with every assortment of pastry she liked. Blueberry muffins, chocolate croissants, scones, and even half a baguette and a tub of butter.

“I wasn’t sure in what state of disrepair I would find you in, but I was absolutely sure that sugar and carbs could cure it.”

Grace laughed again as she pulled out a chocolate croissant and took a big bite out of it. The flakey, buttery layers were a perfect balance to the rich, sweet chocolate in the middle. Mouth full, Grace mumbled, “Thank you,” and reached out for one of the coffee cups.

Lucy handed over one and took a sip from the other. Grace sighed when the sweet caramel and bitter espresso warmed her throat, loosening the grip of sorrow just a tad.

Grace plopped unceremoniously down on the couch and pulled out another pastry, the chocolate croissant still in her hand. When she pulled out the blueberry muffin and bit off the top, Aunt Lucy sat down across from her gently and touched her knee. “That bad, huh?”

Grace chewed quietly, taking the time to rein in her tears and harden herself before responding. “She said that it was just an arrangement and that it would never be anything more.”

Grace avoided looking Aunt Lucy in the eyes, knowing that pity and empathy directed at her would only make her cry. She took another bite of the chocolate croissant, looking down at her hands instead of directly at Lucy. Grace felt the hand on her knee squeeze as Aunt Lucy sighed deeply.

“Grace. I’m sorry. I know you are hurting right now. But from everything you said,

Elara knew it wasn't just an arrangement. We knew she had a lot of walls built up. You've always been so willing to be vulnerable with people; you wear your heart on your sleeve proudly. Which is something I love about you dearly. It's what makes you so enigmatic and lovable. But not everyone is like that. I know Elara hurt you, but I think you just need to give her time to face her fears."

Hot tears spilled down Grace's cheeks as she listened. Her heart hurt, but her stomach began to feel queasy as she realized she was partly to blame for her situation. They had just talked about giving Elara time the day before, and yet Grace had pummeled on headlong anyway.

"I know. Ugh, I know I wear my heart on my sleeve. It hurts enough right now for me not to need you to tell me that. And I tried to give her time, I swear I did. But...she did some things that felt so wrong to me. She made me feel used and alone, and I couldn't stand it. I had to say something."

Aunt Lucy sighed and sat back in her chair. "I'm proud of you for not letting her hurt you. That takes a lot of strength. I just hope you give her the chance to realize how wrong she is."

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Hours after Aunt Lucy left, Grace still sat on the couch, flipping through channels absentmindedly. Instead of a muffin and coffee, she now held a glass of red wine and the half baguette. Between sips of wine, she dipped her bread into the butter and ripped off pieces with her teeth.

She had thought a lot about what Aunt Lucy had said, and she was left feeling angry, sad, and confused. Aunt Lucy was right, of course. Grace had rushed it. But that wasn't her fault. What was she supposed to do? She was not going to keep letting Elara hurt her without saying her piece.

She wanted more than anything to forgive Elara, to give her a second chance. But how was she supposed to do that if Elara didn't want forgiveness? It had been nearly twenty-four hours, and she hadn't so much as received a text from Elara, and Grace was far too stubborn to text first.

Mr. Fluffy Pants was happily curled up by the window, soaking up the last rays of sunlight. Grace changed the channel, and this time she actually let herself stop on the Hallmark channel. She couldn't help herself; she loved the happy endings too much. She settled back into the couch, pulling a blanket over her as she continued to swap between bread and wine. Just as the couple had their first kiss, she heard another knock on her door. It's probably Aunt Lucy again. Hopefully she brought more food.

She waited for Aunt Lucy to let herself in but was confused when the knocking continued. Grace threw off her blanket and set down her bread and wine on the coffee table. By the third knock, she knew there was no way it was Aunt Lucy. Grace quickly shuffled over to the door, curiosity burning while a tiny spark of hope ignited. She didn't even stop to look out her peephole as she opened the door.

Grace gasped as Elara smiled up at her, a giant bouquet of brightly colored tulips in her hands. She blinked in surprise, unable to find her voice.

Elara's normally steely gaze was softer, more vulnerable as she softly greeted her. "Hi."

Grace stood in the doorway, her heart pounding as Elara spoke, each word tugging at her with a mix of longing and guardedness. She wanted to reach out, to let herself believe, but the memory of Elara's cold words still stung, a raw ache she hadn't yet shaken.

Elara's eyes held none of the steely distance Grace had come to expect. Her gaze was soft, vulnerable in a way Grace had never seen before. The bouquet of tulips trembled slightly in her hands as she took a hesitant step forward, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"Grace," Elara began, her voice breaking, "I...I messed up. I know that now. You were right about everything. I kept pushing you away, trying to keep you at a distance, because I was too afraid to let you in."

Grace's breath caught, a small spark of hope flickering in her chest, though she fought to keep her expression steady, waiting for Elara to go on.

Elara took a deep breath, the pain in her eyes unmistakable. "I've spent so long hiding behind walls, telling myself that I didn't need anyone. But you...you tore through all of that without even trying. And I didn't know how to handle it." She paused, her gaze dropping to the floor. "Being with you felt like waking up after years of of being numb. It terrified me."

Grace could feel her own heart racing as Elara continued, her words cutting through the layers of hurt and anger. She wanted to believe Elara—wanted to reach out and

pull her close, but the sting of that last argument still lingered. She kept herself still, waiting.

“I know I made you feel like this was nothing,” Elara whispered, her voice thick with regret. “Like you didn’t matter. But the truth is you’re everything that matters. You made me feel alive, Grace. You made me feel like I could be more.”

Elara’s voice cracked, and she took another step forward, her eyes meeting Grace’s with a raw intensity that made Grace’s throat tighten. “But I was scared, so I pushed you away. I tried to pretend it wasn’t real, that I could just brush you off and go back to my life as it was. But I can’t.”

Grace’s heart thudded painfully, her fingers clenching around the edge of the door. She saw the honesty in Elara’s face, the openness she had begged for, and it was almost too much to bear.

Elara’s voice dropped to a near-whisper, and Grace’s chest ached at the vulnerability she saw there. “I know I don’t deserve a second chance, not after the way I hurt you. But I’m here, Grace. I want to try, if you’ll let me. I don’t want to be afraid anymore. I want to be with you. Really be with you, in a way I’ve never let myself be with anyone.”

She watched as Elara held out the bouquet, her hands trembling, her gaze hopeful and pleading. “Please, Grace. I know I’ve made a mess of things, but I’m ready to give this everything I have. To give you everything I have.”

The words lingered in the air between them, and Grace felt her heart throb painfully as she absorbed them, each one a balm to the wounds she’d carried since leaving the resort. Part of her wanted to throw her arms around Elara, to forgive everything in that moment, but another part held back, still wary, still aching from the hurt.

Yet looking into Elara's eyes, she saw a flicker of something real—something she had longed for. She could see the love and fear mingling there, as raw and unguarded as her own. And in that moment, she felt a cautious hope, a small, trembling belief that maybe, just maybe, they could make this work.

Her throat tight, Grace took a breath, her gaze steady as she met Elara's eyes. She wasn't ready to say everything, not yet, but she knew she could take one step forward, open the door just a little. "Come inside," she said quietly, her voice soft, laced with both pain and hope. "Let's talk."

As Elara stepped into the apartment, Grace felt the first glimmer of warmth begin to seep through the hurt, and she knew that, despite everything, she was willing to try.

Grace led Elara into the living room, her mind racing as she settled onto the couch, leaving a slight but noticeable space between them. She clasped her hands in her lap, glancing briefly at Elara, who was still clutching the bouquet of tulips like it was the only thing keeping her grounded.

The silence stretched, heavy and charged, until finally, Grace broke it, her voice steady but laced with pain. "Why now, Elara? Why show up here after everything?"

Elara looked down, exhaling slowly. "Because I couldn't stand the thought of losing you," she admitted, her voice soft but sincere. "At first, I thought... I thought pushing you away was the only way to keep myself safe. But then you left, and I realized that losing you hurt so much more than any fear I had of letting you in."

Grace's heart twisted, the rawness of Elara's confession stirring something deep within her. But she held her gaze steady, needing more. "I need to know that this isn't just another moment of panic for you, Elara," she said, her tone firm. "I need to know that this isn't just you reacting because you're afraid to be alone."

Elara's eyes flickered, and she nodded, her expression shifting to one of determination. "I understand. I don't blame you for doubting me, Grace. I've been so selfish, letting my own fears control me." She swallowed, the vulnerability clear in her voice as she continued, "But being without you—seeing what life feels like without you in it—showed me that I don't want to live that way. I don't want to keep hurting the people I care about just because I'm too scared to face myself."

Grace's fingers tightened in her lap, her voice barely above a whisper. "I won't let myself be someone's second thought, Elara. I can't go through this again."

Elara leaned forward, her eyes searching Grace's face with an intensity that made Grace's breath catch. "You're not my second thought," she said, her voice breaking. "You're my first. I know I haven't shown it, and I know I don't deserve a second chance, but you're the only person I've ever wanted to let in, to share this part of myself with. I just... I don't know how to do it yet, Grace. But I'm willing to learn, if you'll have the patience for me."

Grace looked away, her chest tightening. She wanted to believe Elara's words, wanted so badly to trust that this time would be different. But the memory of her hurt was still fresh, still raw. "Words are one thing, Elara," she murmured, her tone cautious. "But actions... I need to see it. I need to know that you're willing to do the work, that you won't just shut me out again when things get hard."

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Elara nodded, her gaze unwavering. “I’ll do anything, Grace. I don’t expect you to forgive me overnight, and I know I have a lot to prove. But I want to start now, if you’ll let me.” She reached out, placing her hand gently over Grace’s. “I want to show you that I’m capable of love, that I’m capable of loving you the way you deserve.”

Grace felt the warmth of Elara’s hand, her resolve softening slightly as she looked into Elara’s eyes, seeing the sincerity and longing there. Part of her was still afraid, still cautious, but another part—the part that had fallen in love with Elara’s rare, soft moments—wanted to give her a chance.

After a moment, Grace’s hand shifted, her fingers intertwining tentatively with Elara’s. “I’m willing to try,” she whispered, a small, hopeful smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “But this is the last time, Elara. If you shut me out again, I won’t come back.”

Elara’s eyes filled with relief, her fingers tightening around Grace’s. “I won’t let you down,” she promised, her voice thick with emotion. “I know I have to earn your trust back, and I’ll do whatever it takes. I just want you to know that I love you, Grace. Truly.”

Grace’s heart fluttered, her fears beginning to melt as she leaned into the warmth of Elara’s touch. It wasn’t a perfect reconciliation, not yet, but it was a start, and as she felt the weight of Elara’s hand in hers, she realized it was one she was willing to take.

Grace leaned forward, closing the distance between them and softly kissed Elara. All of her fear and sadness began to wash away as Elara’s arms slowly came around her

back and pulled her closer. Their embrace was slow, soft, and charged with emotions. Grace pulled back and cupped Elara's face as she searched those piercing blue eyes for any signs of doubt or fear and found only love shining toward her. Elara's hands stilled as she gazed back deeply, the vulnerability clearly written across her face.

Her hands still cupping Elara's face, she leaned in and rested her forehead against Elara's, taking a moment to savor the closeness and breath in her tantalizing sandalwood scent. Their breath mingled in the small space between their lips as Grace whispered, "Make love to me."

Elara's hands squeezed gently as her body tensed. She took a shaky breath and whispered back, "Are you sure? I don't want you to feel like that's all I want from you."

Grace pulled back an inch, allowing their gazes to connect once more as she said, "I've never been more sure of anything."

Elara's tenseness loosened as she closed the distance between them once more, pressing their bodies together as their lips moved in a slow dance between their usual fire and the tender emotions pooled between them. Grace's hands traveled down Elara's chest, unbuttoning her shirt with shaky fingers. Elara placed her hand over Grace's, stopping her after the third button. Grace looked at her with wide eyes, worrying that she had taken things too far.

Elara gently raised Grace's hand to her lips and placed a soft kiss on her palm. She looked deeply into Grace's eyes. "Not here. You deserve better than a couch."

Grace felt her heart melt as she took in Elara's words, feeling for the first time as if Elara truly cared about making her feel wanted. A tear threatened to escape from the corner of her eye as she leaned forward and kissed Elara gently once more. In silence, the two stood up from the couch, hand in hand, both unwilling to break their contact.

Grace silently cursed herself for not picking up her mess as she led Elara toward her bedroom. Once she stepped into the room, she looked over her shoulder with worry, waiting to see Elara's disapproval. Instead, she saw Elara's eyes on her with a wide smile warming her cold features.

Elara quietly commented, "It's so you. So full of life."

Moved beyond words, Grace felt tears slide down her cheeks. Elara immediately reached out to soothe her, brushing away the tears. She looked panicked in the face of tears, but still she held Grace steady as she waited for her to respond.

Grace looked up at Elara, her tears brimming. "I love you, Elara." She led Elara to the bed, pulling her down as she laid back on the mattress.

She savored slowly undressing Elara, kissing each inch of skin that she revealed. In turn, Elara caressed and kissed her, letting Grace lead. Once Elara was laid bare before her, Grace peppered Elara with kisses along her skin, making a trail back toward her lips. Once she had thoroughly kissed Elara, she whispered against her lips, "I love you."

Elara shivered as Grace ripped off her tee, revealing her bare breasts underneath. She moaned quietly as she captured one pink nipple in her mouth, sucking and nipping until Grace groaned in return. Moving to the other breast, Elara kissed the middle of Grace's chest and whispered against her skin. "I love you."

She moved her mouth over to Grace's other breast, worshipping her with kisses until Grace was writhing in pleasure. She leaned back, looking into Grace's eyes. "I am so lucky to have you."

Grace shivered at the sudden distance between mouth and breast and reached her hand forward to gently caress Elara's face, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear.

It felt like seconds before Elara's face was buried between Grace's thighs in the delicious dance that had become their sexual go-to. Elara devouring her with a hunger Grace had never known.

Sucking her, licking her, pushing her tongue inside of her.

Grace moaned, relaxing into it and her head tipped back onto the bed.

The two made love throughout the night. Their kisses and licks became prayers, the bed a temple to their love. Later, when they both were spent, Elara held Grace closely. Their limbs intertwined and breath mingled, blurring the lines between one soul to another.

Filled with joy, Grace wiggled closer, nuzzling her nose against Elara's neck and breathing in her scent. Elara gently pressed a kiss on the top of her head, prompting Grace to look back up.

Once their eyes locked, Elara quietly asked, "Will you come back with me? To the resort? As much as I never want to leave this bed, I would like to have the chance to introduce you as my partner. For real this time."

Grace paused at Elara's words, taking them in as she considered her response. Elara watched her silently, the question hanging in the air. Having made her decision, Grace took a deep breath.

Grace's gaze softened as she held Elara's hand, a feeling of calm warmth spreading through her chest. "I've wanted to hear you say that for so long," she murmured, her heart full. "And yes, I'll come back with you. I'd be honored to be by your side—as your partner, as someone who loves you." She smiled, pressing her forehead against Elara's. "Let's go back together."

Elara stepped out of the car, releasing a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding as she looked over at Grace, who was just climbing out beside her. The familiar sight of the resort, framed by the mountains and softened in the early morning light, filled Elara with a warm, quiet sense of anticipation. This time, they were arriving together, and for the first time, it was real.

Grace took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze, her own face a mix of nerves and excitement. Elara felt a surge of pride and protectiveness, a thrill at the thought of introducing Grace as her partner in the way she'd always secretly wanted.

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As they walked up the steps to the entrance, the resort doors opened, and Elara's family spilled out, their eyes lighting up the moment they saw the two of them hand in hand. Cate was the first to move, crossing the space in a few strides and wrapping Grace in an embrace that was as enthusiastic as it was genuine.

"Grace! We're so glad you're back!" Cate's eyes sparkled with warmth, her smile wide and welcoming. "It feels like you never left."

Her father stepped forward next, nodding to Elara before extending a hand to Grace, which he quickly transformed into a friendly, familiar clap on the shoulder. "Good to have you back, Grace," he said, his voice steady and warm. "I trust Elara brought you here safely?"

Grace laughed, a genuine, easy laugh that sent a thrill through Elara, who watched with quiet pride as Grace's face softened, her posture relaxing under the family's kind words and smiles.

Even Elara's mother, whose approval had once felt like an unreachable mark, offered Grace a warm nod and a smile that held a new, genuine warmth. Elara felt a spark of relief; her family was embracing Grace, not as a prop in some act, but as someone who truly belonged here.

As they moved inside together, Elara kept Grace's hand in hers, unable to stop herself from pulling her closer, from leaning in to murmur a few quiet words. "Welcome back," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. Grace looked up at her, smiling, and squeezed her hand in response.

The day flowed with a natural ease that Elara hadn't realized was possible here. The family spent the afternoon by the lake, where laughter and stories flowed freely, the atmosphere warm and open. There was no awkwardness, no guardedness—only an unspoken understanding that Grace was truly part of this now, a part of them.

Elara found herself watching Grace often, drawn to her laughter, to the way she relaxed into conversation with her family, her shoulders loose, her smile easy. Every so often, Grace would glance over, meeting her eyes with a look that was both familiar and new, as though they shared some secret that only they could understand. Each small touch—the gentle brush of fingers, a hand resting on her shoulder—felt like a silent affirmation of everything Elara had feared and then fought to claim.

When evening fell, they gathered for dinner on the terrace, the setting sun casting a warm glow over the table as Elara's family shared stories, jokes, and glasses of wine. Elara felt a deep contentment settle over her, an ease that she hadn't known was possible. This time, there was no pretense, no pressure. She was simply here with Grace, and that was all she needed.

At one point, Elara's father leaned toward Grace, his gaze warm and approving. "It's wonderful to have you back with us," he said, his voice low and sincere. "I hope you know how much it means to all of us—how much you mean to Elara."

He lifted his glass in a small toast, his approval clear in his eyes, and Elara felt her chest swell with happiness, a feeling so deep it left her breathless. She glanced at Grace, who was smiling, her cheeks flushed with both surprise and pleasure as she raised her own glass.

Elara lifted her glass as well, the warmth of her family's acceptance and Grace's love filling her with a profound gratitude. She knew she would remember this day, this feeling, for the rest of her life.

After dinner, as the night settled around them, Elara led Grace up a private staircase

to a balcony overlooking the lake. The air was crisp and fresh, scented faintly with pine and roses—the roses she had asked the staff to set up just before dinner. A small table was nestled in the corner, a bottle of champagne chilling beside two elegant glasses, flickering candles casting a soft, golden light over everything.

Grace stopped in her tracks as she took it all in, her eyes widening in surprise and delight. She turned to Elara, a smile blooming on her face. “You did all this?” she asked, her voice a mixture of wonder and warmth.

Elara felt her heart flutter as she watched Grace’s expression, her own nerves dancing somewhere between anticipation and hope. “I wanted it to be special,” she replied softly, stepping closer and reaching for Grace’s hand. “For us.”

They settled into the cozy seating area, their hands still entwined as Elara poured the champagne, the sound of the bubbles mingling with the faint rustling of the trees below. She handed Grace a glass, her gaze lingering on the gentle curve of Grace’s smile, the way her eyes sparkled in the candlelight. For a moment, they sat together in silence, watching the lake below, each sip of champagne heightening the warmth that bloomed between them.

Finally, Elara took a deep breath, her gaze shifting from the lake to Grace, gathering her courage. “You know, there was a time when I thought I’d never do this. When I thought I’d never let anyone in.” She paused, feeling the vulnerability in her words, but something about being here with Grace made her feel safe enough to continue.

“But with you, it’s different,” she murmured, her fingers brushing over Grace’s. “You showed me that love doesn’t have to be...guarded or distant. It can be simple, real. And I never thought I’d want that—never thought I’d need it—until now.” She looked up, meeting Grace’s eyes with a softness she’d never allowed herself before. “With you, I feel like I’m exactly where I’m meant to be.”

Grace’s hand tightened around hers, her own eyes shining with quiet emotion. “I’ve

waited so long to hear you say that,” she whispered, her voice thick with feeling. “I love you, Elara. I always have, even when it hurt to hold on.”

Elara’s heart swelled, the last of her walls melting away as she leaned forward, pressing a gentle kiss to Grace’s lips. She pulled back, resting her forehead against Grace’s, her voice barely a whisper. “I love you too, Grace. And I’m ready. I’m ready to be yours, for real.”

Grace’s face lit up with a smile that made Elara’s heart feel lighter than it had in years. They wrapped their arms around each other, holding tight as the quiet night cocooned them, their hearts beating in time with the faint hum of the world around them. For the first time, Elara let herself imagine the future—one filled with laughter, love, and the warmth of Grace by her side.

In that moment, she knew she was ready to let go of her fears, to let herself dream of a life together, open and unguarded. With Grace, she knew they could face whatever came their way.

Together.

EPILOGUE

Three years later, sunlight poured through the wide windows of Grace’s new thrift store, casting a warm glow over the carefully curated racks and displays. Grace stood near the front counter, her face flushed with excitement and pride as she welcomed friends, family, and a small crowd of customers who had come to celebrate the store’s grand opening. She wore a radiant smile, her eyes bright with the thrill of seeing her dream come to life.

Elara stood beside her, her gaze fixed on Grace with unguarded admiration and love. She watched Grace greet each visitor with warmth, her laughter filling the space. Elara’s hand drifted toward Grace’s left hand, where the ring she had placed there a

few months ago glinted in the sunlight.

As the last guests wandered off to explore, Grace turned to Elara, her expression a mixture of awe and disbelief. “Can you believe it?” She gestured around at the vibrant space she’d created. “It’s actually real.”

Elara smiled, reaching out to gently tuck a strand of hair behind Grace’s ear. “I can believe it,” she replied, her voice warm and steady. “I always knew you’d make it happen. You have a way of making your dreams real.” Her gaze softened as she gently took Grace’s hand, her thumb brushing over the ring. “Just like you did with us.”

Grace’s cheeks flushed as she glanced down at the ring, her fingers intertwining with Elara’s. “I wouldn’t have gotten here without you,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. “You’re my rock, Elara.”

Just then, Aunt Lucy bustled over, a playful smile spreading across her face as she held up a bouquet of wildflowers. “My favorite niece making all her dreams come true,” she cooed, giving Grace a quick hug. Then, her gaze fell to Grace’s left hand, and she gave a delighted gasp. “Oh, and I see Elara’s made an honest woman of you!” She winked at Elara. “This ring—it’s gorgeous, honey.”

Grace laughed, her cheeks pink as she glanced up at Elara, her eyes shining. “Yeah,” she murmured, holding Elara’s hand a little tighter, lifting her left hand so the ring sparkled in the light. “She surprised me with the sweetest proposal.” She looked back at Elara, love and gratitude in her eyes. “I’d say it all turned out pretty perfectly.”

Elara wrapped an arm around Grace’s shoulders, pulling her close. The years together had softened her in ways she’d never imagined, had shown her a depth of love she hadn’t thought she’d ever find. And now, seeing Grace proudly wearing the ring she’d chosen, Elara knew she was exactly where she was meant to be.

As they watched customers admire Grace's creations, Elara leaned down, pressing a gentle kiss to Grace's forehead. "Here's to many more dreams coming true," she said, her voice filled with emotion.

Grace looked up at her, a soft smile on her lips. "With you, I believe anything's possible," she whispered, her hand resting over Elara's on her shoulder.

Hand in hand, they watched the laughter and joy fill the store, their love woven into every corner of the space, every future they'd yet to build. In that moment, Elara knew that this—this love, this life, and the promise they shared—was everything she'd ever dreamed of and more.